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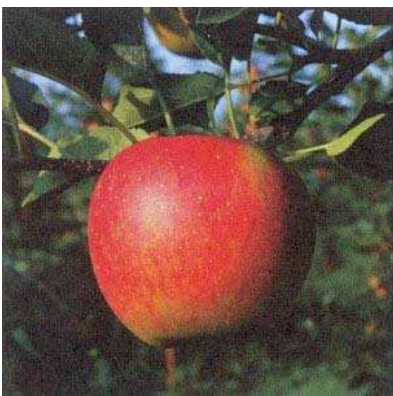
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## Am I Bovered?

A participative action research study to develop, implement and evaluate physical activity interventions with girls

### Phase One Report

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY




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**Centre for Health Services Studies  
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**September 2008**





**Am I Bovered? A participative action research study to develop, implement and evaluate physical activity interventions with girls**

**Phase One Report**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Date: September 2008**

**Commissioned and Funded by:  
The Big Lottery Fund**

**Jenny Billings  
Ferhana Hashem  
Jan Macvarish**

**Centre for Health Services Studies  
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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# 1 Introduction

The 'Am I Bovered?' project is a two-year study aiming to develop, implement and evaluate sustainable exercise-based interventions with girls aged 11-15 years in order to improve their engagement in regular physical activity. This report summarises the findings from the first phase of this three-part project. This was an exploratory phase of the study, using focus groups with girls aged 11-12 and 14-15, recruited from two schools in Thanet, East Kent. These same schools will collaborate in the further phases of the project.

The focus groups were designed to gain insights into the girls' understandings of the relationship between health and physical activity and their attitudes towards sport both in and out of school. Findings from the focus groups will be used to inform the next phase of the study, when interventions will be planned and implemented.

The study increases our understanding of the underlying attitudes and beliefs of girls about taking part in sport and exercise. The research will help to develop practical initiatives and guidelines to increase physical activity levels for this cohort. The insights gained into the lives and experiences of the girls can also be of benefit to services and professionals in order to identify key motivations and barriers to physical activity.

## 2 Aims

The aims of the first phase of the study were to:

- Explore factors that motivate and create barriers to 11-12 and 14-15 year old girls engaging in regular physical activity (Phase 1).

The remaining phases aim to:

- Develop and implement activities chosen by inactive 11-12 and 14-15 year old girls with the support of a multi-agency team (Phase 2).
- Evaluate the impact of the project, examining factors associated with young girls' engagement in physical exercise (Phase 3).
- Make recommendations for policy and practice.

### 3 Methods and Sample

The first phase of the research used a qualitative approach, considered most appropriate to eliciting information from younger people. Focus groups were used as a forum to discuss and debate issues, exploring not only what people thought, but also how and why. There are several advantages to using focus groups with children; they do not discriminate against those who have difficulty reading and writing; they encourage participation from those who are reluctant to be interviewed individually; and they facilitate contributions from young people who feel they have nothing to say.

During May and June 2008, four focus groups were run in each of the two participating schools, arranged with the help of the local School Sports Co-ordinator and PE staff. The groups were organised by age-group (Year 7 and Year 10) and took place during PE lessons, on school premises. Inclusion criteria were that the participants should be within study age range, able to communicate in English and be able-bodied (to ensure consistency of experience).

The target sample was 120, with the aim of recruiting 15 girls to each focus group. In total, 91 girls participated in 8 focus groups across the two schools. Numbers were slightly lower than anticipated because of the difficulties of co-ordinating recruitment; primarily demands of the school schedule meant that there was very little time to focus on recruitment without placing an unreasonable burden on school staff and the School Sports Co-ordinator.

School	Year 7 (age 11-12)	Year 10 (age 14-15)
School One	28	20
School Two	22	21
Sub total	<b>50</b>	<b>41</b>

**Total N = 91**

All groups were of a 'workable' size and although the total number reached is lower than the target, it is sufficient to assess that the study has achieved a credible range of views and experiences across the two age-groups and both schools.

## 4 Key Findings

### Idea about Health and Fitness

- Alongside having fun with friends, weight control and staying slim were described as key motivations for taking part in sport and exercise.
- Other possible benefits to exercise, such as being physically stronger, increasing stamina and improving sporting performance were not raised during the focus groups.
- Being 'big' was something most girls saw as undesirable and was associated with being embarrassed, experiencing teasing and being less inclined to take part in sport and exercise.
- Despite this, most girls felt that sport should be 'for all' and that 'big' girls should not be discouraged from being active.

### Views of PE in School

#### (a) Practicalities and organisation

- Convenience, timing and practical matters influenced the girls' motivation for taking part in PE.
- Views about the preferred length and frequency of PE lessons varied considerably between girls very keen on sport and those who were less enthusiastic.
- Changing facilities were felt generally to be adequate, but privacy was an issue of strong concern, especially with regard to showering.
- PE kit also seemed significant in affecting girls' enthusiasm for PE.

#### (b) How the girls experienced PE in School

- Having fun and having the opportunity to socialise with their friends was a key motivating factor.
- Positive experiences of sport and PE were felt to increase self-confidence, making them 'feel good' about themselves.



- Participating in PE gave the girls the opportunity to engage in activity outside the classroom environment.
- All groups generated ideas for a wider range of sporting activities which the girls felt would help in engaging more pupils.
- Extra-curricular team sports were engaged in by an enthusiastic minority, but there were some issues raised with consistency and the level of training for inter-school competitions.
- The girls were enthused about plans to try new activities but were sometimes disappointed if the anticipated activities did not materialise.

(c) Embarrassment and the fear of failure

- Fears of exposure, embarrassment and failure were strongly expressed in both age-groups and across both schools.
- Privacy while changing was of particular importance and was tied up with protecting their reputations and avoiding becoming the target of teasing.
- There was also the potential for embarrassment during PE, with girls expressing fears of being different (e.g. getting flushed, sweating or running 'strangely'), making a fool of themselves or failing tasks.
- They disliked being watched by boys while undertaking PE, feeling self-conscious about their bodies and their abilities.
- Competition was described as a strong de-motivating factor for many girls and boys were cast as being far more competitive than girls.
- The issuing of grades and rewarding performance also dampened some girls' enthusiasm, as they felt that teachers valued achievement above effort.
- There seemed to be a conflict between the girls' strong desire for fun and what they described as the school's orientation towards achievement.

### **Issues Related to School Culture**

- A general level of pride and satisfaction with their sports facilities impacted upon the girls' enthusiasm for taking part in PE, this was particularly marked in School 1, which has recently modernised its sports facilities.


- The relationship between teachers and pupils influenced the girls' attitudes towards participating in physical activity, notably teachers' authority and their ability to enthuse all pupils.
- Year 7 girls described a transition to a different culture at secondary school, in which PE was more serious, less fun and there were generally less opportunities for girls to engage in informal physical play, for example at break-times.

### **Activities Outside of School**

- Overall, girls described a very wide range of activities available to them out of school, however, the distribution of access was very uneven, with some girls describing numerous activities and others none at all.
- The key motivations for sport outside school were having fun, socialising and avoiding boredom.
- Activities outside school were not always formal and organised, younger girls also described enjoying the opportunity to 'play out', but there was a sense of this diminishing with age.
- Parents played an important role in paying for activities, transporting girls to and from formal activities, and encouraging them to get out of the house and be active.
- Barriers to participation were primarily money, time and transport but also significant were feeling self-conscious and a difficulty in sustaining motivation when exercising alone.
- The girls generally described themselves as feeling confident when 'out and about', however, a few articulated fears of being 'taken' by an adult or of being teased by older children.

### **Gender**

- The range of sports activities was perceived as being more restricted for girls than for boys.

- 
- The younger girls felt the gender distinction more acutely since their arrival at secondary school; they were no longer able to play sport with boys and sports such as rugby were no longer available to them. However, the girls had reservations about mixed-sex sport, as they feared injury and ‘excessive’ competitiveness.
  - The older girls felt strongly that they did not want to have PE with boys.
  - Being ‘sporty’ was seen as unfeminine and ‘boyish’ – this view was particularly strong among the Year 10 girls who had more gendered views of ‘appropriate’ physical activity and sport.

## 5 Conclusions


This study offers an insight into the key motivations and barriers that adolescent girls describe concerning sport and physical activity. Our focus has been to use the views and opinions of the girls themselves to explore why and how girls have lower rates of physical activity than boys. This research forms the bedrock of the study for developing measures and devising practical initiatives in the next phases of the project in order to introduce the girls at each of the two schools to new ideas and opportunities to engage in physical activity.

Overall, the girls held positive ideas about health and fitness. They associated sport and PE at school with having fun with friends, having a break from lessons, being healthy, controlling weight and improving their general sense of well-being. However, the practicalities and organisation required to undertake PE sometimes dampened their enthusiasm. The perceived lack of interesting or suitable activities was also a de-motivating factor. Other negative influences were the fear of being embarrassed, making a fool of themselves, being exposed to ridicule and failing at tasks.

The social setting at school impacted upon the girls' involvement in PE; having modern facilities and having a strong teacher-pupil relationship were both factors cited as having a positive influence on them. There were perceptions that PE unfairly favoured boys, but at the same time, there was an ambivalence towards sport, with 'sporty' girls being regarded as unfeminine and 'boyish'.

Outside of school, having fun and socialising were also associated with physical activities. Here, parents seemed to play a crucial role as facilitators enabling participation in sport. Access to facilities, money, time and transport were all described as impacting on participation. Most girls felt confident going 'out and about' in their local area but a few vocalised safety fears about being in public and anxieties about being teased by other children.

Our study reveals that adolescent girls recognise the importance of physical activity and perceive it as fun and sociable. However, the findings also indicate some



significant barriers and de-motivating factors that are worthy of consideration by professionals seeking to increase the participation of girls in sport.


### **Strengths, Weaknesses and Limitations**

The methodology is judged to have worked well and the findings indicate that considerable insights have been gained, capable of informing the subsequent phases of the project. There are, of course, areas and issues that were not fully explored in the study, in particular, time restrictions meant that school-based PE was more heavily discussed than out-of-school experiences. There was little time to explore in greater depth the more complex issues such as gender and wider school-pupil relationships. The dynamic of the focus groups also tended to gravitate towards a consensus on the 'centre ground', with those girls who were particularly keen on sport less likely to express the full extent of their enthusiasm and those who particularly struggled with PE unwilling to express the more personal reasons for their reluctance to participate. However, it is felt that this initial phase of the study has laid some solid ground for developing the interventions and activities proposed for Phases 2 and 3.

## 6 Recommendations

Clear indicators were revealed from the study findings in relation to key motivations and barriers –

- The fun and sociable aspect of physical activity should be emphasised and built upon as it is the most important motivator for girls of this age.
- Although the variety of views and preferences expressed suggest that it will be difficult to please all girls with regard to the timing, frequency and duration of PE lessons, there were some areas of agreement such as dislike of lessons first thing in the morning and a preference for lessons at the end of the day.
- Other practical barriers to be considered are privacy when changing, the option of private showering, and unpopular aspects of regulation kit.
- Because of the variations in levels of perceived competence, desire for competition and for physical exertion, the range of activities on offer should be as wide as possible.
- Embarrassment and failure was a strong de-motivational factor, heightened by mixed-gender activities. The project's female-only focus is therefore reinforced by the findings.
- Rewards for achievement need to be carefully considered as they are potential disincentives for those who perceive themselves as less competent.
- Resources spent on facilities seemed to influence levels of motivation, it is therefore recommended that the environment in which activities take place is given careful consideration.
- Motivations for out-of-school activities included having fun, socialising, trying new things and having the opportunity for physical play, but it should be recognised that teenage girls are heavily dependent on their parents/carers



to facilitate their involvement. Activities will have to compensate for inequalities in the distribution of money, time, transport and enthusiasm.

- Work needs to be done on girls' perceptions of sport, which can be contradictory. On the one hand girls want fairness of opportunity, but on the other are already influenced by gendered notions of appropriate behaviour.