

Health, wellbeing and physical activity – perspectives of children and young people

COMMISSIONER
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The Commissioner for Children and Young People promotes and advocates for the rights, development and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia, with a special focus to engage with and listen to children who aren't usually heard.



THE ISSUE

Australian children are among the least active in the world. A recent study¹ found that only 18% of Australian children aged 5–17 years are getting the 60 minutes of daily physical activity they need to lead a healthy lifestyle.

Physical activity in children and young people is particularly important as childhood is the most sensitive period of human development in which to promote long-lasting health-enhancing behaviours.

Beyond the clear benefits of regular exercise in developing physical literacy, fitness, keeping healthy and the long-term prevention of chronic disease, studies highlight the connection between physical activity and mental health and wellbeing. Even as little as 20 minutes of exercise per day helps children concentrate and engage better in class, improves their cognitive performance, and builds their confidence and self-esteem.

The Australian Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines² recommends that children aged 5–17 years accumulate at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise every day. Only 22.2%³ of South Australian children and young people report being engaged in that level of daily exercise.

We know that less physical activity can impact children's health and weight. The percentage of SA children and young people who are considered overweight or obese is 32.7%, a figure which has been steadily increasing for years.⁴

BACKGROUND

Primary-school aged children in SA reported that they generally have active school days.

They play games or run around with their peers during recess and lunch, and are able to be active in their lessons. Younger children are often encouraged to participate in active, outside play by their parents and teachers, and

generally are given more free time to run around both within and after school hours.

As children get older, participation in sports and physical activity drops off significantly. Recess and lunch breaks are usually short and are spent 'hanging out' or doing extracurricular activities instead of playing or running around.

However, this isn't to say that teens aren't active at all – their activity just looks different as they get older.

Young people are aware of the importance of regular physical activity to take care of their mental health and wellbeing. Sporting activities are a way for teens to switch off from daily school and life pressures. That said, older students acknowledged that sport or physical activity commitments shouldn't outweigh their mental health and wellbeing.

“ When you are physically active you feel good.” (Female, 12)

“ Physical activity is a vital aspect of childhood where children need to learn the importance of exercise and its benefits.” (Male, 15)

“ It's relaxing and gives the brain a break.” (Male, 14)

Most young people consulted felt that adults didn't believe they were as active as they actually are. Instead of participating in organised sport their physical activity is often incorporated into their daily routines. Teenagers are walking or cycling to school, helping with household chores (like walking the dog) or being on their feet at their part-time retail and hospitality jobs.

“ Children are physically active even if parents think we just spend time on screens.” (Male, 14)

For teenagers in particular, competing commitments of study, social life, extra-curricular activities and part-time work, make it challenging for them to meet the recommended physical activity guidelines.

“ We're trying our best.” (Female, 13)

“ Teenagers often feel really burnt out, maybe even more than adults because their bodies are changing, school is becoming harder, relationships etc.” (Female, 14)

With these competing demands outside of school hours, many students expressed feeling the weight of time and parental and societal pressures on top of school, sport, and work commitments to be too much. For some teens, a regular commitment to physical activity is just another external pressure in an already stressful and critical time in their lives.

The combination of different pressures often leads young people to forego physical activity in favour of time spent alone to relax and take care of their mental health and wellbeing. Some young people felt that their spare time was better spent studying or working.

“ I would prefer time at home to physical activity. I would rather get work done. Sometimes it's hard to do lots of home-work and work.” (Female, 11)

Those children and young people who said they didn't have time to do any more physical activity, understood that travelling to school by foot or bike is an easy way to engage in physical activity in a way that reduces the need to find additional time in their day.

“ I feel that people think we are less active than we really are and that being active is not only about doing club/school sport but just normal stuff in general like cycling to school or walking the dog.” (Female, 14)

SNAPSHOT OF RESULTS

Throughout 2021 and 2022 the Commissioner for Children and Young People engaged children and young people on their views on physical activity and what they think being physically healthy involves.

In total, 15 group sessions were held with 190 children and young people, including children with disabilities and medical conditions, children under Guardianship, Aboriginal children, and children from refugee and migrant communities.

The sessions were held at health centres, community spaces, and primary and secondary Government, Catholic and Independent schools across metropolitan and regional locations throughout SA.

Children who participated could easily describe how a healthy kid feels, what they can do, and what foods keep them healthy and active. For them a healthy kid is “happy, can do anything, is excited and strong, plays sport, has fun, and is active”.

Young people were more likely to refer to health in relation to the quality of their relationships with their peers,

partners and families. Issues relating to self-harm, bullying, family and domestic violence, child abuse, neglect, and family stress were more common in their responses to what being healthy means to them.

In relation to physical activity the majority of those consulted recognised that their health and wellbeing is intrinsically linked to the opportunities they have for physical activity, play and leisure.

There was significant consciousness around health issues relating to young people, including the ‘obesity epidemic’ and ‘emerging mental health crisis’. These issues have been amplified and heard loud and clear by young people. As such they were acutely aware of the need for greater physical activity. However, as they clearly articulated, the barriers to improved physical activity are real.

In order to better address these barriers we need to understand them from the perspectives of children and young people.

KEY MESSAGES



1. Children and young people recognise that having support from parents and families, peers and teachers, and the broader community, was central to their motivation and ability to participate in play and leisure activities. They also recognised that more opportunities require greater support from others to make them happen.



2. Children and young people said that they could have more independence to participate in play and leisure activities if public transport was more affordable and reliable.



3. Children and young people recognised the importance of taking an inclusive response to addressing barriers to physical activity in childhood, regardless of a child's cultural or socio-economic background, their gender, skills, or fitness levels.



4. Children and young people reported that costs associated with playing sport or engaging in other physical activities such as dancing, were a barrier to their participation, regardless of any interest they may have in doing so. Having opportunities to play or engage in physical activity that is more affordable would increase their levels of participation.



5. Children and young people said more time at school to complete homework would increase their free time after school to engage in physical activity with the added benefit of improving their mental health and wellbeing.



6. Children and young people said they needed more physical education built into their curriculum during school hours, and that this needed to go beyond the lessons currently being offered each week. High school students said they often felt pressure to forego their physical activities to focus on their studies, and in some cases this included having to live up to their parents' expectations around choosing study over sport.



7. Children and young people said more information aimed at families about the benefits of participating in sport and play would assist in reducing barriers they face from their parents. Being provided with information about the kinds of opportunities and activities that are available outside of school would boost their motivation and confidence.

“ Cultivating a culture that doesn't shame people who were unfit to start with and not focusing and glorifying athletes. Normalise sports 4 regular people.”

“ More opportunities for girls without pressure put on by boys and teachers.”

“ Having more things that are safe for me and more money.”

“ Making cheaper sports and transport to get to the places for the activities.”

“ Although the sports voucher program is commendable, it only covers one semester's worth of sport.”

“ Convincing families that sports are good for young people and decreasing the amount of school work.”

MAJOR INFLUENCES ON PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Friends and siblings

Having good friends is extremely important to children and young people and can be a major influence on the actions young people take. Having friends who are physically active, or who are involved in regular sport can inspire others to do the same.

“ My friends inspire me to do the sports that they are doing.” (Female, 11)

“ Because if your friends are playing sport, then you'll want to play it too.” (Female, 12)

Similarly, siblings can influence children and young people, as someone to play with outside of school and as someone to aspire to be like.

“ My brothers help me and kind of push me to play sport.” (Female, 11)

Encouragement from parents

Parents, families and carers play an important role in influencing children's participation in physical activity. They are often the first people who encourage a child's participation in a particular sport or physical activity, enrolling them in different teams, clubs, or activities from a young age. They're also often the people who facilitate children's participation in sports – buying uniforms and equipment, and transporting children to and from practices and games each week.

“Parents are important because they teach you life skills and how to be healthy.”
(Female, 9)

Studies highlight the vital role families play in supporting their children's physical activity and participation. Particularly for primary aged children, parental involvement in physical activity increases participation. This might look like going for hikes, walks, bike rides, or playing cricket at the park together.

Positive encouragement from parents is vital to a child's enjoyment of, and subsequent ongoing participation in, sports and physical activity. Children and young people require positive encouragement and a gentle push to participate.

We have heard from students that they rely on their parents' positive feedback, encouragement and support to sustain their interest and participation in sports.

They see their parents as a source of inspiration – choosing sports that follow their parents' example, and sharing a competitive spirit that fuels their own passion for the sport. In addition, the conversations parents have with children at home, and to and from training/matches, can have a major impact on the perceptions young people have of sport.

“Parents tell me to try new things. They say all the positive things. They use their own time to drive me there.” (Female, 11)

“Parents saying ‘try new sports’ and convincing you about the good things about it.” (Female, 11)

“Pushing your children, setting a picture (setting a positive example) and being their motivator helps them. Having that security of knowing your parent will always be proud of you helps. It is up to the kid to take on that challenge and strive to be better. Parents need to be there for them but push them in a positive way.” (Male, 14)

For some children, however, their parents' competitiveness, unrealistic expectations, or overbearing involvement, places too much pressure on them to perform at a high level, taking the fun out of the activity and actually demotivating them. For others, a lack of support from parents, cultural, or religious expectations, and financial and geographical barriers can all be reasons that restrict their participation.

“Some religions and cultures don't allow girls to play sports...Dedication is required in team sports. Parents of certain religions believe girls can use their time differently and ‘better’.” (Female, 14)

High school students in particular, expressed pressure to forego physical activity to focus on their studies to meet their parents' expectations. Some students felt that parents were too strict and limited their active time and sports participation.

“Many external pressures are placed on older teenagers in a very busy and important stage in their lives, meaning less physical activity and more time alone.”
(Male, 17)

The cost of participating in extra-curricular sport is also a consideration. For some families, club fees, uniforms and transport to practices are financially out of reach. Working parents may not be available to transport their children to and from practices and games.

Where carers and families are unable to facilitate children's participation in sports due to financial, logistical, or time constraints, it is teachers who usually become important role models and facilitators of physical activity for some young people.

Teachers and coaches influence physical activity

Like parents, teachers can inspire and encourage children and young people to be physically active and to get involved in sport. Most primary school children get daily encouragement to get outside and move around, while this is less evident at secondary level.

Nevertheless, students did identify some teachers and coaches who were a major influence on their motivation to become and stay involved in physical activity.

“Mrs B says I should do sport.” (Female, 12)

“Coaches make it funnier and more enjoyable.” (Female, 13)

Time in the school day

Overwhelmingly, the children and young people surveyed wanted more physical activity built into their school days. Research shows that on average, 70% of Australian children's school days are spent sitting down. While primary-aged children are much more likely to have short fitness or movement breaks incorporated into their school day, high-school children mostly remain sedentary throughout the day.

“Teachers giving you fitness every morning.”
(Female, 11)

“I would like an hour each lunch and recess.”
(Male, 10)

Older students felt that a key difference between their primary and high school experience, was that they were spending more time just 'hanging out', rather than playing or being physically active during break times. Their classes are more sedentary and focused on screens than they were in primary school too.

School facilities

Students across primary and high school groups believed they would benefit from more playgrounds and sporting equipment being available at their school. There is evidence

to suggest that providing more structured or guided play during break times encourages students to choose to be more active. This could look like schools and teachers setting up sporting equipment or games during recess and lunch times to get children moving.

“We need more playgrounds and sports equipment.” (Male, 15)

We know that influences on the use of playgrounds tends to relate to students' knowledge, behaviour, attitudes and skills.⁵ The social environment is also a major influence. For example, most children like to have someone of a similar age and ability to play with. They also don't like to feel they are being judged by older students.

Many secondary school playgrounds comprise large hard areas which are covered, typically in tarmac and concrete. Ovals or grassed areas, or other natural spaces may be 'out of bounds', except during sport or specific activities. Provision of multiple spaces to take part in different physical activities without feeling watched, can help young people take up ad hoc games and activities.

The built environment can also help. Simple four-square courts or multi use games areas can provide opportunities for teens to experiment in different activities.

Having a uniform that suits physical activity is also important. For example, many girls feel inhibited in a school skirt or dress and would prefer to be able to wear a uniform that is more suited to physical activity such as a skort. Peer pressure can be a factor in terms of what girls will wear to school so that destigmatising the wearing of skorts or similar sportswear options may also be necessary.

School sport

Secondary school students said that physical activity isn't promoted, and that there isn't enough variety in the activities being offered to them. They felt this was contributing to more secondary level students choosing not to do sport at high school.

For this age group in particular, some students felt awkward about picking up a new sport, because their peers had often been playing it for longer and were therefore much more skilled. Others, especially girls, felt self-conscious exercising in front of other people.

Given the costs involved in extra-curricular and club sports, students said that offering a greater variety of school-run fitness activities would help and that they should be made available to children and young people of all abilities rather than focused on existing competitions for those who are already highly skilled or for specialist interest students. Students also said they wanted more options for varying skill levels that favour fun over competition.

“ Make all public schools have sports clubs based at school (not SAPSASA) instead of clubs who play weekly.” (Male, 15)

“ Extra-curricular activities in the right places could help?” (Female, 13)

“ Self-discipline is the key to being physically active. Introducing more group sports in schools to get every student to participate. Managing time and saving time to go for a jog and refresh your mind.” (Male, 17)

“ School doesn’t promote that much physical activity and this results in people choosing not to do sport as subjects.” (Female, 15)

“ We need more physical education (PE) [lessons].” (Female, 14)

“ Physical activity should be done more and there should be more PE in school.” (Female, 13)

Impact of Social Media

Students spoke of the influence social media has on how active they are, including positive and inspiring influencers who encourage young people to strive to be like the athletes they are.

“ After watching the Olympics, I realised how much I loved table tennis and now I play it every day.” (Male, 11)

“ Different footy players influence, like Clayton Oliver, Sam Walsh, Garry Lyons, Jack Steele, Jack Marcae, Ollie Wines. They influence me because I want to become a footy player and win the Brownlow.” (Male, 12)

Some found social media useful for getting health and fitness tips from people they admired, and this engagement motivated them to become more active.

For younger students in particular, the social media presence of Olympic athletes and elite sportspeople inspired them to take up new sports and strive to develop their skills.

“ I watch other celebrities and get influenced by them and watch what they do and what I can improve.” (Male, 11)

Young people also described a darker side to social media in relation to their engagement in physical activity, especially with regards to body image, self-esteem and physical wellbeing.

Some young people said they feel pressure that is focused on body image and that this led to them feeling as though they have to be always striving to look like the athletes, influencers and celebrities they follow, rather than being content with and focused upon their own personal physical health and wellbeing.

“ I think social media has a huge impact on teenagers, especially having issues with food. And although this can be negative, sometimes social media can be a good thing – with things like body positivity and getting tips online.” (Female, 13)

“ People on social media can make you feel bad about yourself.” (Female, 12)

NEXT STEPS

Support to increase the level of engagement children and young people have with regular exercise and physical activity is critical if we are to nurture more mentally and physically healthier children and young people.

Practical support includes ensuring the people, places, and resources children and young people can access with ease are present in their everyday lives. Actively encouraging and promoting physical activity and including opportunities for all children and young people regardless of level of ability or levels of anxiety, body image issues, or 'fitness challenges' some children and young people face is crucial. Such an approach would go beyond support that is focused on able-bodied and neurotypical children and young people to include those who are not.

In addition to challenging sexist, homophobic, transphobic, or racist behaviour and stereotypes, young people said that actively promoting diversity would make a significant difference to their interest in physical activity.

Children and young people are aware of the benefits that regular physical activity offers them and the relationships that exist between being active and maintaining physical and mental health. However, the competing demands of homework, a social life, extra-curricular activities, and after-school casual jobs means many young people find it difficult to strike the recommended balance between sedentary and physical activity.

Young women in particular want to see stronger messaging at school and in the community to promote body positivity, including examples that include a 'size doesn't matter' approach. They also want campaigns that emphasise that 'it doesn't matter how tall or short you are when it comes to being active, or whether you have skills or are just beginning to learn a few.

Taking their lead, young people are saying that increasing opportunities to be healthy and stay physically active requires actions that include:

- **Targeting the influence of friends and siblings through co-designed initiatives that promote physical activity for all ages. For example building playgrounds for teenagers designed with their input or designing school uniforms that allow for more physical activity.**
- **Running more campaigns to educate parents on the health benefits of physical activity and how to support and encourage their children to participate.**
- **Providing more school based opportunities to engage in physical activity including both informal teacher and coach encouragement, and dedicated time in the school day to be more physically active.**
- **Increasing school sports opportunities for children and young people of all abilities, gender, body size, and cultural backgrounds.**
- **Vigorously supporting capacity for children and young people to take more active journeys to school.**



RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Increase physical activity into children's everyday routines at school. This can be done through provision of more opportunities offered in structured break times to address barriers to play, examining the duration of breaks, redesigning of school uniforms and play opportunities in secondary schools and encouraging participation through example and facilitation by teachers.

2

Young people want community spaces that are age appropriate and that they can both 'hang out in' and 'play in' to be more physically active. We should support opportunities for 'older kids' to participate in 'play' through the co-design of teenage play spaces within their local communities.

3

Work with local government and community partners to create safe ways to school by ensuring there are easy access footpaths, cycle paths and crossings within the immediate area of all schools, shops, and parks, with good street lighting, effective signage, and speed restrictions in line with those recommended by the World Health Organisation.

4

Increase the value and expand the scope of the government's Sports Voucher Scheme by introducing more initiatives that target cost barriers to participation, such as uniform recycling, non-branded uniforms, travel vouchers, extended fee relief schemes, community investment in low-cost play, and sports-based activities that are in line with young people's interests.

5

Actively review children's sports associations and clubs to identify best practice participation of children from diverse backgrounds and ethnic and religious minorities, those with illness and disability, those with diverse body types, non-competitive children, LGBTQIA+ children, and those with caring/work responsibilities – encouraging and supporting them to play more sport and to become more physically active.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/health/physical-activity>
- 2 <https://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/physical-activity-and-exercise/physical-activity-and-exercise-guidelines-for-all-australians#summary-by-age>
- 3 SA Health. South Australian Population Health Survey – 2019 Annual Report, Children. <https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/251f283e-791b-4d20-85c0-a5655bce9e66/SAPHS+2019+Annual+Report+++Children+.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=ROOTWORKSPACE-251f283e-791b-4d20-85c0-a5655bce9e66-nKQge5t>
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-10-4738-1_5