

FINDINGS FROM SCHOOL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

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Key Points

Indicative results suggest that the majority of respondents consider themselves to be active, in their own estimation and in the context of recommended levels of activity.

Similarly, most respondents believe that they will continue to lead active lifestyles when they grow older.

For the young people involved in these discussions, the fun and social aspects associated with sport and physical activity were the biggest motivating factors.

As has been the case with the adult discussions the perceived barriers to physical activity raised here were contextual, and both personal and social.

Although the majority of respondents believed they would continue to lead active lifestyles into adulthood, there was recognition that added time constraints, relating to family, work and education commitments, might prevent this.

Introduction

Throughout March 2010 Research Services met with a number of school groups on routine visits to the Northern Ireland Assembly to discuss sports and physical activity participation. Research sought to gather information on young people's experiences and impressions of sports and physical activity. The discussion also presented an opportunity to explore the decline in participation levels which often occurs when individuals move from young adulthood into adulthood.

It has not been possible given the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure's focus on adult participation rates, and time constraints to conduct an extensive and robust survey into youth participation rates.

However findings in this paper provide a 'snap-shot' of youth opinion and should therefore be considered indicative rather than authoritative.

In total five groups took part in the discussions, these were:

- Loreto College, Coleraine – a group of 17 A-Level students, male and female;
- Portadown College – a group of 31 A-level students, male and female;
- Assumption Youth Club – a group of six 11-16 year-olds, male and female;
- Limavady Grammar School – a group of nine A-level students, male and female; and
- The Pathways Group – a group of six 11-16 year olds from an 'alternative education' project for young people, male and female.

This paper outlines group responses to a series of questions, taking each question in turn.

Do you consider yourself to be an active person?

Participants were asked if, in their understanding of what it means to be an active person, they thought themselves to be active. Overall, the majority responded positively. The percentage breakdown for each group was in Table 1 below (percentages have been rounded):

Table 1: No of respondents who consider themselves active

	Active in own opinion		Active in context of recommended levels		Think they will continue to be active in the future	
	%	No of respondents	%	No of respondents	%	No of respondents
Loreto College	71	12	65	17	88	15
Portadown College	94	29	80	28	58	28
Assumption Youth Club	83	6	83	6	83	6
Limivady Grammar	67	6	89	8	89	8
Pathways Group	67	6	50	3	50	3

How would you describe an active person?

The intention of this question was to record participant impressions of an “active person”. They were also asked to comment on what they thought adequate participation levels were.

Across all groups “active” was linked to “sporty”. Participants, for the most part, described an active person with terms such as: “participating”, “exercise”, “part of a team” and “healthy”. Terms linking “active” to non-competitive physical activity and those describing the non-health benefits of participation were cited less frequently but were raised. An “active person” was described as “relaxed”, “outgoing”, and “always on the move” (the latter potentially implying an understanding of physical activity beyond the ‘formal sport’).

With regard to adequate levels of physical activity, respondents from two out of the five groups had an awareness of the “30 minutes a day five days a week” message. Of the other three, one had no response to this question. The others provided a range of answers – “everyday”, “every other day for an hour and a half”, “three times a week” – suggesting an awareness of the desirability of regular physical activity. It is equally evident that the basic message is not getting through in all cases.

What types of activities do you regularly take part in?

This question sought to gain an understanding of what activities younger people participate in. It was also designed to provide an indication of the popularity of non-competitive activities in comparison with competitive sports, and a similar comparison of “traditional” and “alternative” activities.

Across all five groups the popularity of the “big three” sports was evident. Each group mentioned at least one of Football, Gaelic Games or Rugby, all but one group cited two. It should be pointed out that all groups were predominately male, which may account for the popularity of these sports.

Based on the responses, other popular competitive sports include: athletics; basketball; hockey; swimming and volley ball.

Popular non-competitive activities cited were: attending the gym; cycling; running; and walking.

Respondents demonstrated a considerable interest in what might be called alternative to non-mainstream activities, such as: archery; abseiling; go-karting; ice skating; off-road driving; palates; power walking; and Taekwondo. Interestingly, some respondents also included active computer games such as WII Fit in their list of regular activities.

Significantly all activities listed were leisure-time activities, suggesting that the respondents were unaware of the broad conception of physical activity.

Where do you take part in these activities?

Respondents were asked where they participated in activity, the intention was to establish if participation was confined to formal settings such as in schools or youth clubs, or if respondents took part in extra-curricular activities outside of formal structures.

As expected, for all groups (excluding the Pathways Group), school was the first cited location of participation. Other formal locations included youth clubs, sports clubs, the Boys Brigade and Young Enterprise schemes.

Non-formal settings for physical activity included: at home; at local pitches and parks; gyms and leisure centres; and in “their street”.

Given that recommended levels of activity are 30 minutes of moderate activity five times a week, would you still consider yourself an active person?

For this question respondents were asked to consider their activities in the context of recommended activity levels and with a broad concept of physical activity in mind (one that includes work/school-based, home-based and travel-based activities). There was a decrease in participation levels among the two groups which had the highest levels of participation previously (see section two). Fewer respondents from Pathways thought themselves active in light of recommended levels. More respondents from Assumption Youth Club and Limivady Grammar considered themselves active when they considered the above definition. The results are inconclusive.

See Table 1 for the percentage breakdown for each group.

Why do you take part in physical activity?

The purpose of this question was to gather a range of factors that motivate younger people to be active. Significantly, “health benefit” was only cited twice, although related benefits such as “keeping fit”, “stress relief” and “weight loss” were also mentioned. On the basis of the responses, enjoyment and social benefits appear to be more significant motivators for young people, examples of such responses include: “fun”, “socialisation”; “to make friends”; “improve skill”; “getting out of regular school lessons”; and “feel good”. Some respondents also suggested that they participated in physical activity, not for specific benefits, but to “relieve boredom” and because “there is nothing else to do”.

What might stop you from taking part?

Respondents were asked to suggest what might prevent them from participating. The list of barriers provided was extensive and covered a number of personal, health and social factors. For respondents, barriers to physical activity participation included:

- Not feeling part of a team;
- Suffering an injury;
- Depression;
- Lack of motivation;
- Fear of taking part on your own;
- Lack of facilities;
- Cost;
- Access to leisure centres;
- Closing times;
- Being grounded; and
- Local residents banning ball games.

There was a suggestion from one group that gender might be an issue in sport, as from their experience women and girls were unlikely to participate in football, gaelic games and rugby.

For those of you who do not consider yourself active, what would encourage you to participate more?

There were few answers to this question. Those that did answer suggested that activities could be made more fun and cheaper. Other response included increasing facilities and encouraging participation as part of a team.

Do you think you will continue to take part in activity when you leave school/get older?

This question was again designed to provide a simple quantitative measure. Of the five groups, the number of respondents who believed they would take part in exercise when they reached adulthood (18+) was the same as those who felt they met recommended levels of participation. Of the other two, one groups result (Loretto) shows an increase on both other measures outlined above. In the remaining group (Portadown), considerably fewer respondents felt they would continue to be physically active when they were older than they are now. Please see Table 1 for the percentage breakdown for each group.

What might prevent you from continuing an active lifestyle when you get older?

Respondents were asked to consider what might prevent them from being active when they got older. The most common responses suggested that time constraints, caused by family commitments, work or Further Education, were perceived to be the biggest future constraints. Illness was considered a potential barrier by two groups, while losing interest and the impact of having access to a car were factors raised by individual respondents. Other issues, considered to be potential barriers were facilities closing down, drinking and taking drugs.

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