



Durham
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Inspiring the extraordinary

Lockdown, girls and being active

A window of opportunity to build a positive legacy?

Increasing levels of physical activity among girls and women has been a longstanding issue, with clear public health implications. Policy makers and organisations have consistently struggled to engage girls meaningfully with being active. Covid-19 lockdown restrictions have provided a unique situation in which we can learn how girls are motivated and engaged with being active.

A research project, led by Dr Sarah Metcalfe at Durham University explored girls' experiences and feelings of being active during lockdown. This project has shown that previously inactive or less active girls have increased their levels of physical activity. Lockdown restrictions have provided many girls the opportunity to be active in a 'safe' and controlled environment, in ways that were not possible before.



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Findings:

- ✦ **40% of girls reported an increase in their levels of physical activity during lockdown.** These girls were those that, pre-Covid-19, were least active.
- ✦ Girls have 'felt' the benefits of being active, for some, for the first time:
 - 'The results of my daily exercise are becoming apparent now, which is positive for me...I feel better about my body' (age 16)
 - 'keeping active has definitely been a key factor in allowing me to stay happy...the days I do exercise are the days I'm happier and more productive in general' (age 17)
- ✦ Girls explicitly mentioned **UK Government's messaging for increasing their motivation to be active.** The constant messaging of 'daily exercise' elevated the status of being active:
 - 'the government's rules encourage me to complete an hour of exercise each day. I love being active as it makes lockdown a bit easier' (age 18)
 - 'the fact that the government said we could exercise once a day actually encouraged me to exercise...they [the government] made me feel that I should exercise because they restricted so much activity but left that [exercise] available which made me realise how important it was...lockdown has made me focus more on exercise because I realise how important it is when the government were only allowing us to go out and exercise' (age 16)
 - 'I like it [the government's rules on daily exercise] because I've had the opportunity to create the habit of exercising regularly and I feel fitter and healthier' (age 14)
- ✦ The **physical and mental benefits of being active** were also apparent, with exercise explicitly linked benefits of happiness, calmness, ability to deal with stress:
 - 'being active gives me a chance to clear my head and relieves some of my anxiety' (age 18)
 - 'my daily exercise are an opportunity to leave my house for an hour, forget the harsh reality of the world and relieve my GCSE home-learning stress. It definitely makes me happy and is keeping me sane' (age 15)
- ✦ **69%** of girls identified that after we come out of lockdown they will have a **positive engagement with being active:**
 - 'after lockdown I'll be more active as I've realised the importance of it and how it helps me feel better' (age 14)
 - 'if I remember that I was able to keep active during lockdown, then I also know that I can stay active later on in life' (age 12)
- ✦ Girls have enjoyed being active in their own time, **without peer pressure and judgement.** Isolating in lockdown, not being 'supposed to see anyone' has meant that girls have felt 'safe' exercising.
 - 'Lockdown has made me feel more comfortable in my body because I worry less what people think because I see less people' (age 13)
 - 'it's been nice not to be judged by other pupils' (age 13)

Recommendations

The results of the study indicate the immediate need for action to build on the positive impact that lockdown and the government's messaging has had on increasing the perceived value and benefit of being active. There are three key messages:

- 1) Government to maintain public health messaging about the importance of daily exercise, for both physical and mental health**
 - For previously inactive individuals, emphasis should draw on the 'lived' experiences and feelings that are now 'real', drawing on quotes or statements that emphasise the benefits of being active

- 2) School and organisations that work with girls to work to foster and replicate the positive 'feelings' girls felt during lockdown, during communal activities**
 - This should involve addressing stigma around the body, reducing opportunities for judgement, and to publicly promote health benefits over aesthetic appearance

- 3) Providers to change what is offered to girls and the messages around this**
 - This should involve reshaping provision to allow girls to participate without peer pressure and conditions of anxiety, replicating conditions during lockdown which have increased participation levels. Girls have reported enjoying being outdoors, participating in 'simple' activities such as running, walking, cycling and social media workouts. Incorporating these activities will allow girls to continue to feel empowered during being active.

i The results were obtained through an online survey of 509 girls aged 10-20 (average age 14.5). Girls were asked about their levels of activity, feelings about being active, feelings about their body, and their intentions to be active following lockdown. Respondents were located across England and Scotland, and there was a diverse spread across socioeconomic groups (calculated using postcode data linked to indices of deprivation).