

## **The Tipping Point: confidence and attitudes in seven and eight year old girls**

### **Provisional findings**

*26 March 2015*

#### **Background**

The Government Equalities Office (GEO) commissioned Women in Sport, in partnership with the Youth Sport Trust, to undertake a new study to understand more about the influences on girls' and boys' PE, sport and physical activity participation at ages 7 and 8. The research, which built on the substantial body of existing evidence into girls' participation, was designed to unlock new insight into why girls start to drop out of sport and physical activity from age 7 at a faster rate than boys<sup>1</sup>.

The areas explored in this research included:

- What it's like to be a 7-8 year old in 2015
- Issues of body image and self-esteem
- Understanding gender dynamics
- What is driving participation in sport and physical activity amongst 7-8 year olds
- Exploring the engagement of girls with sport and physical activity at this age
- What can we learn from gender differences in sport and physical activity that will help us understand other aspects of gender and gender inequality?

#### **Methodology**

The research, conducted over February and March 2015, consisted of a mixed methods approach to explore physical activity participation, self-esteem and body image among children aged 7-8. Fieldwork was carried out in three primary schools, which were recruited by the Partnership Development Manager of the North Oxfordshire School Sport Partnership (SSP). The schools are located in three very different areas of the partnership – one in the north which is rural and fairly affluent (Bloxham), one in the centre which is a town school (Bicester) and one in a school which is relatively deprived (West Kidlington, edge of Oxford). More detail can be found in Appendix A.

An initial scoping exercise of looking at existing gender research into children of this age and their participation in sport and physical activity helped to shape research materials and generate hypotheses for testing.

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<sup>1</sup> Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation, Changing the Game for Girls, 2012

Limitations - It should be noted that the relatively small scale of the research and case study nature of the approach, means that the findings should not be generalised beyond the sample studied.

## KEY FINDINGS

### 1. Understanding what it's like to be a 7-8 year old in 2015

**Family still plays a dominant role among children in these focus groups – this is reflected in how the children in these focus groups defined their priorities.**

- At age 7 -8, the respondents appear to still be very dependent on their parents. For most of the children involved in the research, spending time with the family is their number one priority. Because of this dominance, parents – and to an extent, older siblings – seem to play an important role in influencing behaviour.
- The role of parents seem both practical - as children in these focus groups are dependent on them to sign them up and to take them to and from activities - as well as emotional, in terms of providing a gender role model.

**By this age, gender stereotypes were already emerging strongly in terms of how children seem to define themselves and what is important to them.**

- From the focus groups, gender identities seem to be already quite strong by age 7-8 among respondents. Although family seems to play an equally important role for boys and girls, there are subtle differences in the way this is expressed. Girls who took part in the focus groups spoke about their family in terms of its supportive and nurturing role; whereas the boys were more likely to talk in the context of 'having fun' and playing.
- The research indicates that 'achievement' is already emerging as being valued among children. This was particularly important for the boys in the focus groups. Similarly, sport seemed to be valued by the boys involved in this research, with achievement and sport often being closely related. These boys in the focus groups frequently and spontaneously cite sport – particularly football – as something that makes them happy. Winning and success in sport is an important part of this, with the converse also true.
- In contrast, the girls involved in this research were more ambivalent about the importance of 'achievement'. Although some are already aware of academic targets, for example, 'achieving things' seemed to be a relatively low priority for most we spoke to. For some, this ambivalence appeared to be driven by a fear of the disappointment associated with not achieving; for others, achieving goals just did not seem to feel relevant for them at this age.

**Social factors were emerging as very important drivers for the girls involved in these focus groups.**

- Spending time with friends as well as family is ranked particularly highly amongst the girls involved in the research. When asked what they would change in their lives, the girls' answers very often related to relationship issues, like getting on better with family members and friends.
- Social factors are strongly reflected in the girls' choice of activity and in what they enjoy. This also extends to sport, which they want to enjoy with their friends and family.
- The teachers interviewed identified a similar differences between the boys and girls and suggested that perhaps girls are more concerned about social acceptance; boys less so:  
*"Girls care much more what their friends are thinking, whether everyone's happy with them. Boys, they're not fussed, they're much more 'we just want to be active, out there getting physical' and they don't worry so much about what everyone else thinks."* (Teacher, year 3).

## **2. Understanding body image and self-esteem**

**For the children in this research, appearance and looking good were not on the radar yet as top priorities.**

- Out of 7 priorities discussed with children in the focus groups, the girls tended to rank 'looking good' towards the bottom of the list. 'Feeling good' is much more important than looking good, and most are mainly happy with their appearance and body image.
- Parents and teachers interviewed, strongly agree that children this age in these schools are 'not that fussed' about appearance. But they also suggested that perhaps Year 3 was the last school year in which children were less self-conscious. This is supported by the data from the Girl Guiding UK report which indicates a notable decline in happiness with body image as girls move into their teenage years. (In 2013 just 9% of girls under 11 years were unhappy with the way their body looked compared to 47% in the 11 – 16 age group.)
- Some of the girls in the focus groups may already be conscious of being teased by boys about their looks. One girl in our group commented: *"Boys sometimes tease you quite a lot, if you're a girl, about how you look sometimes, they don't really do that with other boys"*. However, no other girls, parents or teachers made this point.

**Confidence levels were high for boys and girls across the three focus groups**

- In the focus groups, a mix of confidence levels were found, with most children giving themselves high rankings of A or B on a scale of A-D ('very confident' to 'not at all confident'). Even in this small study, with a small and unrepresentative sample, the boys

who participated in the research tended to say they were very confident. The girls in the sample tended to report that they were 'quite' confident'.

### **The boys and girls participating in the focus groups tend to be quite ambivalent about sports kit at this age**

- Girls in the research did not seem to have more issues regarding their kit at this age. Similarly, the boys in the focus groups reported no issues. Any issues highlighted by the children were largely practical – i.e. concerns about kit being uncomfortable, too tight fitting, too cold for outdoor games.

### **3. Understanding gender dynamics**

#### **At age 7 and 8, girls who took part in the focus groups were already conscious of gender differences in perceptions of girls' physical skills.**

- The girls in the research reported that boys perceive that girls don't have the skills and abilities to play the games they enjoy:  
*"They always think that we're not as good as them / It's because boys think girls can't do stuff that they're doing."*

#### **The 7 and 8 year old boys who participated in the focus groups tend to think that they were better at sport than girls – but girls don't necessarily agree.**

- Gender stereotypes were already emerging in relation to sport among these children, with some boys saying they are faster and stronger than girls, and more sporty:  
*"Girls are rubbish at football... when they kick the ball it goes like 5cm." / "Men can play more sport than women".*

Not all of the boys agreed.

- The girls involved in the research had a range of views in this issue. They were clearly conscious of these perceptions, and some were starting to agree with the assessment that rough or overly competitive sports were not appropriate for girls. This was also observed in the playground. However, other girls disagree, and some are keen to be included by boys in order to prove that they are just as good.
- Both girls and boys who participated in these focus groups appeared to have equally positive associations with sport in general. Overall, the findings suggest that girls do not yet perceive that sport is 'not for them' on the basis of their gender. This point came was reinforced by the interviews with parents.

### **4. Participation in physical activity amongst 7-8 year olds**

#### **Both boys and girls who took part in the focus groups tended to really enjoy PE at this age and have positive associations with sport.**

- The vast majority of the boys and girls involved in the focus groups indicated that they really enjoy being active. The word most commonly spontaneously associated with PE by the children was 'happy'.
- The teachers interviewed suggested that this is partly because year 3 children still struggle to sit quietly for long periods – hence PE gives them a much-needed release from the classroom. This is important for boys and girls.

**The reasons the girls give for enjoying PE are subtly different to those given by the boys who took part in the focus groups**

- The girls involved in the focus groups appeared to enjoy physical movement and the sensations associated, also saw PE as an emotional release. The incorporation of music and dramatic approaches into their PE classes is also something these girls seemed to particularly enjoy.
- These girls enjoy the variety and learning new things, being challenged without being overly concerned about being 'expert'.

*"I want to try all the sports I can, and if I don't get it the first time I want to try and see if I get it another time."*

This would suggest that girls are not yet defining certain sports as for 'boys only' (although the opposite is often true).

- Although both the boys and the girls that participated in these focus groups enjoyed playing matches and competing in sports, competition and winning seemed to be more important for the boys than the girls. These girls perceived that boys were more likely to cheat in order to win, whereas fairness was important to these girls. (This is not to say that girls do not like competition per se though.)

**The girls in the research seemed to prefer indoor activities and sports, whereas boys tended to prefer to play sports outside.**

- Despite enjoying PE, many of these girls reported that they disliked being outside and cold during sport, whereas the boys seemed to appear to enjoy the extra space. This difference between the genders is recognised by these boys as well as the girls:

*"I like playing outside PE because you get more space than playing inside."*  
(Boy)

*"[I only like PE] if it's indoors, because outdoors is really cold".* (Girl)

- However among the children in these focus groups, the girls to played and enjoyed sports more traditionally associated with 'boys' (like football, cricket and hockey). While the boys did not seem to participate in sports traditionally associated with girls, like ballet.

**There are mixed views about the statement that 'PE should be different for boys and girls'.**

- When asked about whether PE should be different for boys and girls, many of the girls tended to agree that they they would prefer separate PE.  
*“So what we want is some calm music on and Miss E at the side, maybe doing some writing, us climbing on the climbing wall, and the boys outside doing their thing, running.”*  
This could be driven by many of the factors above – including these girls’ perception that the boys enjoy different things and can be overly competitive, cheat and play rough, as well as their frustration that boys are just sometimes plain ‘silly’ –
- Most of these boys agreed that PE should be separate. This may be partly informed by their perception that girls are ‘less sporty’ and skilled, as well as less interested in ‘rough’ and muddy outdoor sports:  
*“Girls are not as strong ... boys, they can be really strong so they can take part in the rough sport”.*  
*“Boys could do harder stuff and the girls could do easier stuff.”*
- Despite these differences a minority of the boys and girls in the focus groups were concerned that separate PE should not imply that either boys or girls were better.

## 5. Understanding why girls may start to disengage from sport and physical activity

### Some cracks were evident in the confidence of the girls in the research

- There is evidence that confidence is key to enjoying sport<sup>2</sup>. Some of the Year 3 girls in this research seemed to already express reservations and less bravado than the boys - even the girls who are good at sport.  
*“I’m not going to be in it because I’m not a very good swimmer, but I am in the top group”.*
- It is likely that a perception of not being good at sport – or feeling that others don’t think you are - can be very off-putting for girls who want to participate. This could be why a number of the girls in the focus groups were already beginning to feel uncomfortable about taking part in PE alongside boys who fuel their insecurity.

### In year 3, teachers and parents notice the lack of female sporting role models

- The teachers interviewed commented on the lack of positive sporting role models for girls compared to boys. The teachers and parents agreed that by year 4, girls start to become much more aware of their looks, comparing themselves to TV and other media celebrities. As one teacher pointed out, this contributes to the perception that sport may not be a ‘ladylike thing to do.’
- The teachers involved in this research suggested that any differences between children’s enjoyment of PE at this age is more likely to be driven by their home life than

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<sup>2</sup> Women’s Sport and Fitness Foundation, Changing the Game for Girls, 2012

by gender. The reported that it was their view that there were already clear differences noticeable amongst children from homes where physical activity has not been encouraged – or in some cases has been actively discouraged. These children seemed to be much more reluctant to take part and less likely to enjoy PE, sometimes even being afraid of being out of breath.

- It is likely that these stereotypes and expectations are reinforced at home among children. One teacher said that parents expect their boys to get involved in rough and tumble, but can be shocked if girls mirror this behaviour.
- After year 3, the teachers interviewed reported that many girls start to drop out. They also suggested that if children drop out occurs at this age, girls will be less likely to return to sport.

## **APPENDIX A – MORE DETAILED INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **A. Focus groups and observations in schools with boys and girls aged 7 and 8**

The research was conducted in three primary schools where involved in the research. The schools were chosen in different areas in order to include a range of demographic profiles in the sample. One school was located in a rural and fairly affluent area (Bloxham), one in the centre of town (Bicester) and one on the edge of Oxford in a low income community (West Kidlington).

The total number of young people involved in the six focus groups was 17 girls and 21 boys.

In each of the three schools, two focus groups were held - one focus group with girls aged 7 to 8 and one with boys. This was followed by observation in an informal (playground) setting either at a lunch or break time. Focus groups were chosen as a data collection method as it allowed us to gather in depth data about the subjects of the research and created a relaxed and informal setting for the children to share their experiences and ideas.

The focus groups were designed to be highly engaging and interactive, appropriate to this age group, with hands-on exercises including:

- Call out games around the best and worst thing about being a boy or girl
- Card sorting to rank in importance seven things: feeling good; learning new things; achieving a goal; spending time with family; spending time with friends and looking good
- Call out games around what is liked and disliked about PE
- Private 'voting' to assess individual levels of happiness and confidence.

Parents of all children involved in the focus groups signed permission slips to allow the children to take part and for the discussions to be recorded. The focus groups were led by appropriate members of staff from both Women in Sport and the Youth Sport Trust, all of whom had relevant DBS checks and experience of working with this age group. Focus groups were always attended by two members of staff.

Discussion guides were used by researchers to guide their questioning. Where appropriate questions were expanded on in order to elicit more detailed responses from the children, to give greater insight but within the context of the original question.

Answers to questions that young people may have been inhibited to answer because they were of a more personal nature e.g. 'how happy are you with how you look?' were collected confidentially as written answers.

It was made clear to young people at the start of the focus groups that they did not have to answer any of the questions if they did not want to.



## **B. Interviews with parents**

Eight interviews were conducted with parents of children from two of the three schools that participated in the focus groups. This included seven mothers and one father who were the parents of three boys and five girls. All interviews were conducted by phone. These took place on the same days as the focus groups and were all conducted face to face. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the parents and were made aware of the subject matter prior to the interview commencing.