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A Question of Sport - Perspectives of Children and Young People

Introduction

In this Policy Brief we report the key findings from two surveys undertaken among children and young people in Northern Ireland which explored their attitudes to and experiences of physical activity and sport. At the end of this briefing paper, we will make policy recommendations which are based on the study results. Further results of this study were recently published elsewhere (Schubotz, Lloyd and McKnight, 2016; Sport NI 2016)

In 2015, Sport NI contracted ARK – a joint initiative by Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University - to ask respondents to the Kids Life and Times (KLT) and Young Life and Times (YLT) surveys a range of questions on physical activity and sport. The two surveys are undertaken annually by ARK and cover a range of issues each year. KLT is an online survey run since 2008 and completed by children in their final year in Primary School (P7). All P7 children in Northern Ireland are invited to take part. YLT is a postal survey of 16-year olds runs since 2003 with respondents randomly selected from the Child Benefit register. KLT and YLT are undertaken at crucial status passages for children and young people, namely at the end of their primary school education and when they are 16. For more details about the surveys, including technical reports visit www.ark.ac.uk/klt and www.ark.ac.uk/ylt). In 2015, the KLT survey was completed by 5,194 P7 children while 1,157 16-year olds responded to YLT.

The questions on sport and physical activity were asked for the first time in 2015 and now form a baseline in this area. It is anticipated that these questions will be repeated in order to measure policy progress in the area of sport and physical health. Where possible the same questions were asked in each survey, although the wording of some differed slightly to reflect the age difference between KLT and YLT respondents. The survey questions tried to determine the level of physical activity among children and young people; their experiences of sport inside and outside of school, the type of activity they were involved in, barriers to participation, and whether or not they had inspiring role models or sports idols.

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Every-day activities and physical activity targets

The fact that moderate and regular sport and physical activity are related to physical and mental health benefits is uncontested. Children and young people are therefore encouraged to be physically active for at least 60 minutes every day. Respondents were asked about the type of physical activities they undertake in a normal week; this included activities such as walking or cycling to school, and also organised or unorganised sport. As Table 1 shows, 42 percent of YLT and 49 percent of KLT respondents reported that they walked or cycled to and from school. Forty-four percent of 16-year olds and 53 percent of P7 children said they did PE in school in a normal week. Over half of YLT respondents (52%) and nearly three quarters (74%) of KLT respondents said they were involved in out-of-school sport.

Fewer than one in ten YLT respondents (8%), but nearly one in five KLT respondents (19%) said they did none of these things in a typical week, whilst one in five KLT respondents, but only nine percent of YLT respondents said they did all of these activities in a normal week.

When asked how many days in a normal week they spent at least 60 minutes on sport or physical activity, fewer than one in ten 16-year olds (9%) met this seven-times-a-week target. This compares with almost one third of P7 children (32%). This suggests that many P7 children are involved in physical activity during unstructured play, which would be supported by previous findings in the 2013 KLT survey which showed that the most common activity children engage in after school is playing outside (65% said they did this); 16-year olds, on the other hand, appear to be more reliant on structured physical activity to meet the activity target.

Table 1: Activities in a normal week (Multiple response)

	%	
	YLT	KLT
Walk/cycle to school	42	49
Do PE in school	44	53
Sport/activities outside school	52	74
Any other physical activity	30	N/A
None of these	8	19

Prohibiting factors

If progress is to be made in encouraging children and young people to be more active it is essential to understand the factors that prohibit or discourage this. As Table 2 shows the single most important factor why 16-year olds were not more involved in sports and physical activity was lack of time with seven in ten (69%) YLT respondents saying this; more than twice the proportion of KLT respondents (25%) who regarded lack of time as problematic. The main reason for children not being more active was their lack of knowledge of where they could undertake activities. This highlights their reliance on parents to organise sport for them and to provide the required transport.

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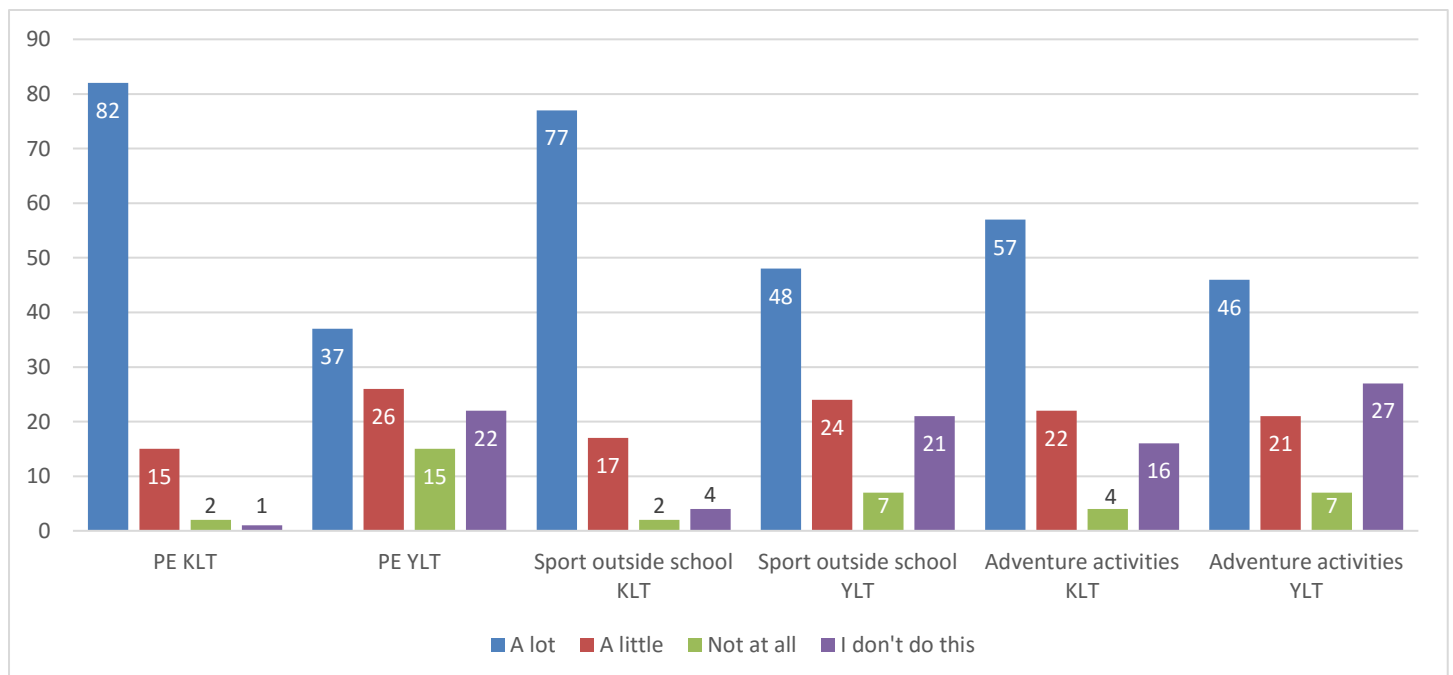
Table 2: Reasons preventing YLT and KLT respondents from taking part in sport (Multiple response)

	%	
	YLT	KLT
Not enough time	69	25
Poor health or a disability	4	20
I don't have anyone I can go with	23	15
Difficulty getting there	26	n. a.
Cost	24	n. a.
Don't know where I can do activities	13	38
Other reason	7	n. a.
Nothing stops or prevents me	9	12

Enjoyment in sport

Children and young people were asked how much they enjoyed taking part in sport and physical activity. Figure 1 shows that P7 children were much more likely than 16-year olds to say that they enjoyed the activities they took part in. This difference was particularly noticeable for PE in school, which 82 percent of KLT respondents, but only 37 percent of YLT respondents said they enjoyed a lot. The difference between KLT and YLT respondents was smallest in relation to outdoor adventure activities which both sets of respondents enjoyed to a similar extent (Figure 1).

Figure 1: How much do you enjoy the following activities? (%)



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Types of sport and activities

Children and young people were asked to say what three types of sport or physical activity they most often undertake. The types of sport mentioned covered an extensive range of activities, with football, swimming and Gaelic sports being the three top activities for KLT respondents. Walking, running and football were just ahead of going to the gym and cycling for 16-year olds. Four out of five top activities for 16-year olds were physical activities, such as walking and running that can be undertaken individually at a time that suits their personal circumstances. This was not the case for KLT respondents. Perhaps this is evidence of a trend towards the individualisation of sport and physical activity with increasing age.

Perceived health effects of sport

Both KLT and YLT respondents were asked whether they thought sport had benefits for their physical and mental health. Table 3 shows that only a very small minority of respondents in both surveys thought that there were no benefits at all. Five times as many KLT respondents as YLT respondents were unsure about both physical and mental health benefits of sport. A plausible explanation for this is that 16-year olds are likely to have a more informed insight than P7 children about the health benefits of sport. In both surveys the proportion of respondents unsure about mental health benefits was twice as high as the proportion unsure about physical health benefits but, overall, these proportions were small.

Table 3: Respondents' perception about the level of health benefits of sport

	%			
	Physical health		Mental health	
	KLT	YLT	KLT	YLT
A lot	78	86	53	65
A little	16	11	30	28
Not at all	2	1	6	5
I don't know	5	1	10	2

We found a very strong link between self-assessed health and the level of physical activity respondents are involved in. Half of YLT respondents who were physically active at least to the recommended level said their health was excellent, whilst a further third thought it was good. In comparison, 47 percent who were never, or for only one day a week, physically active for the recommended 60 minutes said that their health was just fair, with a further 15 percent saying it was poor. The results were similar for KLT respondents. Ninety-three percent of those who were active to the recommended level or above said their health was at least good, whereas this was the case for only 78 percent of KLT respondents who said they never completed the recommended level of activity.

Role models and sports idols

It may be that one of the main motivations for young people to become involved in sport is role models that they see and hear about in the media. Famous sports men and women enjoy celebrity status and many children and young people treat them as idols. For P7 children, footballers Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo were by far those most commonly recorded sports idols. In contrast, a much more diverse group of role models were identified by YLT respondents. However, as Table 4 shows, the role of famous sports persons as a motivating factor to become involved in sport decreases significantly with age.

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Table 4: Who has encouraged or inspired you to take part in sports? (Multiple response table).

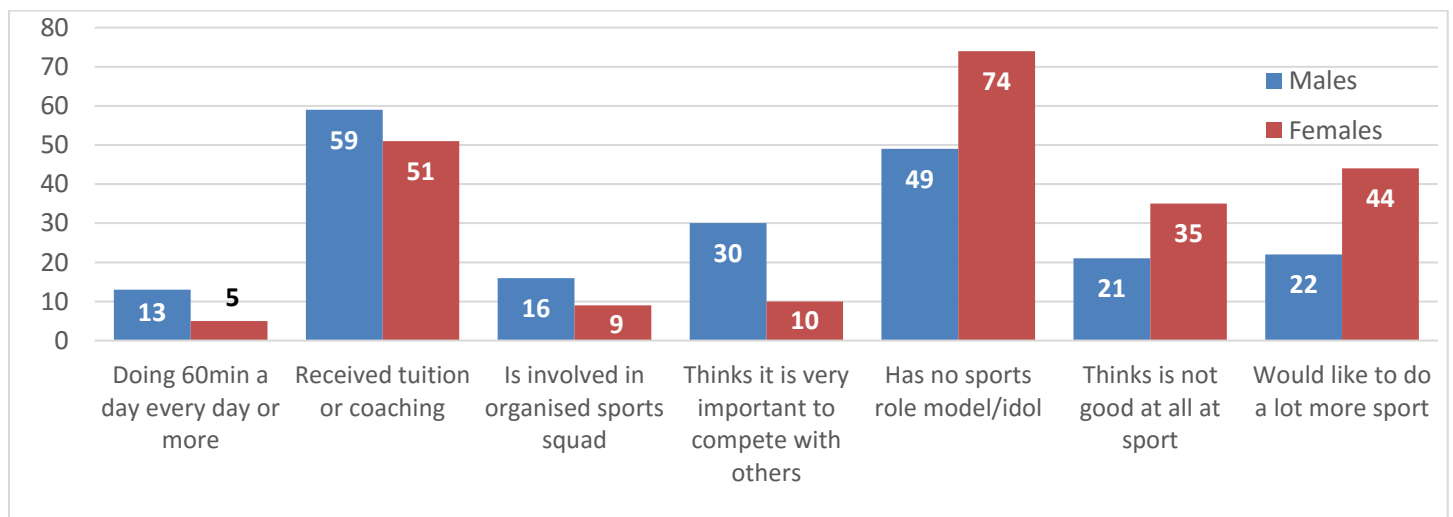
	%	
	YLT	KLT
My family	59	19
A teacher	27	40
My friends	47	21
A famous person	16	45
Someone else	2	10
No-one has inspired or encouraged me	14	20

P7 children were most likely to say that a famous person inspired them to take part in sport (45%) with only 19 percent of KLT respondents saying a family member inspired them. At age 16, the reverse was true and famous sports personalities were the least likely people reported (16%) to inspire someone to be physically active. In fact, 62 percent of YLT respondents said that they did not have a sports idol at all. At the age of 16, family members were the main role models for young people (59%) followed by friends. At this age, friends were more than twice as important as they were for P7 children. The role of a teacher in inspiring children to be physically active is also revealed in Table 4; and, while this role model appears to decrease with age, nonetheless, more than one in four YLT respondents (27%) still reported that a teacher had encouraged or inspired them to take part in sport.

Gender difference

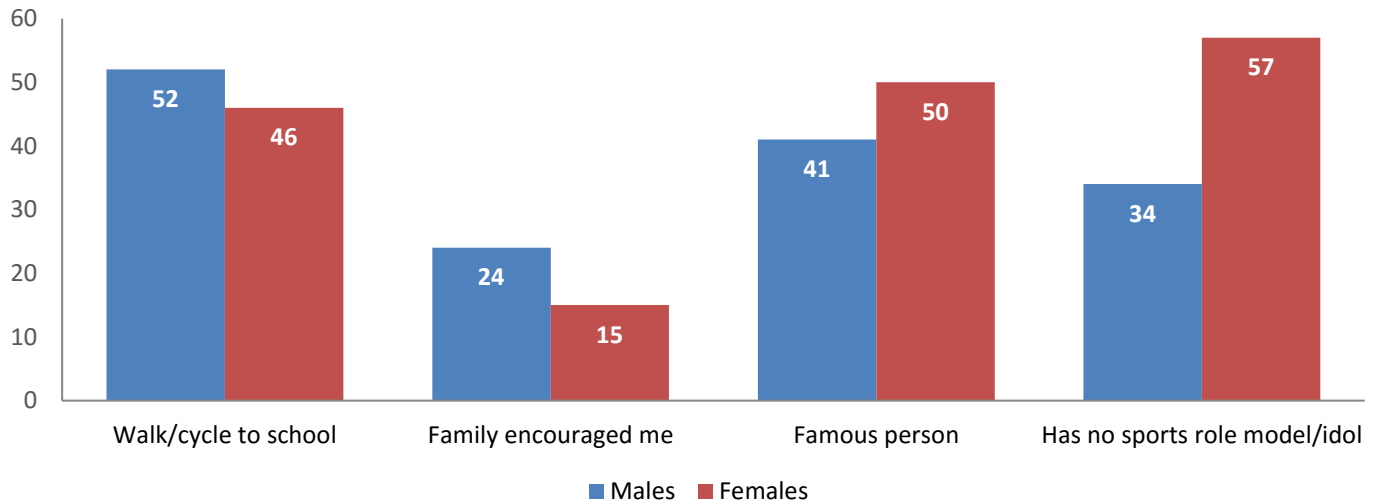
The main variable that impacted on the experiences of, and attitudes to, sport and physical activity was respondents' gender, and this was the case for both the KLT and the YLT surveys (Figures 3 and 4). Figure 3 shows that whilst 16-year old males were more likely to be active to the level that is recommended, females were much more likely than males to say that they would like to do much more sport. The Figure also shows that males were more likely than females to value competitiveness in sport whilst three quarters of females had no sports idol compared with half of males.

Figure 3: Gender difference in physical activity (YLT)



This finding was similar to the P7 children. As Figure 4 shows boys were much more likely to have a sports idol than girls. The most significant finding is perhaps that boys appear to be more encouraged by their family to do sport at that age than girls (24% and 15% respectively).

Figure 4: Gender difference in physical activity (KLT)



Disability and sport

Respondents with a disability or long-term health condition were just as likely as those without a condition to meet the daily 60-minutes activity target. This was the case for both P7 children and 16-year olds. One in five YLT respondents with a disability or long-term health condition said that this condition prevented them from taking part in more sport. This figure was only marginally smaller for KLT respondents with a long-term illness (17%), however, unlike their 16-year old counterparts KLT respondents without a long-term illness were just as likely to say this.

YLT respondents with a disability or long-term illness were less likely to participate in PE and much less likely to say that they enjoyed PE in school. KLT respondents with a long-term illness were also less likely to say that they enjoyed PE; however, they were just as likely to take part in PE as children without a long-term illness. 16-year olds with a long-term illness were also less likely to participate in organised sport outside of school; again, we did not find this among P7 children.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The YLT and KLT studies evoke a range of recommendations which could lead to an increased level of participation in, and enhanced experience of, sport and physical activity among children and young people. Evidence for the value of cost-saving preventative interventions to encourage higher activity levels, particularly in relation to significant health concerns over rising obesity, type 2 diabetes and, increasingly, mental health is compelling and does not need to be repeated. Importantly, both surveys highlighted that the main variable that impacted on the experiences of, and attitudes to, sport and physical activity was gender, and that this gender difference widened over the years. Boys are much more likely to be encouraged by their parents to get involved in sport at a young age. This can be seen to reflect persisting gendered societal norms and values that go beyond sport and physical activity. To this day rewards for sport, sponsorship and advertising too often disproportionately favour male over female sport. Initiatives particularly tailored to encourage females to be active such as 'Girls for Gold' etc. highlight that gender does not need to be a barrier to participation.

The data on the range of activities undertaken by 16-year olds suggests that activities, such as walking, cycling and jogging dominate. These are activities that can be undertaken at any time of the day - individually or with friends - and can be tailored around the other commitments that young people have. We cannot be sure whether these individualised activities dominate due to the lack of preferred alternatives, or whether

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these activities really are the favourite and most practical physical activities young people undertake at that age. In any case, we recommend that **investments into non-competitive and convenient infrastructure**, such as safe foot and cycle paths, should be made to encourage females to be physically more active.

We found no evidence that schools encouraged boys more than girls to be physically active or to do sports. One way of ensuring that every child and young person has a minimum of physical activity each week is to **make it a statutory requirement to teach PE in both primary and post primary schools**.

Currently PE is statutory in schools in England up to Key Stage 4, and the devolved Government in Scotland has also agreed a PE entitlement of two hours each week for primary school children and two periods for young people in post-primary education in Scotland. In Northern Ireland, PE provision is statutory at Key Stages 1 and 2 (http://ccea.org.uk/curriculum/key_stage_1_2/areas_learning/physical_education), but the curriculum is very broad, and does not require schools to provide at least two hours of PE each week. From Key Stage 3 onwards, PE is part of the *Learning for Life and Work* curriculum rather than a distinct subject, and at Key Stage 4 (http://ccea.org.uk/curriculum/key_stage_4/areas_learning/physical_education) PE is non-statutory. As a consequence, as the YLT survey shows, only 44 percent of 16-year olds have PE each week. Whilst statutory at Key Stages 1 and 2, KLT evidence shows that only about half of P7 children receive PE each week, which is evidence that a minimum entitlement curriculum also needs to **establish a minimum frequency and duration of PE** to be effective, as is the case in Scotland. The level of statutory arrangement that is currently in place in Northern Ireland does not address children's and young people's needs to be physically active, and this potentially costs the NI Government significant amounts of spending on healthcare due to the effects of sedentary lifestyles.

Finally, if PE is taught in schools it is done so regardless of gender, so girls and young women, who, as the surveys show, are least active, would benefit the most from statutory provision.

References

Schubotz, D., Lloyd, K. and McKnight, K. (2016). *A Question of Sport*. ARK Research Update 107. Belfast: ARK. Available online at: www.ark.ac.uk/publications/updates/update107.pdf.

Sport NI (2016). *Attitudes to and Experiences of Sport. Evidence from the 2015 Young Life and Times (YLT) and Kids Life and Times (KLT) surveys*. Belfast: Sport NI.

