



Mermaids' Short Report

# Young People and Sport

**“The community I get from my sport and the joy from improving at it are incredible.”**



**Understanding the experiences of trans, non-binary and gender diverse young people in sport and physical exercise in the UK.**

Dr Abby Barras  
Researcher

March 2023

## Introduction

Taking part in sport and physical activity for trans, non-binary and gender diverse people\* (shortened to 'trans youth' hereafter) is not always straightforward. Barriers such as gendered clothing, single-sex changing rooms and teams split into boys and girls can exclude those who are either non-binary or can trigger gender dysphoria.

Research about participating in sport and physical exercise for trans adults is growing, but we know less about the experiences of trans youth. Sport and physical exercise are important for health and well-being, but school can be a minefield to navigate, with rules and regulations that don't suit everyone, not just trans youth. Physical education (PE) and school sport are compulsory, so it's not always possible to opt out. Lots of trans youth want to take part in sport simply because they love it and are good at it, but the barriers they experience are not always realised by teachers and coaches.

Mermaids wants to help reduce those barriers. In July 2022, we launched an online survey asking trans youth aged 11-16 what their experiences were of participating in sport and physical exercise.

180 people responded to the survey.

Some key findings were:

1. Over a third of **trans youth** took part in sport 2 to 3 times a week.

2. The biggest motivation for doing sport was to have fun, see friends, and get fit and healthy.
3. Almost half said that taking part in sport definitely improved their physical health.
4. Common barriers included gendered uniform, language and how sport is organised along binary lines (i.e. boys and girls teams).
5. A third worried about taking part in sport because of negative media stories about trans people.

Despite multiple barriers to trans youth taking part in sport, they are getting out there, doing the activity they love, and spending time with their friends. At a time when many sporting organisations are excluding trans people from participating, now is the time to create a future where trans youth can see themselves welcomed and supported to participate in sport. We can start today by helping to make sport more inclusive for trans youth and share their experiences, making recommendations for clubs, schools and policy-makers to reduce barriers for trans youth in sport.

1. Young people **should never be excluded** from participating in sport on the basis of their gender or trans identities.
2. Careful consideration should be given to whether a sport or activity needs to be sex separated. Where there are benefits to sex separation, **trans youth should be allowed to choose** the category they feel most comfortable with.

3. Appropriate options for gender neutral kit and facilities should be made available that respect the privacy and dignity of all participants.
4. Teachers, coaches and those working in sport should **undertake training** to improve understanding of the issues affecting trans youth in sport.
5. Sporting bodies, Government departments and the media must **listen to and empower the voices of trans youth** in sport, creating an environment where they feel welcome and accepted.
6. Sporting bodies, schools and Government should **take proactive steps** to ensure that trans youth, who are currently underrepresented, feel supported to be involved in sport owing to the specific and transformational benefits that their participation brings.

Young people deserve to be respected, included and listened to. We hope these findings support further work to make sport a welcome, inclusive space for trans youth.

KOD

**Kai O'Doherty**  
Head of Policy and Research

\* Mermaids use trans as an umbrella term for those who are transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid, agender, are of non-Western gender identities and those who have a trans history.



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## Active About Inclusion

Mermaids is passionate about encouraging all trans young people to be able to get involved in the sport they enjoy. We have an ongoing programme of work in this area, **Active About Inclusion**, where we work with sports clubs, national governing bodies and local clubs to help support them to be actively inclusive for trans young people who wish to get involved in sport. Mermaids offers advice and support to:

- ✓ Young people to find inclusive sports opportunities local to them.
- ✓ Parents, guardians and carers seeking to help young people to get involved in sports.
- ✓ Schools, clubs and national governing bodies seeking to improve trans people's inclusion in sports.

**This research is incredibly useful for informing our recommendations to sport bodies, schools and policy-makers who strive for inclusive approaches to sport.**

See page 27 for a list of other LGBTQIA+ sports organisations and resources.

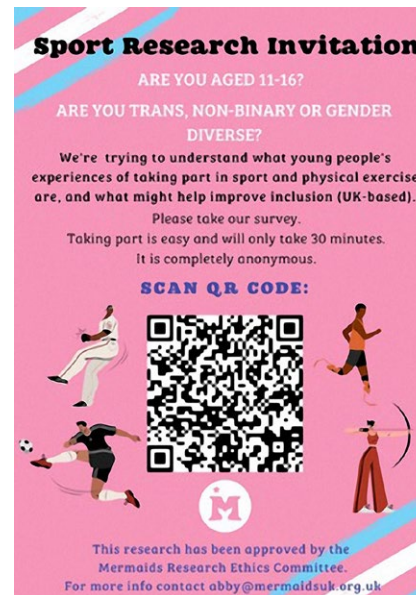


**If you would like to know more, email [sports@mermaidsuk.org.uk](mailto:sports@mermaidsuk.org.uk)**

# The Research: Rationale and Methodology

**What does sport mean to you? How do you keep fit and healthy, and what is the activity you enjoy the most? How often do you take part? How does it make you feel if you can't take part?**

These are the kind of questions we wanted to ask trans young people aged between 11 and 16. The online survey was developed because we wanted to understand the experiences of young trans people taking part in sport. Staying fit and healthy are really key to all young people's well-being as they grow up, and sport offers a way to achieve this. Sport is also a great way to socialise, learn life-skills and have fun. In addition, lots of young people are exceptionally good at sport, and this is a crucial age for their skills to develop and improve.



## Data collection

**The data were collected by Mermaids via an online survey using a link to the platform Survey Monkey. Participants were recruited through Mermaids secure online forums via a poster. This poster was also posted on Mermaids' social media platforms including Twitter and Facebook in July 2022.**

Between July and August 2022, 180 people responded.

The survey asked a combination of tick box and free-text questions about people's experiences of taking part in sport and physical exercise. The survey was designed by Dr Abby Barras and Verity Smith (Sport Inclusion Manager), and people could access the survey using a link or QR code. Ethical approval for the research was given by Mermaids Research Ethics Committee. Appropriate support was offered and made available to all participants and clearly signposted on the surveys, both at the start and at the end. You can find this support [here](#) and on last page of this document.

The survey asked a total of 24 questions. The first 12 questions were to establish demographical data, and the remaining questions are identified throughout the report.

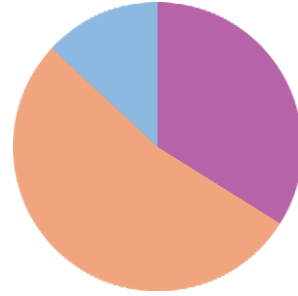
Data was manually thematically analysed by Mermaids' Researcher, Dr Abby Barras, and the key themes are presented in this report.

## Demographic Information



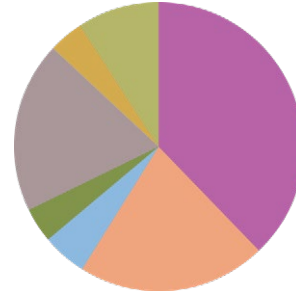
Age (N=118)

8%	11
8%	12
17%	13
15%	14
29%	15
23%	16



Do you consider yourself to have a disability? (N=122)

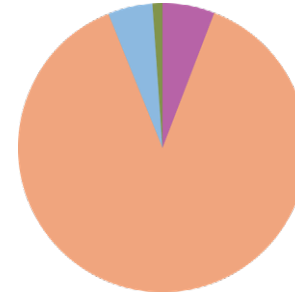
34%	Yes
53%	No
13%	Prefer not to say



Gender Identity (N=122)

38%	Trans boy
21%	Trans girl
5%	Girl
4%	Boy
19%	Non-binary
4%	Prefer no to say
9%	Other

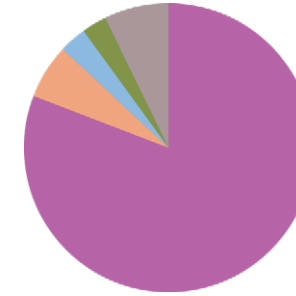
Self-defined gender identities in the 'other' section included demi-girl, gender fluid and gender queer.



Does your gender identity match the sex assigned to you at birth?

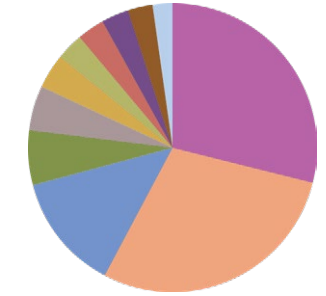
6%	Yes
88%	No
5%	Prefer not to say
1%	Other

For those who selected 'other', they answered 'sometimes'.



Where do you live? (N=122)

81%	England
6%	Wales
3%	Scotland
3%	Nothern Ireland
7%	Other



Please describe your nationality, ethnicity and/or cultural identity.

29%	White
29%	White British
13%	English
6%	Irish
5%	British
4%	Mixed
3%	Half
3%	French
3%	European
3%	Black
2%	Italian

# Playing Sport: now, in the past, and in the imagined future

**We wanted to know the kind of sport and physical exercise trans youth are participating in currently, in the past, and in the future. This information can help us support sports organisations to become more inclusive, for example through staff training or sharing this report.**

We asked:

## What sport do you do? (N=86)

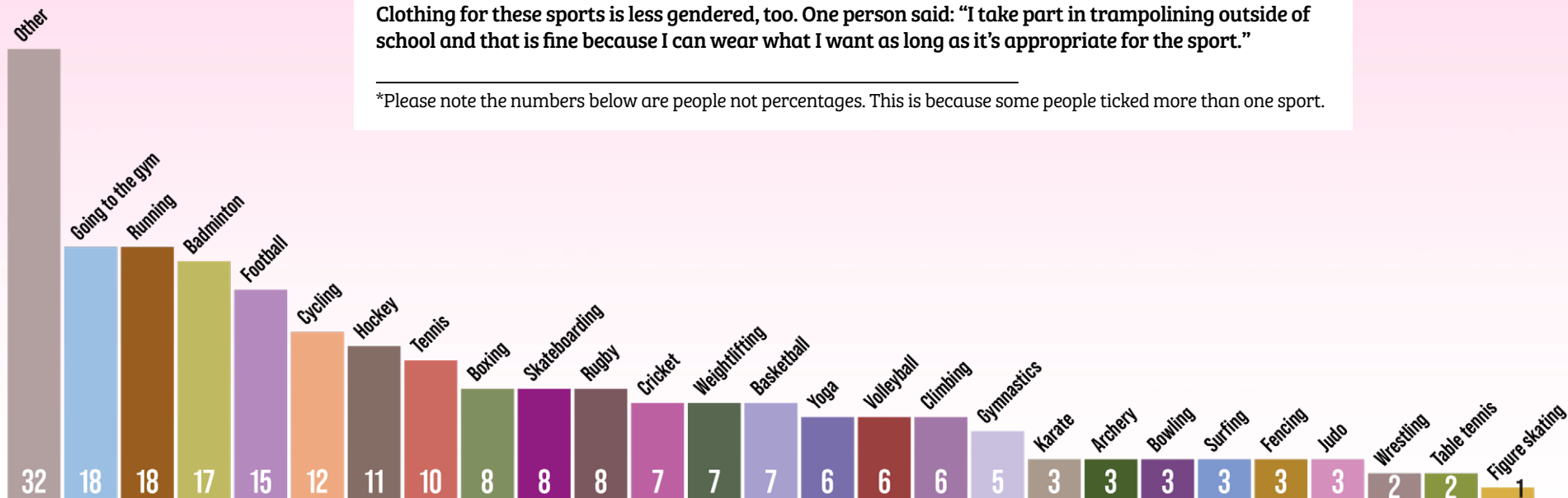
Of the 86 people who responded\* people on average were involved in 2.5 different activities. This indicates that young people are active and involved in sport both in and outside of school.

Of the 32 people who replied 'other', 20 different sports and activities were reported. The most popular activity (n=4) was horse-riding, followed by trampolining and roller-skating (n=3 each). Most schools do not offer these activities on the curriculum, suggesting these activities are being done outside of school.

Sports like running and going to the gym were popular. One person said: "the majority of sports are put into a masculine or feminine box, and I don't like being put in things like that so it makes me want to give the sport up."

Clothing for these sports is less gendered, too. One person said: "I take part in trampolining outside of school and that is fine because I can wear what I want as long as it's appropriate for the sport."

\*Please note the numbers below are people not percentages. This is because some people ticked more than one sport.



We asked:

## **Which sports have you taken part in, in the past?** (N=84)

On average, people who answered this question had done 6.7 different sports. Given the age group of those who responded (11 – 16), it is likely that people have included activities they have done once or twice at school, like rounders, rather than a regular activity.

For those who answered 'other', swimming received the most responses, followed by gymnastics. Both these activities have a high degree of body exposure, and there is evidence in other research\*, that swimming is an activity trans people drop out of at this age, or avoid altogether.

\*See *'The Lived Experiences of Transgender and Non-Binary People in Everyday Sport and Physical Exercise in the UK'* by Abby Barras (2021) and *'Jumping In: Transgender and Non-Binary Swimming'* by Jayne Caudwell (2022).

**“I don't swim anymore even though I love it because wearing a swimsuit makes me too dysphoric.”**

**“I didn't continue with swimming [when puberty started] because I was forced to wear a swimming costume instead of shorts. It was really traumatising for me to wear swimming attire for girls. It really put me off swimming for a long time, I still won't go swimming in a public pool now.”**





# School and PE

We asked:

**Please tell us about anything you think has stopped you from taking part in sport in the past.** (N=69)

## Environmental Barriers

These are barriers such as changing rooms and toilets, as well as the way sport is often organised along binary lines. Gendered language which might not be inclusive, as well as assumptions about a person's gender, are also considered here. Here are some of the things people shared.

"I feel really uncomfortable using the girls' changing room as a non-binary person and our PE is split into boys and girls."

"I worry about getting changed in the changing rooms and people judging you."

"On my bad dysphoria days I just don't bother showering."

"At school our PE lessons are done in 'Boys' and 'Girls' groups but they only really do the groups based on your sex. The teachers address the 'Girls' groups as 'ladies' and 'girls' and don't seem to account for students who identify as different genders."

"I mainly do a lot of sports in my PE classes at school. The classes are always sectioned as boys and girls."

"My PE teacher would also misgender and deadname me constantly and I was not allowed in the boys' changing room."

Splitting sport into 'boys and girls' was not just uncomfortable for some people, it also made them feel unmotivated and left out. Asking trans youth about their preferred gendered group in sport could help resolve this.

"In secondary school, I would get changed in the disabled toilets and I did PE with the girls group, which wasn't great and made me less motivated to do sport but I'd rather be in the girls because none of them said anything bad about being trans to my face."

"At school sport is very divided between genders [and] I was put with the gender I was assigned at birth and not the gender I identify with. This makes me quite uncomfortable sometimes, I feel like I perform worse in the sport and have less motivation to strive for sporting achievements as I will be seen as the gender I was assigned at birth."

"I hate when at school we are split by gender, because I am out at school and to my peers but am still pressured to stay with my assigned gender at birth. I feel accepted until it comes to PE."

# Gendered Clothing

Wearing gendered sporting clothing can be affirming for trans youth. At school, the school PE kit is often compulsory, and options are limited as they do not comply with school clothing policies. This is what people told us.

**“The uniform for boys and girls is not the most ideal. The ‘girls’ shirts don’t have buttons and are very fitted. Our skorts are really short if you have a higher waist which even my cis women friends find uncomfortable.”**

**“I’ve been told off for not wanting to wear my PE kit (shows off my feminine curves). I’ve also explained to PE staff I wear a binder to school *multiple times*, and expected to participate in cross country. The days after that lesson always feel awful as my chest is sore from binding whilst exercising.”**

\*A binder is a compression undergarment that looks like a vest and is usually made of durable nylon and spandex. Wearing a binder (“binding”) flattens the breasts to the body, creating a flatter silhouette, helping to curb gender dysphoria. It can help with ‘passing’ since the appearance of breasts often increases the chance of strangers using female pronouns. See ‘*The Lived Experiences of Transgender and Non-Binary People in Everyday Sport and Physical Exercise in the UK*’ by [Abby Barras](#) (2021)

**“Make sport uniforms/ clothing less gendered, and stop making gendered clothes compulsory for competitions.”**

**“I also bind, which is a barrier to doing a lot of sports.”**

**“Binding is incredibly hard to do safely while doing sport, but without binding I refuse to do sport because I’m so uncomfortable in my own skin.”**

**“Wearing a binder inhibits what I can do. I used to love swimming but won’t go now.”**

**“There isn’t much we can do about the binder, it would be nice if the teacher acknowledged it though and perhaps let me do something less energy consuming.”**



# Gender Dysphoria

Physical exercise can sometimes induce gender dysphoria (or gender euphoria) for trans people. Gender dysphoria is 'the distress and discomfort some trans people experience because of the discrepancy between their gender assigned at birth and gendered self-image.'\*

Here are some of the things people told us.

\*Ashley, F. (2021, p. 1159). 'The Misuse of Gender Dysphoria: Toward Greater Conceptual Clarity in Transgender Health' *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 16(6), 1159–1164.

**"I can't play in boys teams and my dysphoria is so bad it prevents me from doing things I like."**

**"I experienced gender dysphoria [in sport], because I was not fully accepted as myself, did not feel safe telling anyone. Stopped competing when it started affecting my mental health."**

**"Well I suppose I never do school sports because that's assigned by gender and in PE it's assigned by gender, sometimes the dysphoria gets so bad I pretend my EDS [eating disorder] is acting up so I can skip out."**

**"I really wanted to go into gymnastics before I transitioned as a boy but I couldn't because the revealing clothing would give me way too much gender dysphoria."**

We asked:

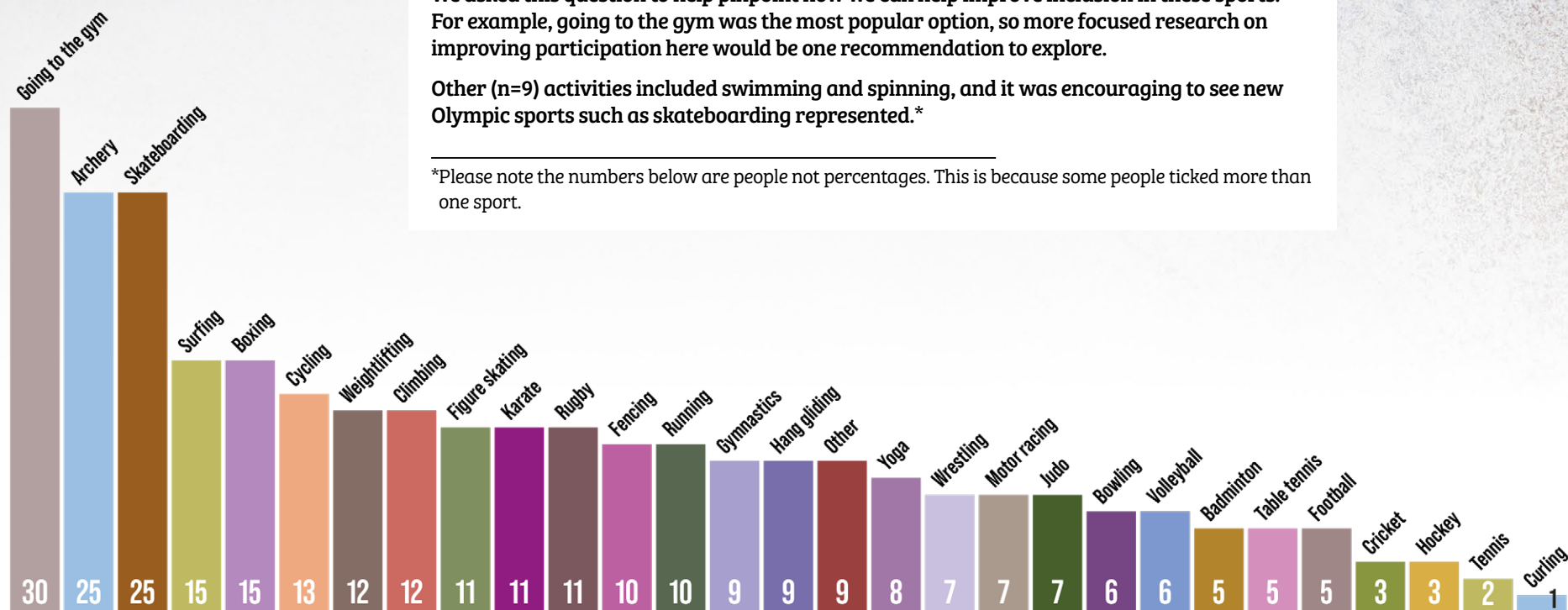
## Which sports would you like to try in the future? (N=83)

**“Anything where I am welcome.”**

We asked this question to help pinpoint how we can help improve inclusion in these sports. For example, going to the gym was the most popular option, so more focused research on improving participation here would be one recommendation to explore.

Other (n=9) activities included swimming and spinning, and it was encouraging to see new Olympic sports such as skateboarding represented.\*

\*Please note the numbers below are people not percentages. This is because some people ticked more than one sport.



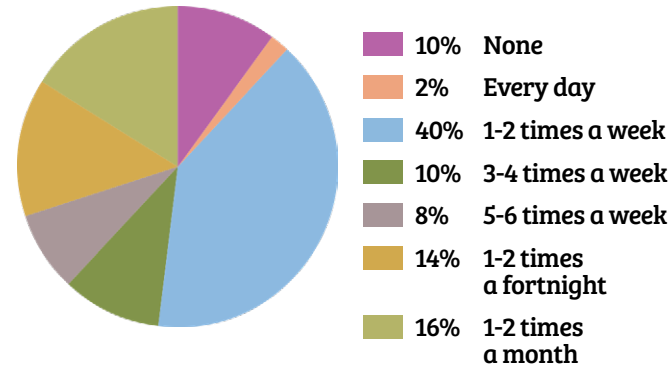
## Frequency of Activity

Knowing levels of exercise for trans youth can help us identify and challenge inequalities. For example, are they exercising less than other young people, and why? Schools in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland all have a duty to teach some form of physical education under the National Curriculum at all key stages (age four - 16), and one of the National Curriculum's stated aims is for children and young people to lead healthy, active lives. Whilst this aim applies to all children and young people, findings from Sport England's 2021 Active Lives Children and Young People Survey estimated that less than half of this population of 3.2 million, achieved the recommended 60 minutes or more a day. Activity levels varied by age, gender and ethnicity. Like many surveys, Sport England only includes 'boys' and 'girls' in its findings. This means trans youths; unique experiences are overlooked. This is an inequality, and research has shown that compared to their cisgender peers, trans adults are less likely to take part in exercise due to their gender identity.\*

\*Jones, B. A., Haycraft, E., Bouman, W. P. & Arcelus, J. (2018). 'The levels and predictors of physical activity engagement within the transgender population: A matched control study'. *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*, 15(2), 99-107.

We asked:

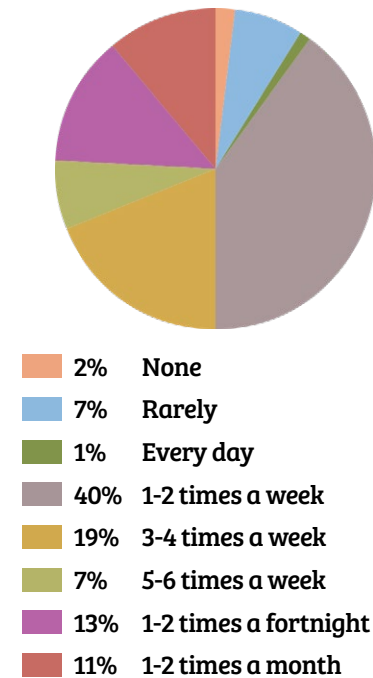
**How many times have you taken part in physical activity in the last month?** N=90



We asked:

**How many times have you taken part in physical activity in the last 6 months?** N=90

When comparing 6 months with monthly, trans youth are doing an activity twice as much, and are active 3 - 4 times a week. It is likely that two of these occasions are school-based (most pupils do PE twice a week), indicating trans youth are also doing another activity (or two other separate activities) after school. This is a very encouraging reflection on trans youth's sport engagement.



**This illustrates a wide range of sports which people have been taking part in. Our recommendation would be conducting further research on why some people drop out of certain sports, particularly those most commonly taught on the curriculum.**

# The Main Benefits of Taking Part in Sport or Physical Activity

If we want to know what motivates someone to take part in sport, it is important to ask them. Because every person's experience is unique to them, understanding their experiences helps in building a picture of what improving inclusion can look like. People's lived experiences are powerful, and help shape positive change.

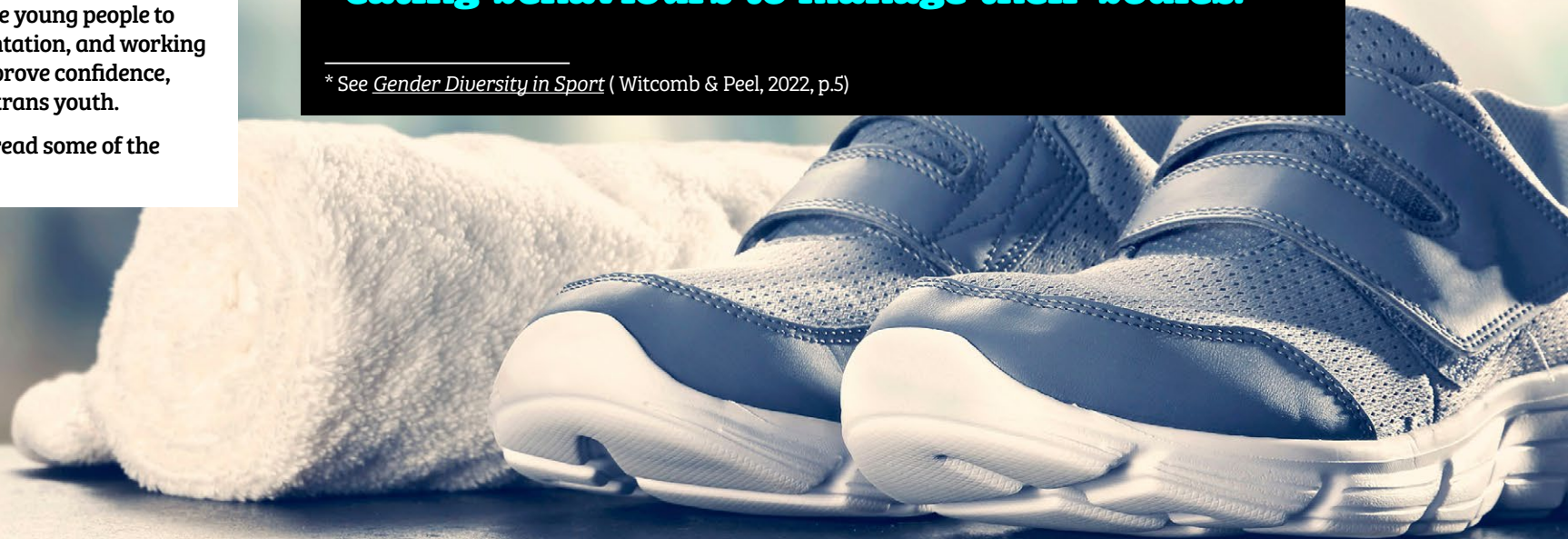
It was inspiring to read how much young people enjoy sport and exercise. Some people had one particular reason they did sport, such as 'I lose weight' or, 'it strengthens my legs so I can get surgery'. Other people said exercise makes them 'happy' or gave them 'personal enjoyment.'

A key finding was the relationship between sport and a person's body. There are long-term positive benefits to doing sport, such as having a strong and healthy body. Sport and exercise is frequently used to change a person's body shape, for example to build muscle or lose weight. Sport helped some young people to develop their own gender presentation, and working on body shape also helped to improve confidence, and this had specific benefits to trans youth.

On the following pages you can read some of the things people told us.

**“The exclusion of gender diverse people from sporting spheres is a direct infringement on their physical and mental health. Additionally, changes to the physical body - through exercise-induced weight loss or increased lean body mass - can bring the body more in line with the physicality that is desired. Such congruence can provide additional mental health benefits related to the alleviation of dysphoric and incongruent body image leaving gender diverse people less reliant on maladaptive eating behaviours to manage their bodies.” \***

\* See *Gender Diversity in Sport* (Witcomb & Peel, 2022, p.5)



## 1. Strengthening the body and relief from gender dysphoria

We asked: What do you see as being the main benefits of taking part in sport or physical activity? N=81

**"To become more healthy overall, but also being built in a certain way to make my body look more masculine."**

**"Building my strength and hopefully changing my body so I can feel more comfortable with it."**

**"You become healthier. You have more stamina, which allows you to participate in other activities more easily. You can gain more muscle mass, which looks cool."**

**"It's good for my health and helps me deal with dissociation by giving me something where I have to be connected to my body. It also helps me relieve some dysphoria by helping me build muscle in my chest area and appear to have a more masculine chest."**

**"Getting fitter, feeling confident in my body, staying healthy physically and mentally."**

**"Exercise, muscle gain, fun!"**

**"Strengthening your body."**

**"Seeing physical improvements like stamina and muscle gain, and boosting my mental health."**

## 2. Enjoying keeping fit and healthy

Trans youth were aware of the link between exercise, physical and mental health. They noted how exercise helped them to 'stay fit' and enjoyed 'being fit'. Many made the link between sport and improved mental and physical health. One person said how for them, exercise was about 'keeping your health in check'.

The table right shows almost half who answered said taking part in sport had probably improved their mental health, and over a third found that being excluded from sport made their mental health worse.

Regarding physical health, almost half said this was definitely improved by taking part in sport. Almost a quarter recognised that being excluded from sport probably made their physical health worse.

**“You can stay healthy, it improves your mental health if you’re more of an active person.”**

N=88	No, definitely not	No, probably not	No impact	Yes, probably	Yes, definitely
Taking part in sport has improved my mental health	<b>10%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>23%</b>
Being excluded from sport has made my mental health worse	<b>5%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>28%</b>
Taking part in sport has improved my physical health	<b>3%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>47%</b>
Being excluded from sport has made my physical health worse	<b>12%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>18%</b>



### 3. Having Fun with Friends

Fun was a strong theme in the survey answers and was mentioned alongside the physical and mental health benefits. Spending time with friends was a key part of this.

**“Keeping up my physical health and mental health, while doing fun things with friends.”**

**“Health benefits, motivation and fun.”**

**“Making friends and being fit.”**

**“Social benefits.”**

### 4. A Positive Outlet and Routine

Respondents shared how exercise was good for them in other ways. It was also, as one person said, 'an energy outlet' or as another said, 'stress relief'. Having a good daily routine which includes exercise is known to help with anxiety and stress, as it helps provide structure and focus.

**“I walk simply so that I can see that 10,000 step mark and I can feel like I have achieved something that day.”**

**“It can boost my mood.”**

**“You get to feel better and healthier when you've built up a routine of exercising.”**

**“It makes me feel better and stronger, and in more control and gives me a good outlet.”**

### 5. Pride, Self-improvement and Self-esteem

We were encouraged to learn how sport meant a variety of different things to trans youth. For example, there was a connection between sport and feelings of pride, self-improvement and increased self-esteem. These things can help to raise a person's confidence, which can have trans youth's life-skills, resilience and future opportunities.

**“I find them to be fun and rewarding, it feels great when you become good at a sport. It also makes me feel healthier on a day to day basis.”**

**“It clears my mind and challenges me and it's very fun.”**

**“It's great for your health, mobility and can help enormously with self-esteem/self confidence.”**

**“Improved fitness and self-esteem.”**

**“Being able to walk quicker and get places.”**

## 6. Community and Competition

Being part of a sporting community with supportive and like-minded people improves our sense of belonging. Competing in sport can be joyous and full-filling. Learning to be part of a team and working towards a shared goal is a great life-skill.

**"The community I get from my sport and the joy from improving at it are incredible."**

**"Participating in a competition [and] being part of a team is pretty fun."**

**"Meeting new people and working as a team."**

**"Sense of community and mental health."**

**"Learning skills."**

**"The sense of community I get from playing team sports."**

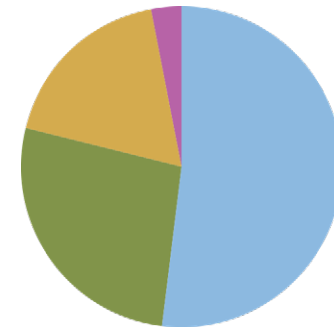
**"It's fun, part of team, fitness."**

# Gender Identity and Non-Binary Inclusion

**Our report has highlighted how the gendered nature of sport, such as sex-segregated teams, changing rooms and clothing can cause barriers to inclusion for trans youth. School can often reinforce these barriers, because PE is compulsory and school policies might not always accommodate gender diversity. It was important to ask people directly if they felt that their gender identity was a barrier to taking part in sport. Just over half said yes.**

We asked:

**Do you feel that your gender identity has ever been a barrier to taking part in sport?** N=89



52% Yes      18% No  
27% Kind of      3% Don't know

## Gender Identity

Here are some of the other things people told us about gender identity and sport.

**“Being seen to have a competitive advantage in sport whereas I’m weaker than 99% of girls doing the same sport.”**

**“Not enough representation of trans and GNC [gender non-conforming] athletes in most sports.”**

**“I have not been able to come out to my current team as I do not want to have to stop playing for them.”**

**“I want to feel comfortable playing a sport without my gender identity being a discussion or a debate.”**

**“A lot of people are closed minded about trans people on gender oriented teams, making it difficult to fit in.”**

## Non-Binary People's Experiences

Almost a fifth (19%) of respondents told us they are non-binary, and one key finding was the lack of consideration in sport for non-binary people.

**"I'm not out as non-binary to many people... this means I play for girls teams, so I haven't been stopped from playing, but I don't always feel entirely comfortable, which might have prevented me from trying new sports."**

**"Trans and non-binary people [should be able to] choose which sport they participate in and which group regarding gender they participate in."**

**"I don't feel like I am welcome in any sports teams because I'm trans and non-binary. I'm not welcomed in my PE class at all. I think I would enjoy sports if the attitude towards queer, trans and non-binary people wasn't so bad."**

**"Honestly sports is a thing where the people in better shape will do better, no matter gender identity, it's competitive. I think trans and non-binary people should be allowed to partake in whichever they feel more comfortable."**

**"I think more education for coaches and the people who control sports [and] educating everyone so there isn't so much misinformation and negativity about trans and non-binary people in sports. I think this would encourage more trans and non-binary people to take part in sports, as it can be scary as you don't know how people will react right now."**

Others had suggestions on how to improve inclusion for non-binary people in sport, such as being able to play for whichever teams they wanted to.

**"Openly trans and non-binary people in these sports and queer spaces, especially those focused on community rather than performance."**

**"I would like all clubs and sports to be clear that we are accepted, and to listen to those who have surgeries/hormones. I would like for trans and non-binary people to be able to play sport for whatever teams they want to play for, that they feel comfortable in."**

## The Media

It can be hard to tune out the negative media stories about the inclusion of trans people in sport. Often these stories distract from the most important thing: that everyone, including trans youth, has the right to participate in sport at all levels. At Mermaids we believe that we all have a part to play in reducing barriers and improving inclusion in sport. This includes the media.

We asked:

**When you see negative stories in the news about trans people in sport, do you worry about taking part?** (23 left a response)



31% Yes      24% No  
24% Sometimes      21% Other

**Young people are not immune to negative stories, and they do have a direct and worrying impact on their participation in sport. Here is what some people told us.**

“Policies of inclusion based on evidence, not on moral panics and pseudoscience. Diversity training for coaches and ideally for the media. Awareness campaigns so the public know that trans people (especially trans women) pose no threat to cis athletes.”

“I worry that as a non-binary person a law or something similar may be passed that might prevent me from taking part in sports once I’m an adult.”

“Yes. While trans women are the ones being banned, I worry that the same attitudes will either implicitly or explicitly push trans men out of sport too. I know that my trans sisters can no longer compete in a growing number of sports, and this affects me less but makes me feel incredibly unwelcome. The media is hostile towards trans people in every way and sports is another attack line; another stick to beat us with. I’m honestly very scared for myself and for my community as a whole.”

“We are being pushed out of normal public life, one step at a time.”

“I just feel that no matter how hard I worked that I would be kicked out for some reason or another.”

“I worry that my future is being limited by people who have no knowledge of what it is to be trans.”

“There is a lot of hateful news and harmful information that is spread and makes me fear judgement.”

“Because people are always so negative towards trans people in sports, it makes me sometimes feel unwanted in the world like I’ll never be good enough for people just because I’m trans.”

“I worry all the stories about trans people trying to compete is hurting how society thinks about us. It makes us look like cheats.”

# Recommendations for Improving Inclusion

Knowing what young people are feeling helps Mermaids to make changes to improve their experiences in sport. Young people had lots of ideas about this, many of which could be easily implemented in schools and sports clubs through staff training and would benefit others too. This is what they told us.

We asked:

**What would you like to see happen in sport to make it more inclusive for trans and non-binary people?** (N=74)

## Training for Staff

**“Coaches being aware of what being trans/non-binary is and what impact it can have on sport.”**

**“More education for sports teams on the basics of being trans/non-binary and how they can work to make sports more accommodating for them.”**

**“School PE Staff need to consider that not everyone in the class identifies as their assigned gender, if it's on the school**

**system that one of the students doesn't identify as the PE groups 'gender' then there shouldn't be any excuses.”**

**“Safe ways of binding for sports. Ways to get schools to understand that binding isn't always a choice, and more education on safe binding as a whole.”**

**“Maybe have sports professionals use more inclusive words. Instead of girls and boys maybe**

**use...people or something other than girls and boys.”**

**“I think more education to coaches and the people who control sports, as well as just educating everyone so there isn't so much misinformation and negativity about trans and non-binary people in sports. I think this would encourage more trans and non-binary people to take part in sports, as it can be scary as you don't know how people will react right now.”**

## Our recommendations

- ✓ Modules on trans and non-binary inclusion, formulated through engagement with trans young people in sport, should be made compulsory during training for PE teachers and in coaching qualifications.
- ✓ Schools and National Governing Bodies should provide clear guidance, following policies such as those of the Football Association and Lawn Tennis Association, that where single sex teams are created in youth sports, trans young people should be allowed to choose the category they feel most comfortable with.

## Role Models and Representation

One way to improve trans youth inclusion in sport is by encouraging visible role models. Visible and positive role models in sport and physical exercise has been shown to improve inclusion for those groups traditionally less engaged than others, for example adolescent girls and LGBTQIA+ and ethnic minority communities . This was reflected in the findings.

**“More opportunities at local-levels for trans and enby [non-binary] people to take part in sports and feel safe around other trans people; more trans representation in different sports (especially less popular sports) in the media.”**

**“Make [people] not have to feel uncomfortable with having a trans or non-binary person on their team.”**

**“Policies of inclusion based on evidence, not on moral panics and pseudoscience.”**

**“See more trans athletes on tv news etc. in a positive light and show kids and teens that just because you're trans in sport should let you down and not let you do the sports you want to do.”**

\* See 'The Lived Experiences of Transgender and Non-Binary People in Everyday Sport and Physical Exercise in the UK' by [Abby Barras](#) (2021)

## Our recommendations

- ✓ Sports clubs and National Governing Bodies should explicitly and publicly state that they will include trans youth and take proactive steps to ensure trans representation at all levels, including within governance structures.
- ✓ We ask that trans people are given the opportunity to share their lived experiences of sport without having their right to participate debated, including trans representation at governance level.
- ✓ Politicians, public figures and the media should recognise the impact their comments and reporting are likely to have in producing real and perceived barriers to trans young people's participation in sport.

## Relax the Binary

Sport doesn't always have to be organised along binary lines, or only have boys and girls' teams. Mixed-teams are a great way to keep active with their friends and have fun. This doesn't mean getting rid of the binary in sport, because lots of people find playing on a gendered team affirming. It just means having more options for people to get involved in sport.

**"Honestly just get rid of the binary divide between children, it would help all kids not just trans and non-binary ones and would make it more fair and equal overall."**

**"Have mixed/all gender PE classes, more education about trans/non binary people in sport to reduce levels of transphobia."**

**"Mixed-gender PE classes in school if possible, and in general sports, more openness to trans people competing with the gender we feel most comfortable with."**

**"Just have mixed sports, make it so that people with the same levels of endurance, strength compete together, and if that changes in you,**

**then you can go up or down a level."**

**"Get rid of gendered sections, and base it on skill instead. Especially for primary school/teen sports. Because it is easier, inclusive & doesn't foster more unnecessary separation between girls and boys, because especially at primary school age it isn't needed."**

## Our recommendations

- ✓ Coaches and teachers should carefully consider whether an activity needs to be sex separated, recognising that justifications may vary across activities.
- ✓ All young people should be able to choose the kit, clothing and changing rooms that they feel most comfortable with. Schools and clubs should endeavour to make gender neutral facilities, kit and language available to all, which can facilitate inclusion for all young people.
- ✓ Assumptions about someone's identity or participation should be avoided and no decisions should be made about a trans person's involvement without asking them first.



## More Acceptance for Trans People in Sport

Despite the positive experiences shared in this report, participation in sport for some trans youth can still be challenging. Finding ways to support their inclusion can and should be given consideration, and encouraging others to help promote inclusion for everyone will have a positive effect on others who may also be finding sport challenging.

**“More teams that focus on LGBTQ+ participants.”**

**“A way to know what trainers/ sport staff are trans friendly.”**

**“Greater understanding of the Equality Act so that we don't have to advocate all the time, this others us and outs us. There is just simply no need for it.”**

**“Having more activity based trans youth groups rather than talking and socialising. having more dedicated trans sports clubs.”**

## Our recommendations

✓ Sporting bodies, schools and Government should take proactive steps to ensure that trans youth, who are currently underrepresented in sport, feel supported to be involved, owing to the specific and transformational benefits\* that their participation brings.

\* See 'Barriers to physical activity in transgender and non-binary populations', Jones, B. A., Haycraft, E., Bouman, W. P. & Arcelus, J. (2018). *The levels and predictors of physical activity engagement within the transgender population: A matched control study*. *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*, 15(2), 99-107. Phipps, C. (2019). *Thinking beyond the binary: Barriers to trans participation in university sport*. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 56(1), 81-96.

✓ Individual sporting bodies should undertake further research on the barriers to trans inclusion specific to them, exploring reasons why trans people may drop out and proposing remedies for this.

# Recommendations

Based on this research, we have produced a series of recommendations with implications for schools, sports clubs, coaches, governing bodies, policy makers and the media rooted in the experiences of trans youth.

**1.** Young people should never be excluded from participating in sport on the basis of their gender or trans identities.

**2.** Careful consideration should be given to whether a sport or activity needs to be sex separated. Where there are benefits to sex separation, **trans youth should be allowed to choose** the category they feel most comfortable with.

**3.** Appropriate options for gender neutral kit and facilities should be made available that respect the privacy and dignity of all participants.

**4.** Teachers, coaches and those working in sport should **undertake training** to improve understanding of the issues affecting trans youth in sport.

**5.** Sporting bodies, Government departments and the media must **listen to and empower the voices of trans youth** in sport, taking proactive steps to make them feel welcome and accepted.

**6.** Sporting bodies, schools and Government should **take proactive steps** to ensure that trans youth, who are currently underrepresented, feel supported to be involved in sport owing to the specific and transformational benefits that their participation brings.

**The response to our survey highlights that trans youth in sport regularly feel their voices and perspectives are ignored - our recommendations offer an opportunity for sport leaders to start the work of being Active About Inclusion.**

# Conclusion

We can conclude the following on what sport means to trans youth aged 11 - 16 in the UK today.

- ✓ **Many people face barriers to taking part in sport, but this does not stop them from doing what they love.**
- ✓ **The reasons for doing sport are varied, but young people recognise the value of fun, fitness and friendship.**
- ✓ **Young people worry about taking part in sport after there is negative media attention - but they try not to let it stop them.**
- ✓ **Young people benefit enormously from taking part in sport - just like all young people.**
- ✓ **Young people care greatly about other trans people and the future of sport for those in the whole LGBTQIA+ community.**
- ✓ **Schools, PE teachers, coaches and sports organisations all have a part to play in reducing barriers to inclusion and making it more welcoming.**
- ✓ **Non-binary people's experiences need greater attention.**
- ✓ **Role models and representation matter.**

**Mermaids hopes the experiences reflected here serve as a reminder of the importance of trans youth's rights to play sport with their friends, keep fit and have fun, just like all young people.**

## LGBTQIA+ Sports Organisations

**LEAP Sports and Non-Binary Inclusion in Sport**

**LGBT+ Sport Cymru (Wales)**

**Pride Sports**

## Sports Resources

**Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sports Research**

**Football v Transphobia**

**Gender Diversity in Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives**

**Monash University and Bingham Cup**

**Trans Inclusion Schools Toolkit**  
(Brighton and Hove Council, 2021)

**Transgender, intersex and non-binary people in sport and physical activity: A review of research and policy.**



A full glossary of terms used in this report is [available here](#).

Details of our helpline services [are also available](#).

Thank you to all those who took the time to respond to the original survey.

Contact our Research Team via [email](#) or the [Mermaids website](#)



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