New data showing 2.1 million children inactive is 'unacceptable' says charity

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Children's charity the Youth Sport Trust has responded to new research showing that levels of physical activity among young people are increasing - but still 'unacceptably' low in schools.

The research published by Sport England today shows that 3.3 million young people averaged 60 daily minutes of physical activity over the last year, up 279,600 on the year before.

Key findings from today's Active Lives – Children and Young People data show that:

- 46.8% of young people (3.3 million) average at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day up 3.6% from last year. 29% (2.1 million) young people average less than 30 minutes per day (vs. 32.9% last year)
- The increase has been across all age groups and demographics, driven by a growth in participation in physical activity out of school hours, specifically in team sports, informal activity and walking
- Young people who are more active and physically literate are happier, more resilient and trusting and have improved wellbeing - regardless of their gender or background
- Only two in five (40%) young people are active for at least 30 minutes per day in school

Responding to the findings, Youth Sport Trust Chief Executive Ali Oliver, said:

"It is encouraging to see that children and young people's overall levels of physical activity are up on a year ago reflecting the huge amount of work done by a number of organisations and partners to ensure provision is more inclusive and better reflects young people's aspirations. However, we know levels of physical activity are still far too low and there is much more for us to do if we are to tackle the problems this poses for children's physical, social and emotional wellbeing: too many are growing up overweight or obese, unhappy, lost and lonely.

"We are encouraged by Sport England's findings that out of school hours participation is increasing. Working with NGBs and active partnerships we have been making competitive school sport more inclusive through the School Games programme, and through innovative projects like TeamUp, a partnership with the three women's world cups in netball, hockey and cricket, we have been inspiring more young women and girls to take up team sport.

"But we should all find it unacceptable that fewer than half of young people average 30 minutes of activity within the school day. Not only is there clear evidence that sedentary behaviour is the driver of many health issues, but at the same time the research tells us more active children perform better in the classroom and that movement aids cognitive performance.

"We are using our voice to challenge the narrowing of the curriculum that has happened in recent years while at the same time positioning taking responsibility for transforming schools and classrooms to be more active learning environments, and refocussing Physical Education to focus on the development of physical literacy, wellbeing and personal development.

"We are calling on the new government to ensure that every child gets an hour a day of activity, that teacher training for physical education is a priority and that there is greater value and accountability placed on Physical Education in a broad and balanced curriculum. Sadly, there is a general lack of awareness of the value of PE, sport and the benefits they can have on young people's wider development: while a refreshed Ofsted framework and government plan for sport and activity may go some way to addressing this, more needs to be done.

"Far too many young people are missing out on the life-changing benefits of sport and play. From tackling isolation and improving mental health, to developing life skills and character traits like leadership, teamwork and empathy, there is so much that an active lifestyle and sport in particular offers to young people growing up in today's uncertain world.

“Reading the report other findings which resonate with us and will inform our continued efforts to build a brighter future for young people through Physical Education and sport, are the findings that tell us more active and physically literate children are happier, more resilient and more trusting of others and they also experience higher levels of mental wellbeing. However, sadly enduring inequalities exist in participation across gender, ethnicity and affluence and we will continue to extend the impact of our targeted interventions such as the powerful Girls Active programme.

“Along with leaders in sport and education, we are calling on the next government to tackle inactivity and the decline in young people’s wellbeing with a long-term plan for harnessing the power of play, sport and Physical Education.”

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