



# My Active Future: Including every child

A report exploring disabled children and young people's experiences and perceptions of being active

**Research Summary**

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[activityalliance.org.uk](https://activityalliance.org.uk)

# Introduction

Activity Alliance's vision is fairness for disabled people in sport and activity. We will achieve that vision by leading organisational improvement and changing attitudes to unlock the value of sport and activity for disabled people.

Sport England's Active Lives Children and Young People Survey 2018/19 found that 3.3 million children (47%) lead active lives. These children meet the Chief Medical Officers' guidelines of doing more than 60 minutes of physical activity a day, across the week. However, 2.1 million (29%) of all children are active for less than 30 minutes a day.

There are almost one million disabled children in England (Department of Work and Pensions Family Resources Survey 2017/18). The benefits of sport and activity in children's physical, mental, social, and emotional development are well-documented. Sport and activity is linked to cognitive benefits, learning ability, and better grade attainment for disabled children.

This report, which complements Sport England's Active Lives Children and Young People Survey, investigates the differences in experience and perceptions of sport and activity among disabled and non-disabled children. This includes their attitudes, enjoyment and participation, as well as their barriers and motivations.

We heard directly from disabled children aged 5 to 16 years, and their parents. A total of 760 disabled children and parents took part in our online survey, along with 921 non-disabled children and their parents. This allowed us to compare their experiences.

To explore key issues and potential solutions we used exploratory focus groups, interviews, and creative workshops. We also consulted with organisations working in the sector to understand shared priorities and challenges.

Understanding the experiences of disabled children will enable Activity Alliance and the wider sector to provide for and include more disabled children. By encouraging inclusion at an early age, we can help to build lifelong habits and ensure more children enjoy an active future.

The full research report is available on our website:

[activityalliance.org.uk/research](https://activityalliance.org.uk/research)



# Key findings

**One third** of disabled children take part in less than 30 minutes of sport and physical activity per day.



Only **one in four** disabled children take part in sport and physical activity all of the time at school.



Disabled children are **twice as likely** as non-disabled children to be lonely.



Disabled children are **less likely** than non-disabled children to be active at a park, leisure centre or friend's house.



Disabled children are motivated to take part in sport and physical activity to feel **a sense of belonging** and **be more independent**.



Worrying about **getting hurt, how they look** and **not knowing what to do** stops many disabled children being active.



**Nine in ten** parents of disabled children say their child's level of physical activity is important to them.

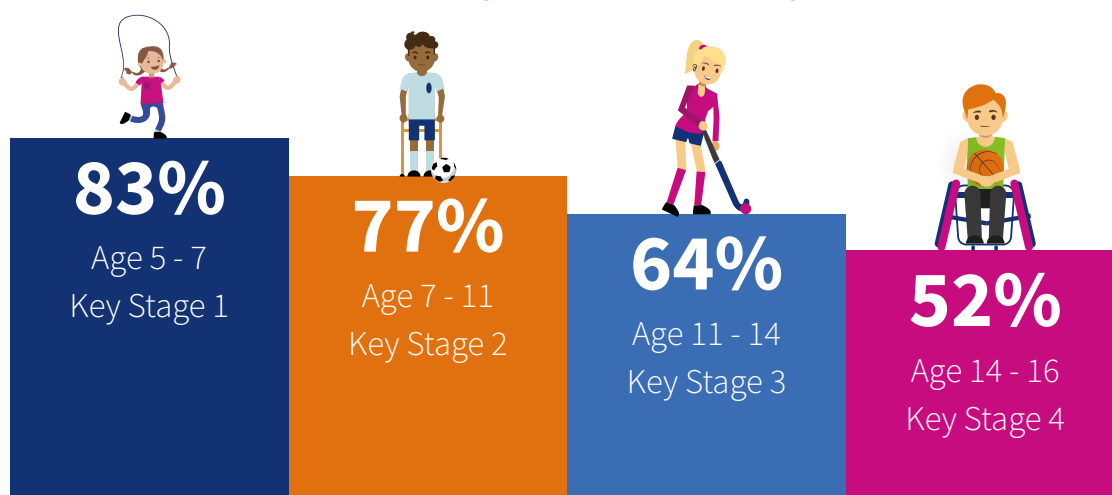


**Less than half** of parents with disabled children feel they have enough support to help their child to be active.



Disabled children's activity levels decrease significantly, as they get older.

Proportion of disabled children who are 'active or fairly active'.





# Summary of main findings by topic

## Activity levels

### Disabled children are less active than non-disabled children\*

- During term-time, 30% of disabled children are 'less active', compared to 21% of non-disabled children.

### As disabled children get older, the gap in activity levels gets bigger\*\*

- Activity levels for disabled and non-disabled children are similar at Key Stage 1 (83% during term-time compared to 84%). By Key Stage 2 disabled children are less likely to be 'active or fairly active' (77% vs 85%). The gap widens more significantly by Key Stage 4 (52% vs 72%).

### \*This study defined activity levels using Sport England's Active Lives Children and Young People Survey categories:

- 'Less active' (an average of less than 30 minutes per day).
- 'Fairly active' (an average of 30-60 minutes per day).
- 'Active' (at least 60 minutes per day).

### \*\* Key Stage guide

Key Stage	Pupil age	Year group
1	Ages 5 - 7	1 - 2
2	Ages 7 - 11	3 - 6
3	Ages 11 - 14	7 - 9
4	Ages 14 - 16	10 - 11

## Enjoyment and participation

### Disabled children are less likely to enjoy sport and physical activity, but want to do more

- Seven in ten (71%) disabled children say they enjoy taking part in sport and physical activity, compared to eight in ten (82%) non-disabled children.
- Yet, more disabled children would like to take part in more sport and physical activity compared to non-disabled children (38% vs 28%).

### At school, disabled children are less likely to take part, and less likely to enjoy being active

- Only a quarter (25%) of disabled children say they take part in sport and activity all of the time at school, compared to 41% of non-disabled children.
- One in five (20%) disabled children do not like PE lessons and games at school. This is significantly higher than their non-disabled peers (9%).

### Outside of school, disabled children are significantly less likely to be active

- In the last year, disabled children were less likely than non-disabled children to have been active in the following settings: park or play area (64% vs 73%), a leisure centre (53% vs 61%), at a friend's house (44% vs 57%), after-school club (28% vs 41%), for a sports team (17% vs 27%).
- All children take part to a similar level at home or on their street (48% vs 53%), at clubs like Brownies and Scouts (17% vs 18%) and at competitions (12% vs 15%).

## Inclusive activity

### Some disabled children want to take part in inclusive sports and activities. Others prefer to take part with children who have similar impairments

- 44% of disabled children want to take part in inclusive activities, with disabled and non-disabled children. 20% want to take part with children with similar impairments, and 15% say they prefer to take part with children with a range of impairments.



## Barriers and motivations to being active

### Disabled children are more likely to be lonely

- Disabled children are twice as likely to be lonely compared to their non-disabled peers (72% vs 36%). They are more likely to feel they have no one to talk to, feel left out, and to feel alone.
- Loneliness increases with age. At Key Stage 1, 14% of disabled children are lonely, rising to 29% at Key Stage 4.
- Over three-quarters (78%) of less active disabled children are lonely, compared to half (52%) of active disabled children.

### Disabled children worry about getting hurt, how they look, and not knowing what to do

- ‘Feeling uncomfortable’ ranked as the second highest barrier for disabled children (37% vs 19% for non-disabled children). This is especially true for children with mental health problems and behavioural impairments.
- Disabled children are more likely to feel that ‘getting hurt’, ‘worrying about how they look’, and ‘not knowing what to do’ stops them from being active.
- Disabled children in Key Stage 4 are significantly more likely to be worried about how they look compared to their non-disabled peers (27% vs 11%).
- Qualitative evidence suggests that some also worry about standing out, being made fun of, or making mistakes.

### Disabled children feel their impairment makes it more difficult to be active

- Two in five (40%) disabled children view their impairment as the top barrier to being active. This is more common among children with mobility impairments, long-term pain, and individuals with three or more impairments.
- This feeling increases with age. Almost half (49%) of disabled children in Key Stage 4 select this as a top barrier, compared to 37% and 36% in Key Stage 1 and 2.

### All children have similar motivations to be active

- The top reasons for disabled and non-disabled children to be active are ‘to improve physical health’, ‘for fun’ and ‘to spend time with friends’.
- Disabled children also wanted to take part for ‘a sense of belonging’, ‘to be more independent’, and ‘to help with their impairment’.



## The role of parents and guardians

### Parents and guardians see sport and activity as important and are more involved in decision-making

- Nine in ten (86%) parents of disabled children say their child's level of physical activity is important to them.
- Parents of disabled children are more likely to say that decisions on being active are 'generally' or 'totally' driven by them (26% vs 13% for parents of non-disabled children).

### Parents of disabled children need more support to help their children to be active

- Over a quarter (27%) of parents of disabled children think their child doesn't do enough physical activity (17% for parents of non-disabled children).
- Less than half (49%) of parents with a disabled child feel it is easy to get their child involved in physical activity.
- Parents of disabled children are less likely than parents of non-disabled children to feel they have enough support to manage their child's wellbeing (47% vs 73%) and help their child to be active (47% vs 70%).

### Concerns about safety, inclusion and cost can prevent parents supporting their child to be active

- All parents find cost and a lack of suitable places a barrier to their children being active.
- Additional concerns for parents of disabled children include a lack of support and understanding from people working in the sport sector. They also worry about their child not being able to take part, and their child's safety.
- Parents of disabled children feel more information on what is suitable, practical support during activities, and advice from medical professionals would help them to support their child to be active.



# What do children want?

We asked disabled children to tell us what one thing would support them to be more active. Here are the most common answers.

“ Don't shout if we don't understand the first time. ”

## More understanding and acceptance from others

- Many children and parents want others to understand their impairment, and how it affects them. They want children to be more accepting and adults to be more patient when taking part in activities.

“ Give me more choices of what to do, so I can pick what I like the sound of. ”

## More choice

- Children want more choice of activities that are suitable for them, and that they feel confident they will enjoy. For some this means more activities that are inclusive for disabled and non-disabled children. While others want activities that are just for children with similar impairments.





“ When those who are really good make fun of me, it hurts my feelings and I don’t want to do it anymore. ”

### Less pressure

- Being able to make mistakes and to learn at their own pace would help disabled children feel more comfortable. This could include smaller groups, focussing on having fun, comfortable and familiar environments, more time and breaks, one-on-one support, or confidence and skill-building.

“ Have people to help me, because Mummy can’t do it all. ”

### Independence and practical support

- Many children want more support to be active, and to feel less reliant on their parents and guardians.

“ Make everyone less bothered about winning and more about doing it for fun. ”

### More motivation

- Disabled children want more encouragement and inspiration. This could be from teachers, healthcare professionals, the media, role models, and wider representation in society.



# Key recommendations

Our findings reinforce the activity gap between disabled and non-disabled children. Disabled children are less active than their peers, and experience more barriers. They are less likely to enjoy being active in and out of school, and are less likely to be included in PE and games.

Despite the difference in participation and enjoyment, there is less difference between what disabled and non-disabled children want to do more of. This tells us there is work to do in many settings to include disabled children, and to ensure quality experiences.

The research highlights the importance of tackling the activity gap that widens as disabled children get older. Bad experiences, worries about appearance and being treated differently, and increasing social isolation contribute to this. A lack of suitable opportunities and appropriate inclusive activities could also be a factor.

Below are four key themes that emerged from the study as important areas for action. This research will help us champion disabled children's inclusion in sport and physical activity. Importantly, it enables us all to understand how to encourage and support disabled children to have active futures.

## 1. Engage with and listen to all children

- Design and promote activities that appeal to children's motivations. All children want to be active for fun, to take part with friends, and to stay healthy. Other motivations like fostering a sense of belonging and feeling independent are important for disabled children.
- Teachers and providers should be supported to take children's impairments into account, rather than seen as a reason for them not to take part. Often disabled children want more time, clearer instructions, and one-on-one support.
- Parents and other adults should be supported to offer children more choice (ideally the same choices as non-disabled children). This gives them independence, and a sense that they have the same opportunities as others.
- Ensure every child's opinion is heard through research and co-production: these should be accessible and inclusive, including different methodology and formats.

## 2. Build confidence and independence from a young age

- Support all children to understand disability and to celebrate differences, as well as individual classmates' and peers' needs. This could reduce bullying, social isolation, and encourage inclusion in sport and activity.
- Challenge perceptions of disability among children and parents. Many feel their impairment stops them taking part, or worry about being safe. Provide reliable information about risks, and reassurance on how adaptations help overcome potential barriers.
- Create opportunities to address personal feelings about being active and help to build confidence. This might be sessions to empower disabled children, campaigns with disabled role models, and representation of children or teachers with impairments.
- Design opportunities to re-engage older disabled children to be more active. This could include initiatives specifically targeting disabled children at Key Stage 3 onwards. This is critical to help children be active as they move into adulthood, as explored in our 2015 **Active Beyond Education research**.

### 3. Engage leaders on the need for inclusion and show them how to create comfortable environments

- Train and support teachers and activity deliverers to better understand and act on the individual needs of disabled children. This could be through disability awareness courses, or class activities.
- Educate leaders on providing truly inclusive activities for all children. In schools, this could include using and learning from initiatives like **Sainsbury's Active Kids for All Inclusive PE Training** for teachers, and **Youth Sport Trust's Lead Inclusion Schools** and **Top Sportsability programme**. There are lessons to be learnt from successful initiatives that already exist to upskill the community-based workforce. The **Inclusive Activity Programme** trains sports deliverers to adapt activity sessions for disabled people.
- To encourage the least active children to be active, focus on providing a predictable and comfortable environment to build confidence. This highlights the importance of accessible and high quality activities. These may be more impairment-specific informal activities so parents and children can feel more at ease.
- Government must ensure that departments and stakeholders work closely together to support disabled children to live, study and play on equal terms. This includes transport, housing and community, and health and social care.

### 4. Support and encourage parents to help their child to live an active life

- Reassure parents and guardians about the wellbeing of their child and address concerns about their child's ability to take part when

designing and promoting inclusive activities. Some would value advice from their child's healthcare professional.

- Offer practical support to parents. This can include providing travel for children, providing carers or specific support during an activity, and make activities local, flexible and sustainable.
- Harness the link between parents' and children's activity levels. Conduct campaigns and programmes to encourage parents to take part in sport and physical activity themselves and act as a role model for their child. Initiatives such as **Sport England's Family Fund** and **Activity Alliance's Get Out Get Active programme**, can help families be active together.
- Raise awareness among parents that disabled children are more likely to be inactive, and promote the benefits of physical activity to make it a priority.
- Link initiatives that provide general support to parents to those who offer physical activity opportunities for children. Parents who feel more able to support their child's wellbeing in general can be better placed to support their child to be active. This could include collaboration between support, health, and community organisations with impairment specialists.





01509 227750



[info@activityalliance.org.uk](mailto:info@activityalliance.org.uk)



[activityalliance.org.uk](http://activityalliance.org.uk)



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