

# REFRAMING SPORT FOR TEENAGE GIRLS:

## Tackling teenage disengagement





# BACKGROUND

**Our Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls insight showed the need to engage girls in more active lifestyles has never been more urgent.**

This generation of teenage girls are experiencing worrying mental health issues and report being less confident, less happy and increasingly concerned with their appearance<sup>[1]</sup>. The pandemic has amplified these issues for many girls.

**When teenage girls are active, they are healthier and happier,** and have greater self-esteem, body confidence and wellbeing. But teenage girls are disengaging with sport and physical activity. They are less physically active generally and are also far less likely to take part in team sports than boys<sup>[2]</sup>. Worryingly girls lose their love of sport and exercise during teenage

years and this presents a significant psychological barrier throughout life.

**Teenage girls are not a homogenous group.** They have different lived experiences of sport and exercise and attitudes towards it, which fundamentally influence their behaviours. Understanding their start-point is key to creating truly effective offers that will inspire more girls to get active.

To underpin our extensive knowledge and understanding of this important life-stage for girls, we carried out a nationally representative survey of over 4,000<sup>[3]</sup> adolescent girls and boys age 11-18 years old to explore their engagement in and attitudes towards sport and exercise.

## ENJOYMENT OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY<sup>2\*</sup>



## ACHIEVING RECOMMENDED PHYSICAL ACTIVITY<sup>2\*</sup>



## PARTICIPATING IN TEAM SPORTS<sup>2\*</sup>



\*Teens (11-16)

### SOURCES:

[1] Women in Sport (2019) [Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls: Building Strong Foundations for their Futures](#)

[2] Sport England (2019) [Active Lives Children and Young People Survey Academic Year 2018/2019](#) pre pandemic

[3] Nationally representative survey of 2,291 girls and 2,024 boys aged 11-18 conducted by Savanta in July 2021. All figures presented in this report are from this sample, unless otherwise specified.

# SUMMARY

**Our findings illustrate the importance of understanding teenagers' engagement with sport and exercise through a gendered lens.**

Teenage girls and boys experience it differently and require different solutions. Girls have numerous, complex barriers that influence their enjoyment and participation and understanding how these manifest across the spectrum of engagement is key to providing more targeted and effective solutions that give girls what they really want and need.

**We have a significant opportunity to re-engage them and we must work harder to do so and to prevent girls from missing out.** In particular, we are deeply concerned by the number of girls who disengage from sport and exercise post primary school, with a further dip at age 17-18, once school sport is not longer compulsory. Many of these girls enjoyed being active when younger but have needlessly fallen out of love with it in adolescence. We can now pinpoint and address their needs through our insight and understanding.

## KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Too many girls are disengaging from sport and exercise in their teens. This is huge compared to boys – a significant missed opportunity for the sector.
- ▶ Self-belief, capability and body image concerns can be significant issues for all girls, but more so for girls who *stop taking part*.
- ▶ All girls, even the *most sporty*, need more support to manage the physical and emotional impact of puberty on physical activity.
- ▶ Fathers/father figures support their daughters less than their sons and could play a powerful role in encouraging girls to love being active.
- ▶ Girls want a wider variety of fun, exciting and accessible opportunities to get active – many like competition if the context is right.



# GIRLS & BOYS BOTH WANT A MORE ACTIVE LIFESTYLE

## DESIRE & UNDERSTANDING

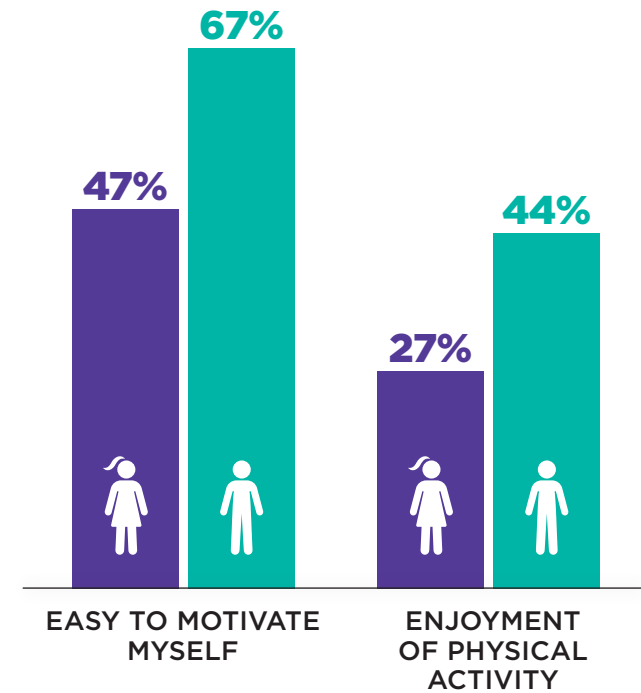


# BUT

### GIRLS...

- ▶ experience disconnect between desire and enjoyment
- ▶ find it more difficult to motivate themselves
- ▶ fall out of love with sport and physical activity

## DON'T LOVE IT & FIND MOTIVATION HARD





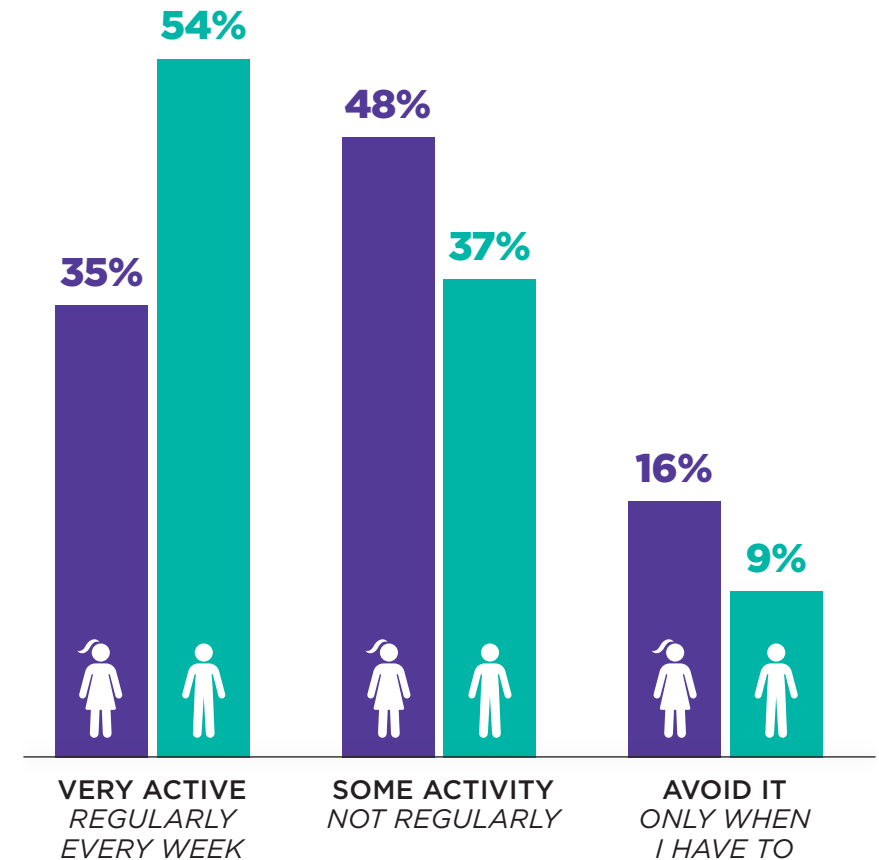


# MANY GIRLS ARE FAILING TO ENGAGE IN ORGANISED SPORT OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL PE

**37% OF GIRLS ONLY DO SPORT & PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN SCHOOL PE VS 27% OF BOYS\*.**

And those girls are much less likely to 'love sport and exercise' and more likely to say they 'try and avoid it'.

REGULARLY TAKE PART IN...	GIRLS 	BOYS 
After-school clubs	23% ↓	30%
Outside school clubs	31% ↓	44%
Individual activities (running, swimming, gym, cycling)	45%	43%



\* Of those who attend school/college

# GIRLS ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY THAN BOYS TO STOP FEELING 'SPORTY' AFTER PRIMARY SCHOOL

**AROUND 4 IN 10 TEENAGE GIRLS SAY THEY 'ARE SPORTY'.**

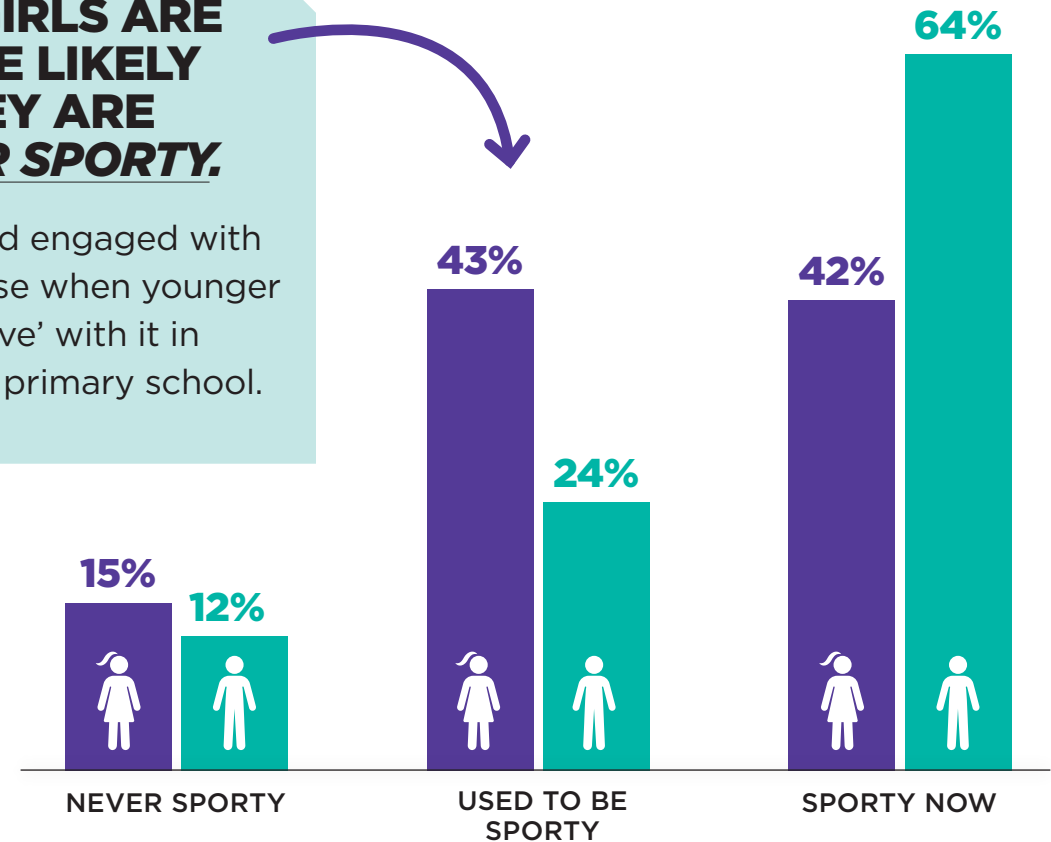


**COMPARED TO MORE THAN 6 IN 10 BOYS.**

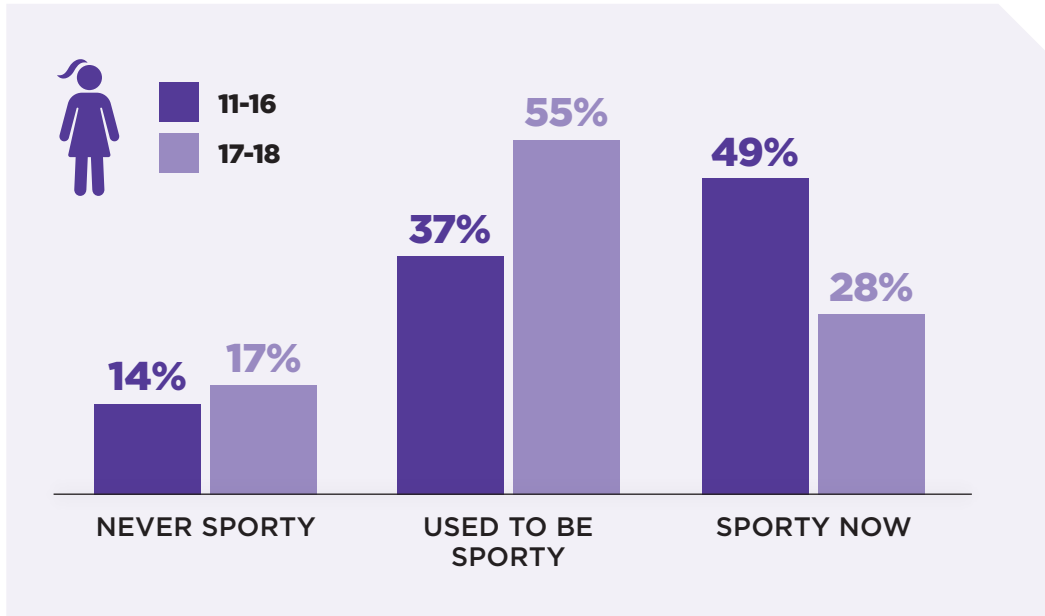


**TEENAGE GIRLS ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO SAY THEY ARE NO LONGER SPORTY.**

They enjoyed and engaged with sport and exercise when younger but fell 'out of love' with it in their teens, post primary school.

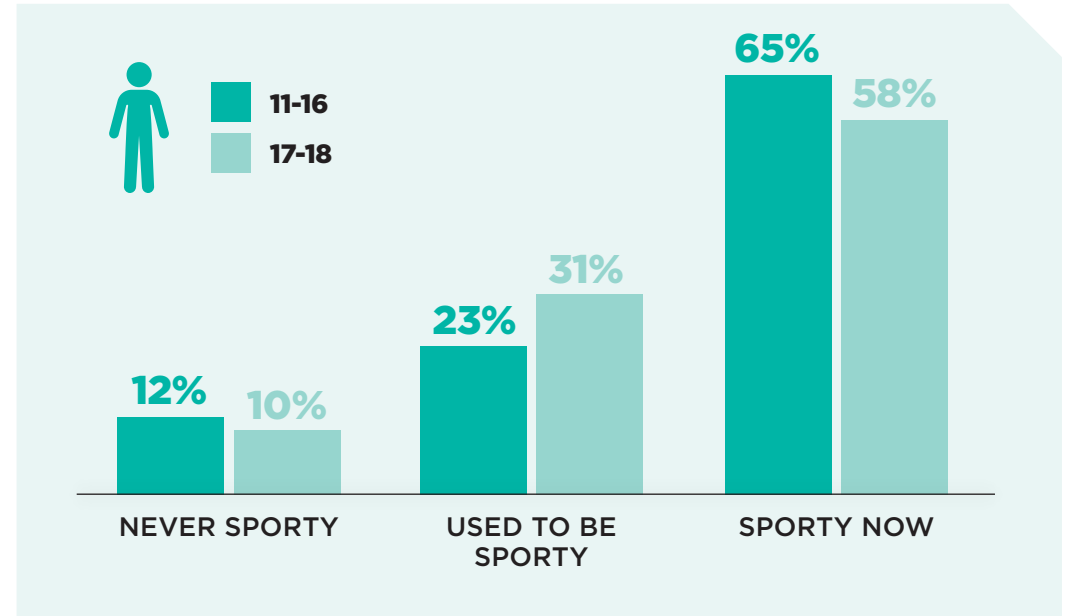


# FOR GIRLS 'NOT BELONGING' ACCELERATES RAPIDLY IN LATE TEENAGE YEARS



**BY AGE 17-18 FEWER THAN 3 IN 10 GIRLS SAY THEY 'ARE SPORTY'.**

**28%**



**COMPARED TO AROUND 6 IN 10 BOYS.**

**58%**

# SO WHAT'S HAPPENED SINCE PRIMARY SCHOOL?

**88%** of girls who used to be sporty said sport and exercise had changed since primary school!



*“When you’re younger it’s just friendly... nice to go out and see your friends, play and just have a kickabout.”*

## TOP 5 REASONS GIRLS DISENGAGED

- 1. 32% Motivation** You are no longer able to take part just for fun
- 2. 27% Priority** Too busy with schoolwork now
- 3. 25% Value** It’s no longer important to me
- 4. 24% Pressure** Sport got too competitive
- 5. 23% Opportunity** Not as many opportunities to take part



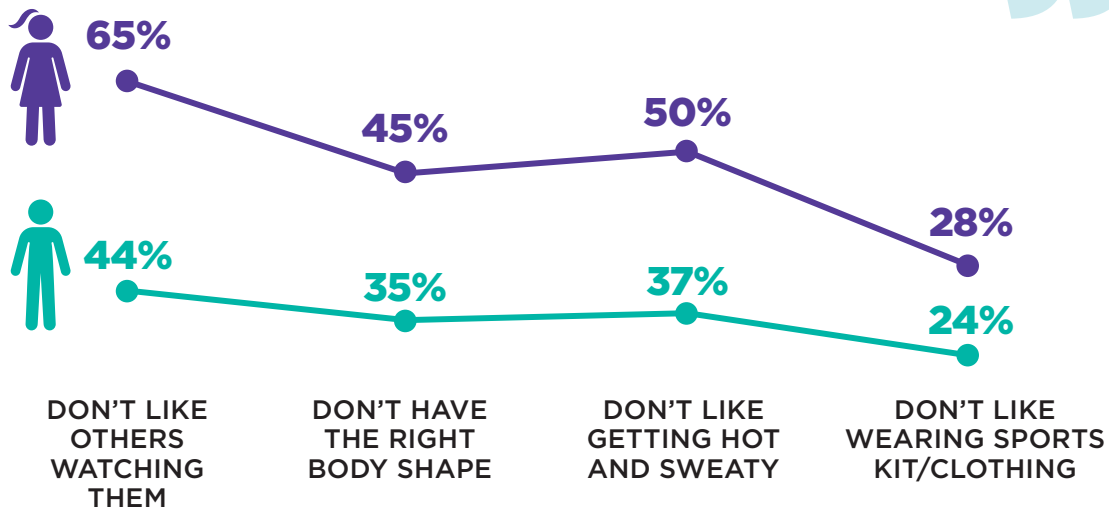


# BODY IMAGE & PERIODS ARE SIGNIFICANT ISSUES DURING PUBERTY

Puberty is a time of difficult physical and emotional changes but also when girls would benefit most from being active.

Physical activity can highlight insecurities and make them feel self-conscious, vulnerable and objectified.

*Everyone's watching you. I hate being in front of people.*



AGREE / STRONGLY AGREE

## AROUND 7 IN 10 AVOID BEING ACTIVE WHEN ON THEIR PERIOD (REGULARLY/SOMETIMES)



Managing periods is challenging for all girls, regardless of how *sporty* they are, and can lead to long term absences and habits that are difficult to reverse.

## WHY DO THEY AVOID EXERCISE?

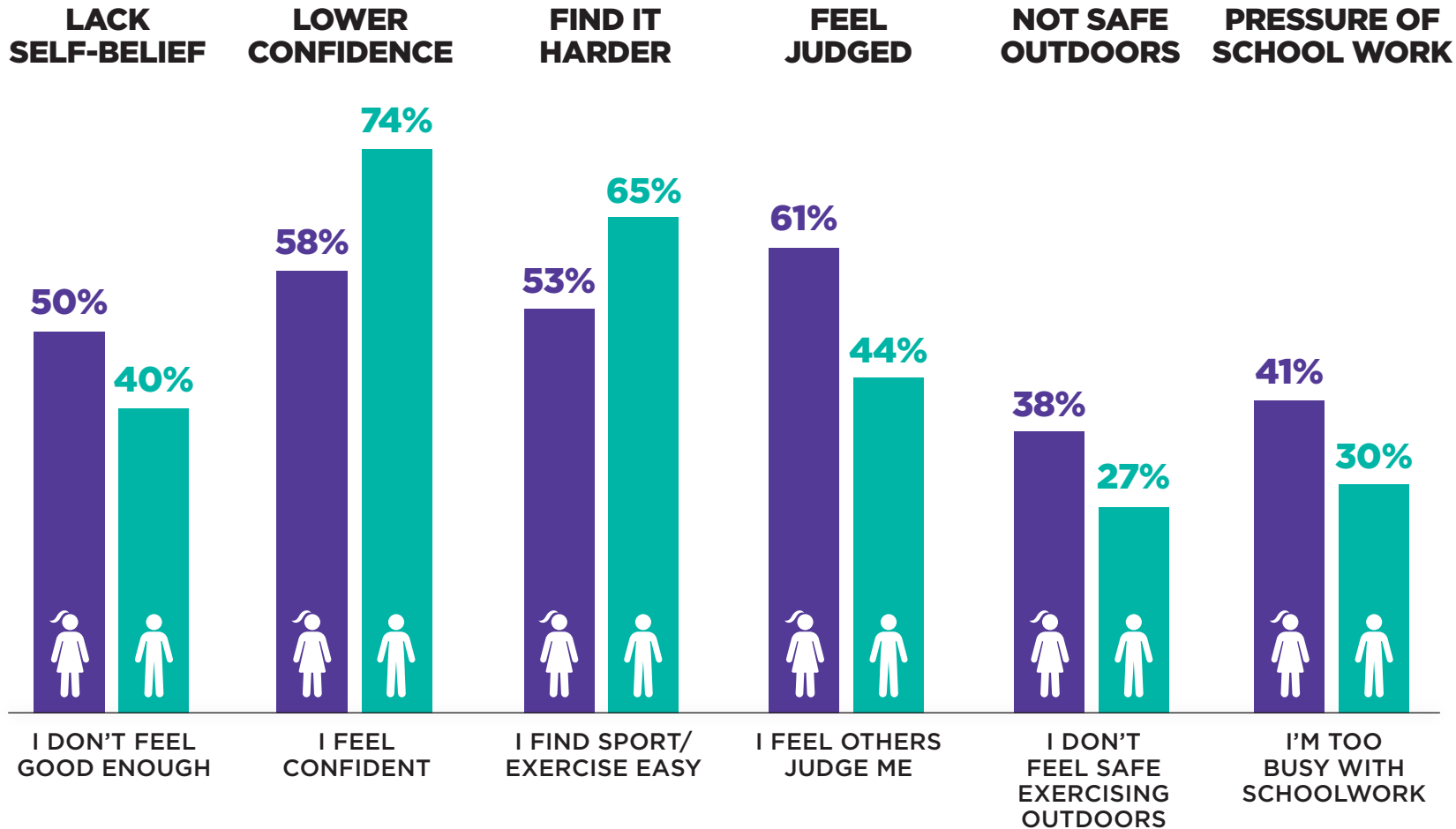
73% Pain

62% Fear of leakage

52% Tiredness

45% Self-consciousness

# COMPLEX BARRIERS & DEEP ROOTED NEGATIVE ATTITUDES ARE AFFECTING ENJOYMENT



## GIRLS TOLD US...

*“If I had more confidence, I feel I would be doing it more.”*

*“The fear is that you’ll be criticised by somebody... if I messed up they would laugh at me.”*

*“Studying is way more important than it ever was, so sport has taken a drop in my priority list.”*

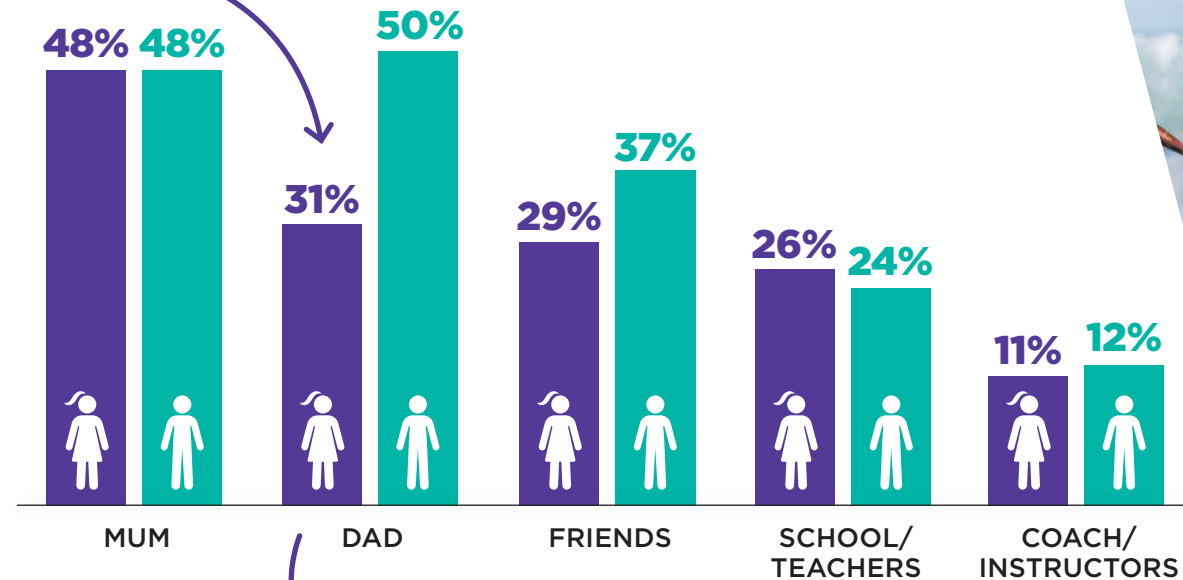
# DADS ARE LESS LIKELY TO SUPPORT OR ENCOURAGE GIRLS THAN BOYS

Fathers/father figures could be a powerful source of support for girls. Less than a third of teenage girls feel supported by their dad, compared to half of boys.

Yet boys and girls feel equally supported by their mum.

Friends can be positive and negative influencers for girls – girls feel less supported by their friends to be active than boys.

## WHO ENCOURAGES AND SUPPORTS YOU TO BE ACTIVE?



**BUT** we know when dads support their daughters, they are more likely to be sporty!

*“I’m held back because my brother has to play football and because my dad plays football as well... there’s no way for me to get anywhere.”*

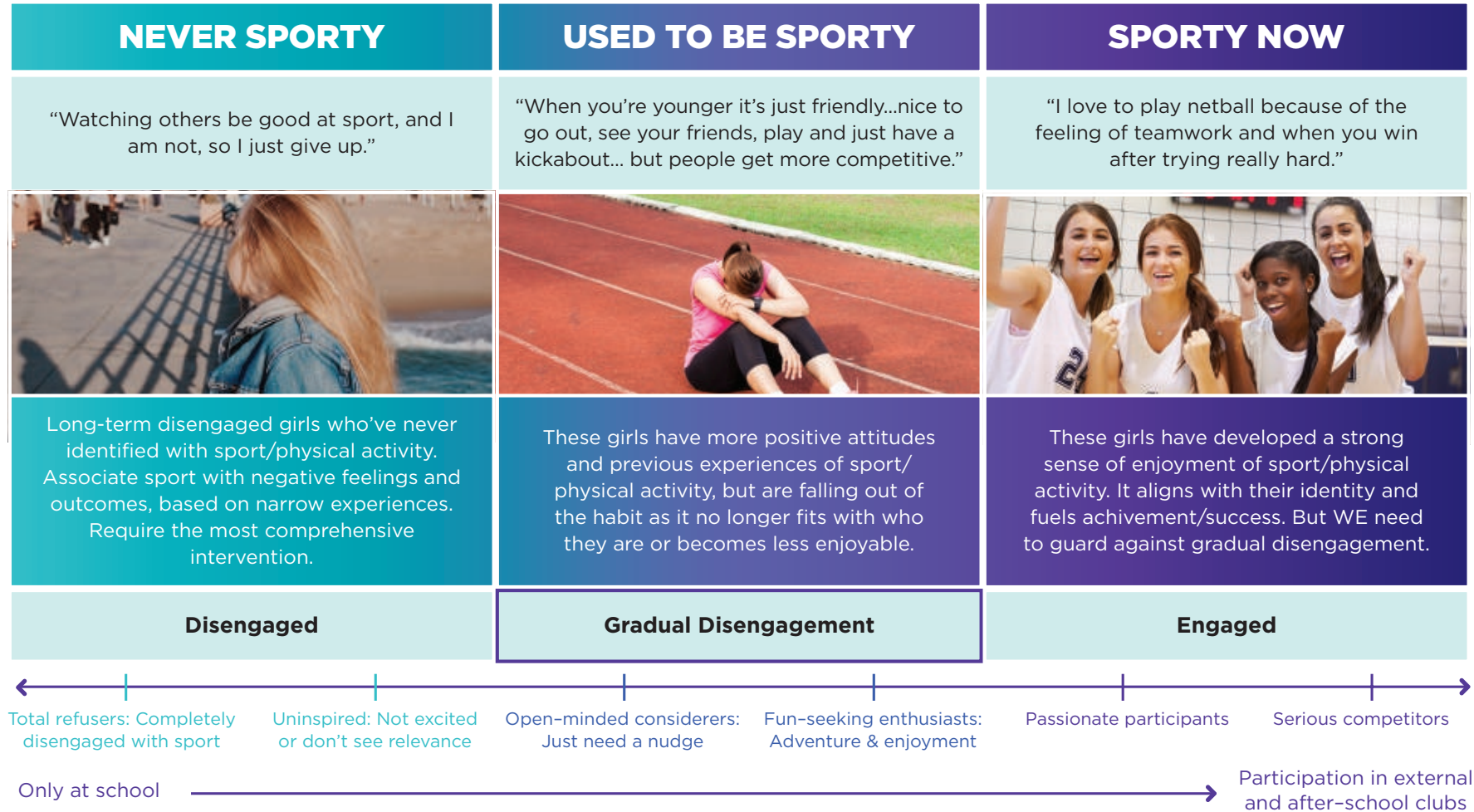




# THE SPECTRUM OF ENGAGEMENT FOR TEENAGE GIRLS

In their teens, girls start to define themselves rigidly as either *sporty* or *not sporty* and this can affect their predisposition towards sport and exercise well into adulthood.

Even amongst the *non-sporty*, there is a broad spectrum in levels of engagement ranging from those who have had no positive engagement at all (*never sporty*), to others who have previously enjoyed sport but gradually disengaged as they got older (*used to be sporty*).



# THE SPECTRUM OF ENGAGEMENT FOR TEENAGE GIRLS

**4 in 10** girls used to love sport and exercise but have disengaged since primary school. This is a significant drop out and massive missed opportunity.

**THE UNINSPIRED**  
Never Sporty

**15%**

**THE MISSED OPPORTUNITY**  
Used to be Sporty

**43%**

**PASSIONATE PARTICIPANTS**  
Sporty Now

**42%**



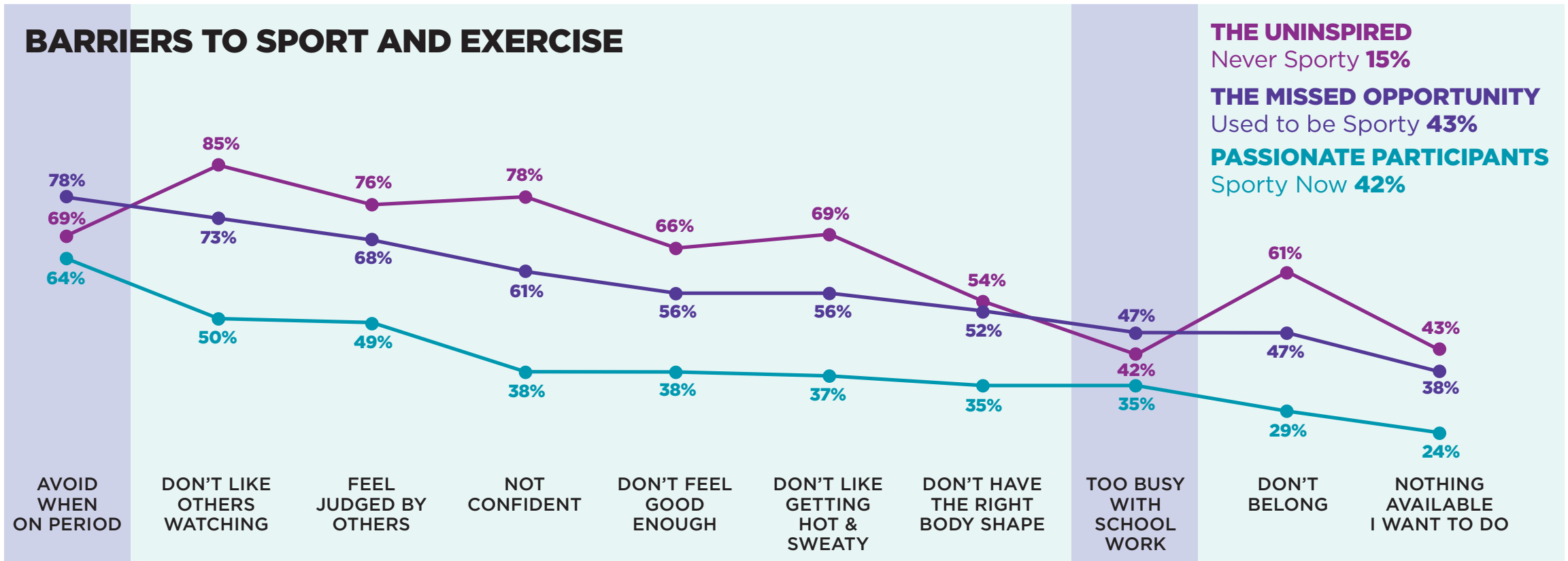
**Need most intervention**

**Positive attitudes to leverage**

**Beware of disruptors**

# THE BARRIERS DIFFER IN MAGNITUDE DEPENDING ON GIRLS' ENGAGEMENT

- ▶ Periods and schoolwork affect girls regardless of their engagement levels.
- ▶ Fear of judgement and lack of self-belief still affect even many of the sporty girls.







# COMPETITIVE SPORT STILL APPEALS TO THE MAJORITY OF GIRLS

**64%** of girls enjoy competitive sport compared to 74% of boys.

**66%** of girls believe they are good at team sports compared to 73% of boys.

LIKE COMPETITIVE SPORT	GIRLS 	BOYS 
Sporty now	84%	87%
Used to be sporty	59%	65%
Never sporty	23%	22%



*I think competition gets so many more girls involved... I never knew I was competitive until I really enjoyed the games where you're on teams and can win!*

But girls lack the opportunities to play sport unless they are really good and therefore feel a sense of failure in a competitive environment where they will never thrive. It loses the fun factor!

**Options to take part at the right level are important.**

**THE UNINSPIRED**Never Sporty  
15%**70%**

dislike/hate sport and exercise. Only 13% find it easy to motivate themselves

**60%**

dislike/hate PE at school

**61%**

don't feel they 'belong' in sport and exercise

**55%**

don't like competitive sport

**WHAT CHARACTERISES THEM?****WHAT'S STOPPING THESE GIRLS?****HIGH LACK OF CONFIDENCE AND PERCEIVED CAPABILITY**

- 78% don't feel confident
- 76% feel others are judging them
- 66% don't feel good enough to take part
- 50% don't feel good at team sports

**FEEL VERY SELF-CONSCIOUS, EXPOSED AND VULNERABLE**

- 85% don't like other people watching them
- 69% don't like getting hot and sweaty
- 54% don't feel they have the right body shape
- 41% don't like wearing sports kit/clothing

**HAVEN'T EXPERIENCED THE TRUE BENEFITS AS MUCH AS OTHER GIRLS**

- 38% makes them happier
- 38% sport/exercise good way to make friends
- 37% enjoy learning new skills
- 33% makes them feel less stressed

**OPTIONS FEEL LIMITED AND UNINSPIRING**

- 43% nothing available they want to do
- 42% it's not relevant to them/their lives
- 36% nothing fun to do outdoors

“You're surrounded by sporty people who are all great and you're not.”

“You're doing a lot of exercise and it makes you feel smelly and uncomfortable. You're worried what other people will think.”

“Not being as good as others isn't a nice feeling or encouraging... some people make fun of the things you do.”

**THE UNINSPIRED**  
Never Sporty  
15%

**Only 30%**  
are happy with  
how active  
they are

**89%**  
recognise being  
active is good for  
them but most  
haven't personally  
experienced the  
real benefits

**53%**  
think keeping fit/  
active is more  
important than  
ever since the  
pandemic

## LEVERAGING THE OPPORTUNITY

### WHAT WOULD HELP THEM TO DO MORE?

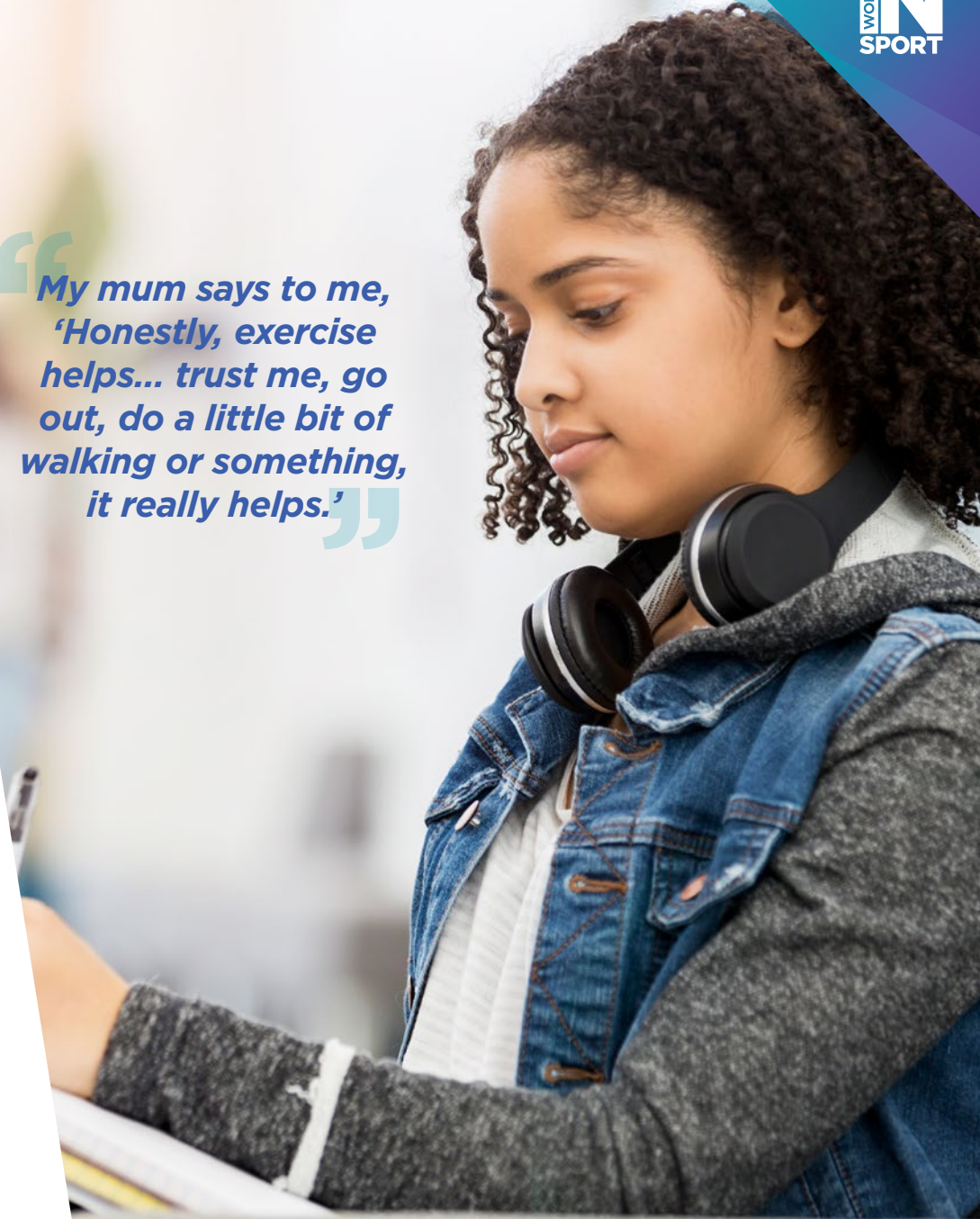
- 48% would take part if their friends did
- 47% if more fun/exciting/adventurous
- 36% if less serious/competitive
- 27% if saw more who look like them
- 23% if sport/exercise could fit more easily into their lives
- 21% if easier to find options nearby
- 19% more sport/exercise opportunities outside of school

### KEY INFLUENCERS

Mum is their biggest source of support to get active. Dad is an important influencer to leverage. But friends are unlikely to be influencers currently.

- 47% Mum
- 25% Dad
- 25% School/teachers
- 18% Friends

“My mum says to me, ‘Honestly, exercise helps... trust me, go out, do a little bit of walking or something, it really helps.’”





**THE UNINSPIRED**

Never Sporty

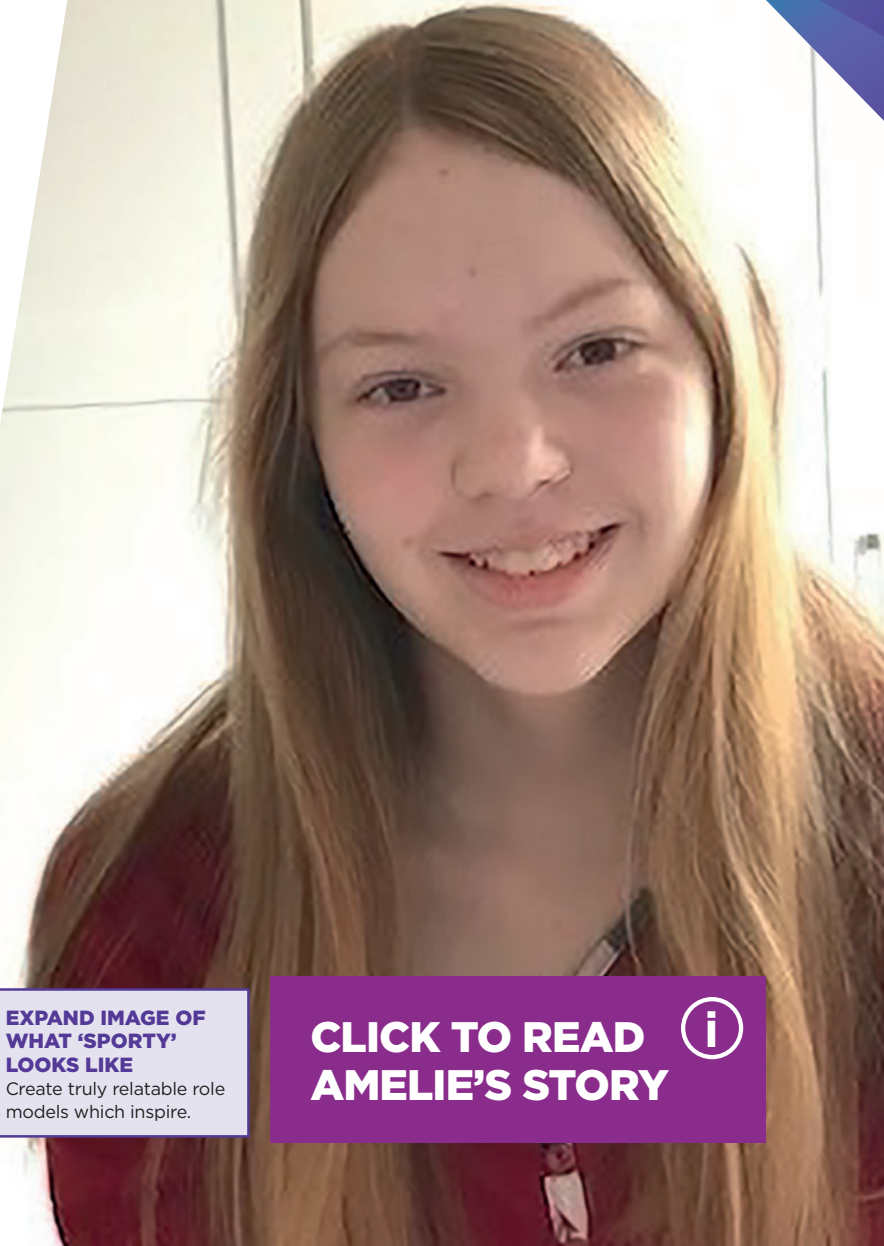
15%

**HOW TO SUPPORT THEM****THESE GIRLS:**

- ▶ Know why being active is good for them but just telling them why is not going to change behaviour.
- ▶ Want to be more active but need much more support and inspiration than other girls to change the way they feel about sport and exercise.

**WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO?**

- ▶ Identify and target these girls with early interventions before they reach their teens.
- ▶ Create innovative offers that will excite and inspire them to get active with friends and family.
- ▶ Provide a wider range of positive experiences, both in and out of school, that are free from judgement and focus on fun, enjoyment and building confidence in themselves and their abilities.
- ▶ Leverage key influencers from an early age to encourage and support them.

**TOP PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESS****CLICK TO READ  
AMELIE'S STORY**

**THE MISSED OPPORTUNITY**Used to be Sporty  
43%**83%**

liked/loved sport and exercise in primary school but only...

**13%**

now describe themselves as 'very active/take part regularly'

**27%**

actively dislike/hate school PE

**56%**

don't feel good enough to take part

# WHAT CHARACTERISES THEM?

## WHAT'S CHANGED FOR THESE GIRLS?

### FEAR OF FAILURE AND FEELING THEY DON'T BELONG

- 68% feel others are judging them
- 61% don't feel confident
- 56% don't feel good enough to take part
- 47% feel they don't belong

### PUBERTY MAKES THEM FEEL VULNERABLE AND EXPOSED

- 78% have avoided sport when on their period
- 73% don't like other people watching them
- 56% don't like getting hot and sweaty
- 43% don't feel safe exercising outdoors in their area

### SPORT/EXERCISE BECAME TOO RIGID AND IMPORTANTLY LESS ENJOYABLE!

- 32% can no longer take part just for fun
- 27% too busy with schoolwork
- 25% it's no longer important to them

### SPORT DOESN'T GROW WITH THEM AND OPTIONS START TO FEEL MORE LIMITED

- 38% nothing available they want to do
- 31% not relevant to them/their lives
- 31% nothing fun to do outdoors

“  
*It can get boring after a while when you keep doing the same old thing.*  
”

“  
*Our crowd don't really play sports - my friends don't like sport either.*  
”

“  
*The priorities at secondary school are work and going out.*  
”

“  
*I do not play outside of school as there is no club I know of around my area.*  
”

## THE MISSED OPPORTUNITY

Used to be Sporty  
43%

**78%**  
would like  
to do more

**66%**  
feel that taking  
part in regular  
sport/exercise  
makes them  
happier

**53%**  
feel they are  
naturally good  
at sport

# LEVERAGING THE OPPORTUNITY

## THEY HAVE EXPERIENCED AND VALUE THE BENEFITS:

9 in 10 say being physically active is important for fitness, good mental health, building confidence, feeling good, having fun, and feeling happy.

## WHAT WOULD HELP THEM TO DO MORE?

- 50% if more fun/exciting/adventurous
- 47% would take part if their friends did
- 32% if easier to find options nearby
- 32% if sport/exercise could fit more easily into their lives
- 28% if less serious/competitive
- 26% if saw more who look like them taking part
- 25% more sport/exercise opportunities outside school

## KEY INFLUENCERS

Feel most supported to get active by mum but dad and friends could play a crucial role in keeping these girls engaged in sport.

- 41% Mum
- 23% Dad
- 28% Friends
- 26% School/teachers

“  
*My dad used to drag me along on walks but now it has stopped because of homework, school and events.*  
”





**THE MISSED OPPORTUNITY**Used to be Sporty  
43%**59%**  
like/love  
competitive sports**61%**  
feel good at  
team sports**43%**  
think of their  
body as athletic

# HOW TO SUPPORT THEM

**THESE GIRLS:**

- ▶ Have fallen out of love with sport/exercise in their teens as they are made to feel as if they're not good enough and don't deserve to be there.
- ▶ Have more positive experiences and emotional connections with sport and exercise which we can leverage to re-engage.

**WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO?**

- ▶ Work much harder to prevent girls from gradually disengaging, especially in the transition from primary to secondary school and during puberty.
- ▶ Make them feel they deserve opportunities to play even if not top tier ability.
- ▶ Providing the right offer at the right time is key - offers that cater to their changing needs and focus on enjoyment and excitement so they compete with other things in their lives.
- ▶ Leverage key influencers to prevent drop out and support re-engagement - dad could be particularly powerful.

**TOP PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESS****1****NO JUDGEMENT**

Take pressure off performance and give freedom simply to play.

**2****INVOKE EXCITEMENT**

Bring a sense of adventure and discovery.

**3****CLEAR EMOTIONAL REWARD**

Reframe achievement as 'moments of pride', not winning.

**6****GIVE GIRLS A VOICE & CHOICE**

Allow girls choice and control to feel empowered.

**CLICK TO READ  
ZAINAB'S STORY**



**PASSIONATE PARTICIPANTS**Sporty Now  
42%**84%**

describe themselves as 'very active and take part regularly'

**95%**

like/love sport and exercise and 85% like/love PE at school

**94%**

say it makes them feel happier

**84%**

like/love competitive sport

**80%**

find sport and exercise easy

# WHAT DEFINES THEM?

## WHY DO THESE GIRLS ENGAGE?

### VALUE SPORT AND EXERCISE HIGHLY - 9 IN 10 SAY BEING PHYSICALLY ACTIVE IS IMPORTANT TO THEM FOR:

- ▶ Keeping body fit and active
- ▶ Good mental health and wellbeing
- ▶ Building confidence
- ▶ Feeling good about themselves
- ▶ Having fun and feeling happy

### KEY INFLUENCERS

Sporty girls feel much more supported by key people in their lives - and dad has a significant influence.

**55% Mum****41% Dad****34% Friends****26% School/teachers**

“  
*I love to play netball because of the feeling of teamwork and when you win after trying really hard is rewarding and makes my happy.*  
”

“  
*You're with school friends all week and then when you go to a club it's like new friends and you can get away from any school stress.*  
”

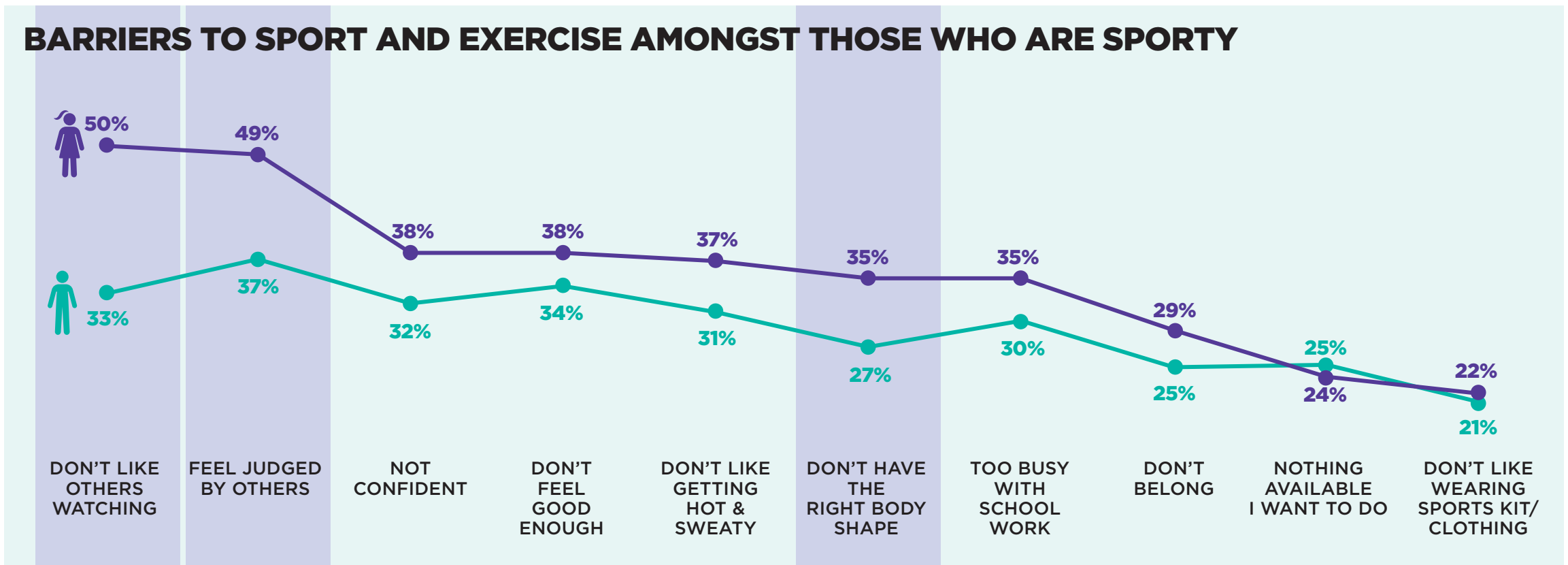
“  
*(Exercise) makes me feel better, more confident and good about myself.*  
”

“  
*My dad, he motivates us more. When I go to competitions I'll know where he is, I can just hear his voice.*  
”



PASSIONATE  
PARTICIPANTSSporty Now  
42%**HOWEVER, EVEN SPORTY GIRLS...**

are more self-conscious, feel judged by others and worry more about their body image compared to sporty boys.

**BARRIERS TO SPORT AND EXERCISE AMONGST THOSE WHO ARE SPORTY**

## PASSIONATE PARTICIPANTS

Sporty Now  
42%

**64%**

avoid exercise when on their period

**51%**

have lost confidence in their sporting ability since the pandemic

**35%**

say they're too busy with schoolwork

*“It's good to have the opportunity to try something new.”*

# WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL DISRUPTORS?

## LOW CONFIDENCE IMPACTS EVEN THE SPORTIEST GIRLS

- 49% feel others are judging them
- 40% don't feel confident
- 38% don't feel good enough to take part
- 29% feel they don't belong

## BODY CONSCIOUSNESS IS AN UNDERLYING ISSUE FOR MANY

- 50% don't like others watching them
- 37% don't like getting hot and sweaty
- 35% don't feel they have the right body shape
- 22% don't like wearing sports kit/clothing

## WHAT WOULD HELP TO KEEP THEM ENGAGED?

- 47% if more fun/exciting/adventurous
- 37% would take part if their friends did
- 33% if easier to find options nearby
- 32% more opportunities outside school
- 25% if it could fit more easily into their lives
- 24% make it more competitive

*“There's not really much time since GCSEs... there's a lot of revision already so it's hard to fit in everything.”*

*“If someone says that I'm a 'try hard'... I have to stop, I have to hold back a bit.”*



**PASSIONATE PARTICIPANTS**  
Sporty Now  
42%

**85%**  
enjoy trying new  
and different  
sports and  
activities

**89%**  
enjoy learning  
new skills

**88%**  
believe taking part  
is a great way to  
make new friends

# HOW TO SUPPORT THEM

## THESE GIRLS:

- ▶ Take part regularly and have positive attitudes towards sport and exercise.
- ▶ Feel more confident and capable than others on the spectrum but even the sportiest can start to disengage if sport/exercise no longer meets their needs or becomes boring.

## WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO?

- ▶ Provide more practical and emotional support to help them stay active during puberty and reinforce body confidence.
- ▶ Guard against potential barriers that could lead them to gradually disengage, particularly shifts in friendship groups and pressure of school work.
- ▶ Provide more accessible opportunities outside of school to continue their interest and build their love of sport and exercise.
- ▶ Keep sustaining their interest through progression and new skills.

## TOP PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESS

2



### INVOKE EXCITEMENT

Bring a sense of adventure and discovery.

6



### GIVE GIRLS A VOICE & CHOICE

Allow girls choice and control to feel empowered.

7



### CHAMPION WHAT'S IN IT FOR THEM

Make it much more than just about health.

**CLICK TO READ  
SAKINAH'S STORY**





# REFRAMING SPORT FOR GIRLS USING THE 8 PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESS

Women in Sport have developed 8 Principles for Success to minimise the barriers girls experience and to make sport and exercise a much more meaningful and exciting prospect in their lives.

Sport and exercise providers can use these principles to evaluate and enhance existing programmes, and to develop new initiatives through a teenage girl lens to ensure they are truly accessible and meet the needs of girls across the spectrum of engagement.

1



## NO JUDGEMENT

Take pressure off performance and give freedom simply to play.

2



## VOKE EXCITEMENT

Bring a sense of adventure and discovery.

3



## CLEAR EMOTIONAL REWARD

Reframe achievement as 'moments of pride', not winning

4



## OPEN EYES TO WHAT'S THERE

Redefine sport as more than school sport.

5



## BUILD INTO EXISTING HABITS

Tap into existing behaviours in other spheres.

6



## GIVE GIRLS A VOICE & CHOICE

Allow girls choice and control to feel empowered.

7



## CHAMPION WHAT'S IN IT FOR THEM

Make it about more than just health.

8



## EXPAND IMAGE OF WHAT 'SPORTY' LOOKS LIKE

Create truly relatable role models which inspire.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Women in Sport want sport and exercise providers to use these findings:

- ▶ To build their understanding of teenage girls and their attitudes towards sport and exercise.
- ▶ To better target their teenage girl audience and provide tailored offers that give girls across the spectrum what they want and need.
- ▶ To use our 8 Principles for Success to interrogate existing programmes and initiatives and to design new ones through a teenage girl lens.
- ▶ To innovate solutions that reframe sport as a much more exciting and inspiring prospect in teenage girls' lives.

### 'NEVER SPORTY' GIRLS

need the most comprehensive intervention - we need to identify and target earlier before teenage years.

### 'USED TO BE SPORTY' GIRLS

are the huge missed opportunity - we need to work much harder to prevent drop off and reengage.

### 'SPORT NOW' GIRLS

need us to guard against signs of gradual disengagement and ensure your offer continues to meet their needs.



**For more ideas and resources to help you Reframe Sport for Teenage Girls visit our online toolkit »**

**We would love to hear how you have used this research. Get in touch with us at:**

Email: [support@womeninsport.org](mailto:support@womeninsport.org)

Website: [www.womeninsport.org](http://www.womeninsport.org)

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