Sporting gender stereotypes taking hold from a young age, new research reveals

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Latest Youth Sport Trust Girls Active survey shows gendered attitudes are highest among younger primary pupils, and fewer than half of girls believe they have equal access to sport at school.

New research from the Youth Sport Trust has found young people are increasingly likely to believe some sports are for boys, and some are for girls.

The latest Girls Active survey, which explores young people's experiences and attitudes in the UK towards PE, physical activity and sport, found the proportion of boys believing "some sports are for boys and some sports are for girls" has steadily risen from 35% in 2023/24 to 41% in 2025/26. Among girls, agreement has also increased from 20% to 25%. Agreement with the statement is highest among children aged 7 to 9 years old, with almost half of boys at this age agreeing some sports are only for boys.

The findings highlight how experiences, attitudes and the influence of others shape children's perceptions, thereby highlighting the important role schools can play in challenging these stereotypes. Creating positive experiences of a wide range of sports from an early age can help ensure children do not feel limited by gendered expectations.

The research also suggests gender stereotypes are reinforced by girls' experiences of unequal access to sport and physical activity at school:

- Only around half of girls feel they have the same access to space and equipment outside of PE as boys.
- Only around half feel they have the same opportunity as boys to do the sports and activities they want to outside of PE.
- And fewer than half of girls feel they have the opportunity to take part in the same range of sports and activities as boys in PE.

Overall, more than half (56%) of boys believe girls' and boys' sport are seen as equally important, compared with just 39% of girls.

Despite the success and visibility of elite women's sport in recent years, this data suggests the impact is not trickling down to young people's everyday experiences and attitudes towards sport. Rather than moving towards a more equal view of sport, young people appear to be moving in the opposite direction.

Olympic medallist and middle-distance runner, Georgia Hunter Bell said, "Having visible role models to look up to is a big factor in inspiring young girls and showing them they belong in sport. But we also need to turn that inspiration into positive experiences of sport at a young age.

"I vividly remember watching Dame Kelly Holmes win double Olympic gold. It made me want to be a runner one day and made that dream realistic. The more exposure women and girls in sport get, alongside the right support in schools, it will reduce the thinking that sport is just for boys - because of course it isn't."

Team GB weightlifter, Sarah Davies, added, "My journey has taken me from competing in gymnastics to golf to beauty pageants to representing Team GB in weightlifting, and those experiences have shown me there is no set way to be a woman or to be strong or to find success. When I started weightlifting in 2011, it was still a very male-dominated sport. British weightlifting looks very different now; the women's side of the sport has a much bigger and competitive team than the men's. Seeing women succeeding in a sport like weightlifting should make a huge difference to whether a young girl now thinks, 'that could be me'. We are starting to see the shift with women's sport in the media, but it still isn't enough.

"This is why it is so important we challenge these ideas early. No child should feel a sport is off limits because of their gender. Girls and boys should be able to see themselves in every sport, have the confidence to give it a go and decide for themselves what they enjoy."

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The research also highlights the wider social pressures influencing girls' experiences of being active, with girls reporting feelings of judgement and intimidation from both boys and girls.

Among girls who are less active at school because of negative comments from boys, nearly half (47%) said it was due to comments based on gender stereotypes about being a girl. By comparison, among girls affected by negative comments from other girls, the majority (59%) said these comments were about their appearance.

The findings suggest peer attitudes from both boys and girls significantly influence girls' experiences of sport, highlighting the need for education from a very young age on the lasting impact negative comments can have on confidence and enjoyment.

Ali Oliver MBE, Youth Sport Trust CEO, said "The achievements of elite athletes over the course of 2026 have been utterly inspiring, however, the success of our national teams and athletes alone are not enough to change the everyday experience of young women and girls. It's really concerning our latest Girls Active Survey results reveal a growing trend for girls and boys to see some sports belonging to a single gender. This can result in young people internalising harmful stereotypes from a young age limiting their aspirations, ambitions and experiences.

"It would be easy to blame growing divisive ideologies we know are gaining traction and targeting young people online, but I think those of us leading, teaching and coaching sport have to ask ourselves whether we are doing enough to tackle gender stereotyping, and ensure opportunities are accessible, inclusive and available for all young people.

"The systemic change we need starts at home and in school, through beliefs, attitudes, and equal access and opportunity for girls. We must also design sport and physical activity around girls' needs and include their voices in shaping all aspects of participation."

The research comes as Youth Sport Trust prepares to support the launch of the Equal Sport Project, a new UK-wide sporting sector commitment to advancing equality in women and girls' sport.

For schools looking to tackle gender stereotypes in their own settings, Women in Sport's Teachers Resource: Creating Mini Allies - Women in Sport Charity offers helpful guidance for how educators can take action now.

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