

# How To Engage Boys Aged 13-15 In Sport And Activity

## PERCEPTIONS

Sport England found that, during this age span, participation in sport develops from something guided by parents and school, to something guided by individual choices. Also, boys' priorities start to change. The perceived benefit of activity becomes less about having fun and more about looking/feeling good and being healthy.

In addition, young people are also becoming conscious of how they are perceived by their peers and other important people in their lives, which creates a structure for their personal development, and will rarely do something that risks jarring with their social group.

As such, to engage successfully with this demographic, sport must fit in with the likes and needs of a child's social group - rather than isolating them - and connect to other interests and priorities.<sup>i</sup>

### Weight affects perception

Recent research has shown that attitude to physical activity can differ according to a boy's weight. Obese adolescent boys often have lower sport participation rates and a less positive attitude towards physical activity, as well as finding limited pleasure in activity.

This research also revealed that perceived barriers to activity are more numerous and prevalent amongst overweight children. These barriers were found to include physical complaints, not being good at or not liking sport, and insecurity about appearance. Boys of normal weight were found to be less likely to have these negative perceptions.<sup>ii</sup>

### Activity levels can alter perception

According to an Irish study, perception in regards to health is guided by the level of activity undertaken, with more active adolescents seeing a clear link between health and being active. One participant commented: 'that you see people jogging on the road and you know they are fit and healthy.' Inactive adolescents tended *not* to draw this comparison and relate being healthy to nutrition, rather than exercise. One respondent associated being healthy with 'not getting fat...eating the right food to help your body.'<sup>iii</sup>

## **MOTIVATIONS**

A 2013 StreetGames report suggests that, in regards to activity, key motivators for boys are keeping fit and healthy, improving performance, fun and socialising, achieving personal goals, learning about teamwork and leadership, boosting confidence, presenting opportunity (e.g. being scouted by professional teams), competition, and being inspired by established sports stars.<sup>iv</sup>

Another study found that boys tend to be motivated by a 'what's in it for me?' approach that weighs up value and outcomes before making a decision.<sup>v</sup>

### **Enjoyment is a motivator for many**

Research conducted at Dublin City University found that enjoyment was a key motivator for boys, and one that was common to both boys who are already highly active and those who are inactive. A highly active boy commented that 'well I enjoy it and I know it's very good and like healthy for you', whilst an inactive boys stated that: 'I just find them fun, they're good to do'.<sup>vi</sup>

A data analysis questionnaire for Reading Borough Council backs up this finding, with 50.8% of respondents listing fun and enjoyment as a main factor in motivating them to participate in activity.<sup>vii</sup>

However, fun must not be seen as a motivating factor for all. Sport England research reveals that, for many young people, sport was last seen as fun in primary school. Enjoyment of sport then starts to fade in secondary school, where many perceive it as a more serious pursuit for those who are more able. Thus, not all young people are motivated by the desire to have fun.<sup>viii</sup>

### **Motivations are affected by weight**

As with perception, weight also appears to have an effect on some aspects of motivation. A study has shown that many motivations (social contact, competition, feeling better, improving health and physical condition) are unaffected by the weight of the participants. However, three motivations – enjoyment, losing weight and looking better – were found to differ according to weight. Enjoyment was found to be less important for obese boys than for the normal-weight boys, whilst losing weight and looking better was more important for obese boys.

The study also noted that, as weight loss associated with exercise is likely to be relatively small, obese boys should be encouraged to experiment with different activities until they find something they enjoy.<sup>ix</sup>

## **BARRIERS**

Data collected from multiple studies and research projects across the world suggests a number of common barriers that prevent or discourage boys from participating in activity.

These include:

- Bad experiences of school sport. These include lack of encouragement from staff, not enjoying any one sport, the overly competitive nature of school sport, and a dislike of changing in front of others.<sup>x</sup>
- Limited free time due to the demands of other commitments, both educational and social.<sup>xi</sup>
- Not enough family support. This factor includes access to activities outside school being limited parents who are unwilling or unable to provide transport; parents not encouraging (or even discouraging) participation; and parents who are not active themselves - thus depriving boys of someone to participate with.<sup>xii</sup>
- Fear of being laughed at or bullied<sup>xiii</sup>
- Not being good enough at sport to participate<sup>xiv</sup>
- Activity being too tiring<sup>xv</sup>

### **Barriers for obese boys**

Research that specifically looked at weight in regards participation found several common barriers shared by obese and overweight boys. These include lack of interest in physical activity, being chosen last for the team, and being teased by friends during physical activity and sports.<sup>xvi</sup>

## **MESSAGES**

Studies have revealed the type of message that successfully connects with this demographic in regards to encouraging activity, as well as the type of message that *fails* to connect.

### **The word 'sport' can have negative connotations**

Research by Sport England found the word 'sport' has negative connotations for many boys, as they associate it with bad experiences at school and an overly competitive environment. Promotions that don't mention sport could therefore prove popular, as they offer broader appeal.<sup>xvii</sup> Similarly, the term fitness has negative connotations for many people. The term activity has been shown by various studies to be the most effective one to use.

## **Marketing style**

In addition, Sport England found the delivery of the message was also important. Boys responded best when the person delivering the message was seen as 'trustworthy', 'expert' and 'like me'. Other important factors include having illustrations with bold colours and urban-style graphics, as well as catchy and direct slogans, and demonstrate the expertise of the coach/instructor.<sup>xviii</sup>

## **PARTICIPATION**

Recent research has provided a host of insights into the type of activity boys currently participate in, with football unanimously found to be most popular - both in and out of school. Other popular activities include rugby, swimming, cycling, cricket and boxing.<sup>xix</sup>

### **Activity levels and demand are both high**

Questionnaire data compiled by Reading Borough Council points to the high demand for activity amongst boys. Responses showed 67% of young people surveyed currently participate in extracurricular sport during term-time. In addition, when asked what pastime they would like to do more of during term-time, sport was the most popular answer (35% of respondents).<sup>xx</sup>

### **How to encourage more participation**

Sport England research found that a broader offering of activity is needed to break the norm of sport participation.<sup>xxi</sup> This is backed up by a StreetGames study, which found that – along with competitive sports such as football – many boys are interested in trying activities such as running, BMX riding, gym and adventure sports.<sup>xxii</sup>

StreetGames research also revealed key criteria that encourage participation. These include convenient times (straight after school and in school holidays) and locations (near to school/home), value for money, and a choice of interesting activities.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Another study found that boys can be encouraged to participate by positive influences. A recent study found teenagers were more likely to be active if they perceived pressure from teachers, friends or family members, and were surrounded by friends who were also active.

The study also suggests that boys with active friends see sport as a way to spend more time with their social group, so are more likely to participate themselves.<sup>xxiv</sup>

## **COMMUNICATION**

Research has pointed to a number of key factors in relation to communication channels and methods.

### **Effective channels and information**

Research by StreetGames found that boys find information on activity from a wide range of sources. These include school, social media, adverts, text messages, posters and leaflets in the post.<sup>xxv</sup> However, our own research has shown that, because of the cost of print and distribution, poster and leaflets are not an effective way of reaching the target audience.

Reading Borough Council's data analysis found that most respondents (38.3%) found out about activities from friends, followed by school (16.6%), parents/carers (15%) and the internet (11.7%).<sup>xxvi</sup>

StreetGames research also looked at the information that should be communicated to encourage participation. This includes cost, times, type and nature of the activity (competitive or non-competitive), information on incentives (e.g. a free trial), and images of people taking part.<sup>xxvii</sup>

In addition, the StreetGames research made a number of pertinent recommendations in regards communicating with boys about activity.<sup>xxviii</sup>

These include:

- Tap into the desire to have fun – having fun is very important for boys, so communications must reflect this.
- Take sport away from an educational context – many boys link sport inextricably with school, even if they participate outside school, so have limited ideas in regards sport after they have left education. It is therefore important to create an awareness of the importance of activity outside school, thus developing a desire to continue sport once the target audience leaves school.
- Choice is key – there is a perceived lack of choice in regards school sport. This means communicating the choice of a wide range of activities outside school could be a key factor in driving participation.
- Communicate in a way that interests boys – to be successful, communications should reflect both motivations (e.g. being healthy, cost, learning new skills) and non-sporting interests (e.g. video games, socialising, music, TV and films).

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