

Sports Participation in schools boosts wellbeing and mental toughness, says new study.

Wednesday 29 November, 2023

New research shows sports participation in school is associated with higher levels of wellbeing for young people. It also shows that participation in sport is a significant predictor of self-belief and mental toughness and the continued promotion of school sport throughout a child's time at school, up to and including during exams, should be encouraged.

The survey of 5,481 young people aged 13-15 was undertaken by Manchester Metropolitan University, on behalf of the Youth Sport Trust (YST) and HMC – the Heads Conference.

Conducted across both state and independent schools, the results showed similar levels of correlation between wellbeing and sports participation in both. The research showed that the wellbeing benefits of sports participation can be gained for all students, regardless of the sector they are educated within.

Participation in sport was identified by using survey data to create a composite score reflecting the number of sports a child had participated in, their involvement in sports at school, and the perceived importance of sport at school.

The research found that:

- Greater sports participation in school is associated with **higher levels of wellbeing**.
- Sports participation is also a significant predictor of **self-belief and mental toughness**, key life skills for young people.
- Students in year 10 reported **lower participation in sport** than those in year 9, and also **lower levels of wellbeing, self-belief, and mental toughness**.
- The effects of mental toughness and self-efficacy on life satisfaction and happiness were greater for girls than boys.

Ali Oliver MBE, CEO at Youth Sport Trust said:

“This powerful new research clearly shows not just the importance of young people taking part in sport and physical activity at school, but crucially continuing to take part throughout exam season. We know that healthy and happy children learn better, and with mock exam season approaching for many young people, this research highlights the need for young people to remain engaged in sport throughout the school year.

In particular, more needs to be done to ensure that girls remain active throughout their school careers. We have seen both enjoyment and participation levels in PE drop in recent years and as this latest research shows, taking part in sport can play an important role in life satisfaction and happiness for girls.”

Simon Hyde, General Secretary of HMC, said;

“The research HMC and the Youth Sport Trust have published today is incredibly valuable to schools, parents and policymakers and shows the true value of sport and physical activity to our children. Physical activity is not only great for the wellbeing of young people today, but helps boost their self-belief and mental health.

We know that healthy children are more attentive and perform better in the classroom – that is why HMC schools put such an emphasis on the academic but also the co-curricular, extracurricular, pastoral and sporting aspects of their provision.”

Kevin Knibbs, Chair of the HMC Sports Committee and Headmaster, Hampton School

“These important research findings highlight the hugely beneficial role that sport is able to play in the lives of young people and its positive effects upon their wellbeing, self-esteem and resilience. Ensuring that pupils have plenty of active involvement in sport at school throughout the year - including and especially in the run-up to exams - helps them to maintain a healthy balance and navigate teenage life's pressures and demands.”

For further information and to read the full report entitled 'The benefits of sport participation and physical

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activity in schools' please visit our [website](#).

About the Youth Sport Trust

The Youth Sport Trust is a UK leading children's charity for improving young people's wellbeing through sport and play. It empowers young people and equips educators to transform lives. Founded in 1995, it works with around 20,000 schools and inspires Changemakers to build a sense of belonging. Its vision is to create a future where every child enjoys the life-changing benefits of play and sport. Visit the YST website for ideas, tips and information www.youthsporttrust.org

About HMC (The Heads' Conference)

[HMC \(The Heads' Conference\)](#) is a professional association of heads of the world's leading independent schools. HMC has over 300 member schools in the British Isles educating more than 270,000 children, and a further 50 international members. Our members lead schools that are distinguished by their excellence in sport, pastoral care, co-curricular provision and classroom teaching. Members of HMC have met annually in conference since the first meeting in 1869. HMC is a thriving, proactive Association of leading figures in school education. Visit <https://www.hmc.org.uk/> to learn more.

Research notes

Mental toughness is the ability to withstand and recover from adversity, and cope with the pressures of success and achievement. It's important as it provides a psychological advantage that enables pupils to, cope better than fellow pupils with the many demands of school. Also, to be more consistent and better than fellow pupils in remaining determined, focused, confident, and in control when under pressure.

Self-efficacy is the belief in one's capability to attain desired goals (eg go to college) and/or complete a task (eg. pass a test.) It is important because it reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behaviour, and social environment.

- The research was undertaken by Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), on behalf of the Youth Sport Trust (YST) and HMC (The Head's Conference).
- The project objectives were to assess the impact of participation in sports upon belonging and well-being among Year 9 and 10 secondary school students, and to scrutinise the role of hypothetically important factors to this relationship, namely mental toughness, and self-efficacy/self-belief.
- A total of 5481 pupils (2578 girls, 2727 boys, 83 preferred to self-describe, 93 preferred not to say) from 80 schools (61 private/independent, 19 state) took part in an online survey. There were 2,957 Year 9 pupils (age 13 – 14 years old), and 2,524 Year 10 pupils (age 14-15 years old).

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