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## Understanding the impact of Covid-19

January 2021

Explore the key factors influencing people's attitudes and behaviours towards physical activity during Covid-19.



## **This document will help you understand the current impact of Covid-19 for consumers and the sector.**

Accurately predicting the impact of such a complex, fast moving, unprecedented situation is almost impossible. However, it will help you to build understanding of the current position and then plan carefully to both mitigate the threats and seize any opportunities presented by the situation.

This update was released in January 2021 during the third lockdown period

Current restrictions

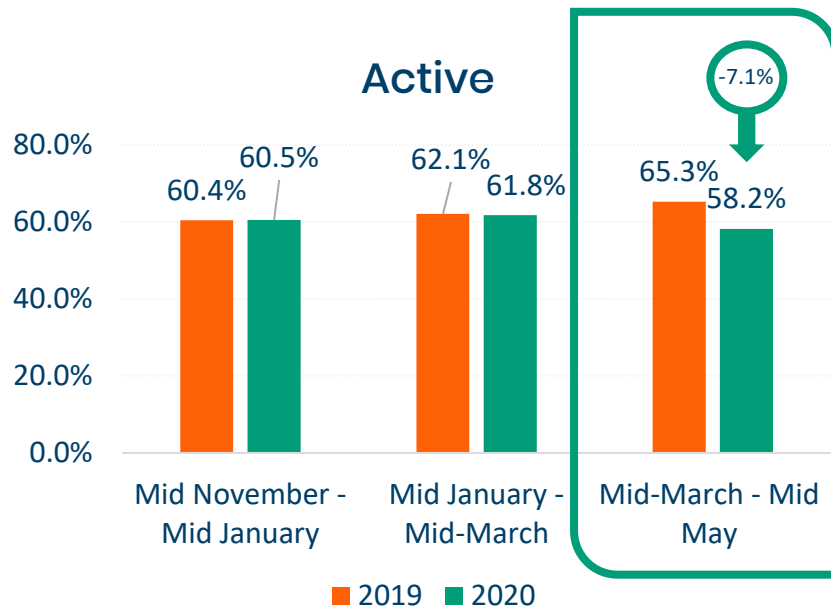
Activity levels



Trend data



## Activity levels - adults

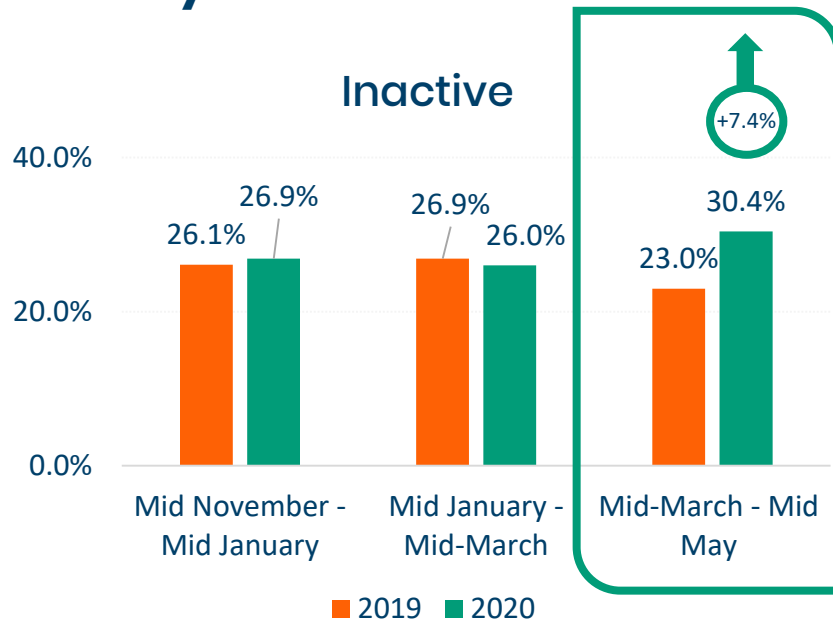


Activity levels for adults had been increasing until coronavirus restrictions were introduced in March. This led to unprecedented drops in activity during the first few weeks of full lockdown between mid-March and mid-May.

The proportion of the population classed as active dropped by 7.1%. This represents just over 3 million fewer active adults.



## Activity levels - adults



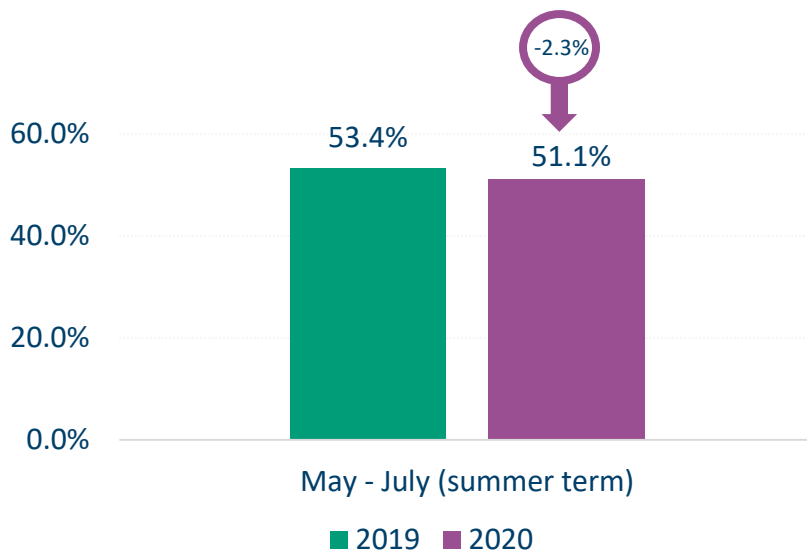
The proportion of adults classed as inactive increased by 7.4%. This represents over 3.4 million more inactive adults.

Some audiences found it harder to be active before Covid-19 and are finding it hard now. Inequalities between different groups have persisted since lockdown restrictions began in March. Those who have found it hardest to stay active include:

- People with long-term health conditions/disabilities
- People from lower socio-economic groups
- Women
- 16-34-year-olds
- 55 years and up
- Black adults, Asian adults and adults from other ethnic groups

## Activity levels – children and young people

Active (an average of 60 minutes a day)



The proportion of children and young people reporting that they were active during mid-May to late July (the summer term) fell by 2.3%, with just over 100,000 fewer children meeting the recommended level of activity compared to the same period 12 months earlier.

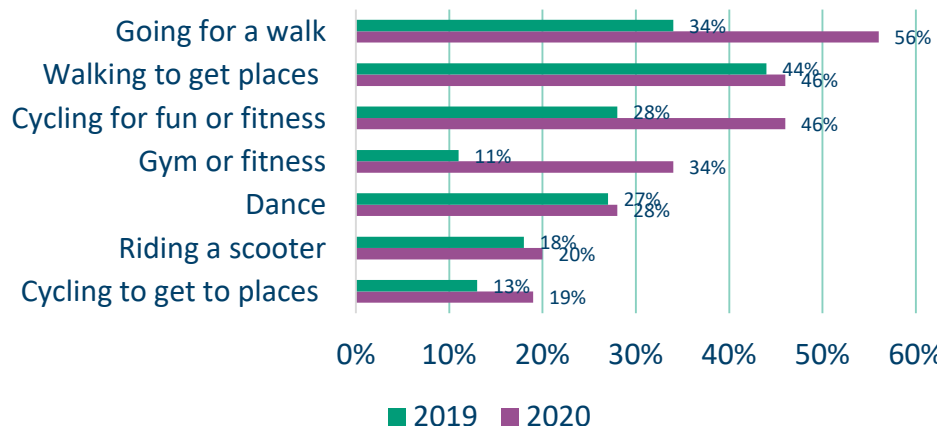
The impact was greater for some groups than others. Whilst all groups have been impacted in terms of activity levels, girls fared far better than boys, whilst those from Black and Mixed backgrounds saw noticeable drops in activity levels.



## Types of activity – children and young people

### Selected types of activity done in the last week\*

Years 1-11 (ages 5-16) May-July (the summer term)



Sporting activities saw a large decrease with over a million fewer children and young people (-16.3%) reporting they took part in swimming and team sports in the last week\* compared to the same period 12 months earlier.

Walking, cycling and fitness all saw large increases in the numbers reporting they took part in the last week compared to the same period 12 months earlier.

1.6m more children and young people went for a walk (+22%) or did fitness activities (+22.1%), whilst 1.4m more cycled for fun or fitness (+18.4%).

When looking at individual or groups of activities, we use the measure of whether they took part in the last week as we're looking to understand which activities contribute to overall activity levels.

Source: Active Lives Children and Young People Survey Coronavirus (Covid-19) Report. Mid-May-late July 2020. Published January 2021



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**A number of themes influencing and affecting physical activity behaviours for both children and young people and adults have been identified...**

Adults

Children and young people



## **Adults:** A number of themes influencing and affecting physical activity behaviours of adults have been identified...

Worry and anxiety impact motivation

Reduction in opportunity

Disproportionately affected financially

Lower levels of enjoyment and motivation

Greater burden of care

Onset of autumn/winter







## Worry and anxiety impact motivation

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As the cases of Covid-19 increased between September and December worry and anxiety about catching the virus continued. People are particularly worried about contracting the virus in indoor settings.

Some feel alone and anxious, this has caused levels of motivation to fluctuate. Continued lack of control and uncertainty linked to restrictions have heightened fear and people continue to rely on their own judgement to assess the risk they expose themselves to.

Levels of worry about exercising close to others and feeling safer exercising at home remain high. 64% of people agree they are worried about exercising close to other people and 62% of people agreeing they feel safer exercising at home rather than in public places (wave 14).

People are divided into those who do and do not feel comfortable using indoor facilities or being in close proximity to others.

Common barriers cited by those who have stopped using indoor facilities (when they were accessible) include:

- Sense of responsibility to reduce spread of Covid-19 infections in society
- Worries for their own health if high risk
- Distrust in others to maintain social distancing and follow venue rules

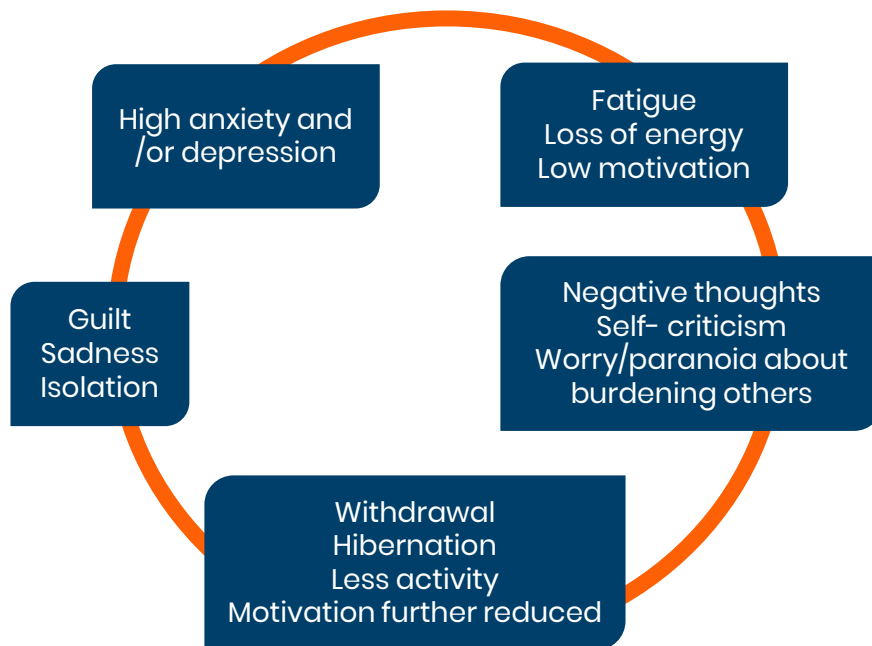
Looking ahead, we should expect that some people will return to activities and places they operate in as soon as they reopen, whilst others may not return immediately and will need on-going reassurance of safety precautions.

**“** *Running alone means that I am in control, for the most part, of being socially distant from others.* **”**  
38, Tier 2, Fairly Active



## Worry and anxiety impact motivation

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Restrictions and social disconnection have heightened this experience. At it's most severe, high anxiety creates a vicious cycle; leaving people unable to break out and find motivation.

Due to the high levels of anxiety, many people continue to seek reassurance that measures are in place to make it safe for them to participate or options are available which mean they can avoid being in close proximity to others.

“ I sometimes enter a bit of a shell. I know the benefits of getting out there, being social, getting moving, but I feel exposed doing so. I need other people sometimes to get motivated to do the activity but I can't take those steps to do it alone. ”  
Male, 29, LT depression/anxiety



## Disproportionately affected financially

### Reduces mental bandwidth and impacts spend on the sector (memberships, subscriptions etc.)

Economic uncertainty between July and September saw a record rise in redundancies of 181,000.

One of the hardest hit groups are young people (16–24-year-olds) with 174,000 fewer employed between July–September compared to the previous three months.

The original furlough scheme ended on 31 October 2020 and the government announced that people and businesses would be provided with additional financial support.

Most economists expect unemployment to continue to rise for the rest of the year. In a recent forecast, the Bank of England said that unemployment would most likely peak at 7.7% in April–June 2021.

As a result, we should expect to see a continued reduction on mental bandwidth to be physically active as a result of financial worry and anxiety, especially amongst younger adults (16–24-year-olds).

In addition, lack of disposable income may lead to a reduction in sports sector spend and could impact activities which cater for children and young people as well as adults.

Uncertain employment and financial circumstances mean that greater numbers of people will be looking for affordable and flexible opportunities to stay active. Fewer people will be in a position to make an ongoing financial commitment to participate.



## Greater burden of care

### Disruption to structured support and care reduce mental bandwidth, increase worry and anxiety.

The reopening of schools during September was welcomed and provided respite to carers of children.

However the closure of schools in January is likely to bring a new wave of worry and anxiety.

More than ever, people are seeking stability and control to balance the unpredictability. There are clear signs of lockdown fatigue and reduced headspace which is affecting people's motivation to be active.

People are more aware than ever of the need to look after their mental health and many are turning to physical activity and exercise.

There is an opportunity to dial up the present moment, highlight the positive mental and physical benefits of being active and support people to find ways to stay active which are easy to do i.e. friction is reduced and simple to perform i.e. people feel able/confident.

“ I generally felt busy with the new routine of the school run / work, trying to think ahead a bit more about cooking – so my thoughts on being active have gone on the back burner  
41, Tier 2, Fairly Active ”



## Reduction in opportunity

### Opportunity to be active narrows resulting in lower levels of enjoyment and motivation

As lockdown restrictions were re-introduced physical activity choices once again largely narrowed to walking, running, cycling, fitness (at home or outdoors) and active play.

People are only permitted to exercise in a public outdoor space with people they lived with, their support bubble or with one other person.

When people's usual activities are restricted, we want to give them alternative options. Encouraging them to switch to alternative activities such as walking, running and cycling or working out at home instead of at the gym.

“ *My own space is too small to exercise, and communal areas always have people in them, and I'd feel more relaxed doing them alone.* ”  
23, Tier 2, Inactive

“ *I can't have a game of football with my mates unless we are part of a team which is frustrating because we enjoy doing it socially which we can't.* ”  
26, Tier 2, Fairly Active



## Lower levels of enjoyment and motivation

### Opportunity to be active narrows resulting in lower levels of enjoyment and motivation

Some of us have managed to find opportunities to be active and are doing more local activities e.g. walks, runs and cycles or have created workout space at home.

For others a reduction in activity options has led to lower levels of activity, enjoyment and motivation as they miss the activities they previously did, lack accountability from having a regular routine and miss the social aspects which underpin enjoyment and motivation.

Reintroducing some of the social cues which were present earlier in the year could help motivate people e.g. connecting people who used to take part together to continue virtually.

When we asked 50 strangers to talk to us and one another about exercise for a week as part of a research project, we found they all supported and encouraged each other and it really motivated them to be more active.

“ I had good motivation at the start of lockdown when it was more of a novelty, as lockdown slowly went on, I felt much less motivated, it was hard to keep going. ”  
26, Tier 2, Fairly Active



## Onset of autumn/winter

### Less favourable weather reduces people's desire to be outdoors

Key differences between the restrictions in the spring in comparison to autumn/winter restrictions were the weather and darker days. As we saw in the first lockdown period, people displayed a continued appreciation for being in nature and its restorative properties to both physical and mental health.

Shorter days, a drop in temperatures and increased rainfall in October affected people's moods and motivations.

The turn of the season made people feel less motivated to leave the house and many migrated indoors.

Exercising indoors is one way people can continue to be active during this period. People are adopting coping techniques such as investing in warm or waterproof clothing and changing their routine so that they are being active earlier in the day when it is lighter.

“ *I try to remain optimistic but I have to admit that my optimism is being tested – the dark nights and cold weather does not inspire me and it is easy not to bother staying fit and active.* ”  
47, Tier 2, Fairly Active



## Trend data - adults

Throughout the pandemic we have on an ongoing and regular basis used a tracker to monitor physical activity attitudes and behaviours.

One of the questions used asks people to tell us 'In the past week, on how many days have you done a total of 30 minutes or more of activity, which was enough to raise your breathing rate?'

Using this question we have been able to track the percentage of people who say they have been physically active on 'most' (5+ days), 'some' (1-4 days) and 'none' (0-days).

During the pandemic the greatest proportion of people were been active on 'some' days, followed by 'most' days. We saw a greater proportion of people active on 'most' days during the first lockdown period (late-March-mid-May).

From mid-May, as restrictions eased over the summer and were reinforced during the autumn/winter, there has been an increase in people being active on 'some' days and a decrease in people being active on 'most' days.

Recently (mid-October and late-November) we saw the lowest reported figures of people being active on 'most' days to date. This indicates that some people are finding it harder to be active in the winter months whilst under restrictions.

Throughout the pandemic the proportion of people who were active on 0-days ('none') has followed a fairly flat trend.

However, the data suggests that groups such as people with long-term health conditions and/or illnesses and those aged 55+ are more likely to have done physical activity on 0 days (none).

It should be noted that this data **can't** be compared to Active Lives activity level data. The two surveys use different methods and tools for measuring physical activity, reflecting the different purpose and role of each.





## Children and young people: themes influencing and affecting physical activity behaviours of children and young people...

Enjoying 'the new normal'

Worries about the virus

Lack of access to usual spaces and places

Lower levels of confidence and competence

Parents and carers are a key driver of behaviour



## Enjoying the new normal

Although there were many barriers to being active in lockdown, enjoyment continued to be a key motivator to staying active.

The top two reasons for staying active in the first national lockdown were staying fit and healthy (46%) and because they enjoy it (43%).

This of course meant different things to different people but feeling a sense of achievement, getting outside, having fun and feeling good was all part of enjoying being active.

For some, the 'new normal' was an opportunity to do things differently.

This meant some children were enjoying being active more than usual – using the extra time to take ownership of what they did and try out new things in a way that felt safe, supported and free from pressure or judgement.

Teenage girls were more likely than others to report this increase, perhaps partly explaining why girls' activity levels held up so well (boys' activity levels fell by 6.4% year on year in the summer term, compared to an increase of 2.4% in girls' activity levels in the summer term compared to the previous year).

“ *I think being in lockdown has made you reflect on your health a bit, both mental and physical. You want to improve both of them, so I think that's a reason why I'd want to do more [exercise] in the future.*

Girl, Year 7-11



Source: Understanding the impact of Covid-19 on the physical literacy of children and young people. EVERFI EdComs. September 2020.

Source: Family Kids and Youth Insight panel. Survey questions September 2020. England Nat rep sample of 1028 children aged 7 – 16

Source: Children's experience of physical activity in lockdown. May 2020

Source: Active Lives Children and Young People survey Academic Year 19/20 Coronavirus report



## Worries about the virus

Some children are concerned about going for a walk or going in the garden for fear of spreading or catching the virus.

Many families have been faced with having to shield and, as a result, are unsure how to be active within the spaces of their own home. For families with disabled children requiring specific care, lockdown periods are incredibly challenging.

Over a quarter of children and young people told us that their own worries about the virus are preventing them from being active.

Whilst one in six say that their parents/carers are too worried about Coronavirus to let them leave the home.

Children from BAME backgrounds are nearly twice as likely to say their parents/carers are too worried about Coronavirus to let them leave home (27% vs 15%).

“ *We didn't go outside much because we have asthma so Mum didn't want us to.*

Girl, Year 1-6



“ *I am too scared to leave the house.*

Boy, school Year 9-11



Source: Understanding the impact of Covid-19 on the physical literacy of children and young people. EVERFI EdComs. September 2020.

Source: Family Kids and Youth Insight panel. Survey questions September 2020. England Nat rep sample of 1028 children aged 7-16

Source: Children's experience of physical activity in lockdown.. May 2020



## Lack of access to usual spaces and places

Community sport provision plays a critical role in keeping children and young people active and the ongoing closure of so much provision is likely to be impacting physical activity behaviours.

Routine and structure are missed by children during lockdown periods and, when removed they recognise the benefits it has on their everyday lives.

During the first lockdown period 36% of children and young people told us that their sport and physical activity was different to normal because their usual clubs, centres, gyms and/or classes were closed.

In September, young people told us that the number one reason they were less active than usual was because their usual sports clubs/exercise classes/sessions weren't running.

When restrictions eased in 2020, using spaces (e.g. football pitches and tennis courts) or starting sessions again allowed children to generate further structure and re-establish old routines and habits.

During the restrictions, clubs and classes with virtual offers have helped to create routine and structures, a key driver for children.

Some children have told us that they would like more opportunities to socialise and make connections from these offers as the focus on skills can become repetitive.

“ *When I was down at the yard I was by myself which was demotivating... usually me and my friends would push each other to be more active.*

Girl, school Year 9-11





## Parents and carers are a key driver of behaviour

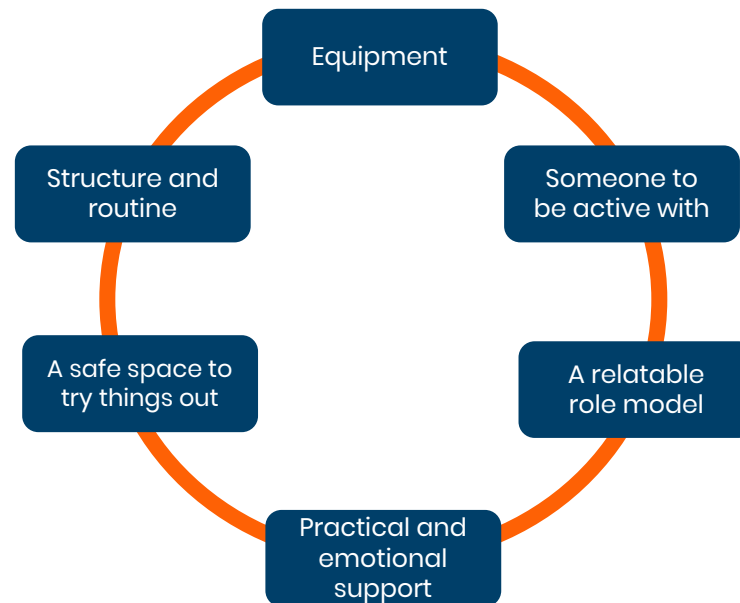
Family has a major influence on participation. There are strong associations between the attitudes and behaviours of parents/carers and those of their children.

71% of children told us that they were active with their parents/carers in the first lockdown. They have played a key role in providing someone for them to play with.

The more active a parent/carer is, the more active their children are. The more positive a parent/carer feels towards sport/activity, the more likely their child(ren) are to be active.

If a parent/carer is more active than usual, so is their child.

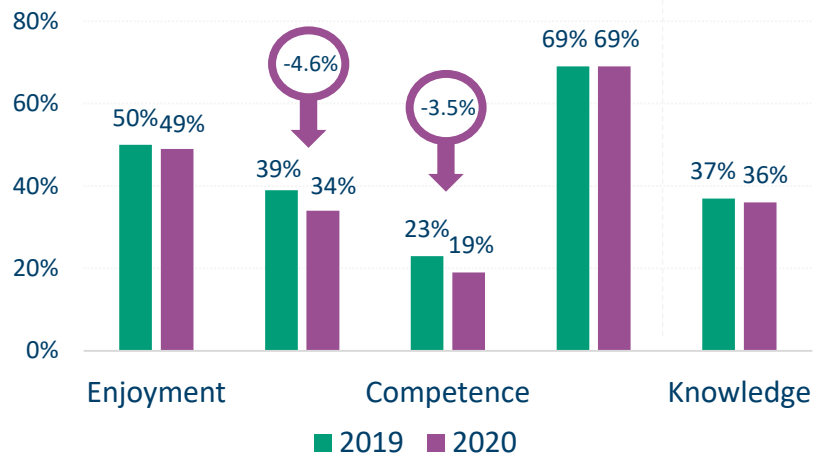
### Parents and carers drive activity in many ways





## Lower levels of confidence and competence

Positive attitudes towards sport and physical activity (proportion who strongly agree)  
May-July (summer term)



We know that there is an established relationship between feeling positive about taking part in sport and physical activity and doing so.

During the mid-May and late-July period we saw overall drops in both those feeling confident when taking part and finding sport easy (competence) compared to 12 months earlier.

It is likely that as restrictions eased during this period that some children felt less confident as they returned to activities they'd not been able to do for some time, if they had lost some skills, they might have felt less competent.

The current set of lockdown restrictions could further impact levels of confidence, competence and in the case of some groups; boys, those from the least affluent families, those in Years 5 and 6 and Black children and young people, enjoyment.

As such, a focus on fun and enjoyment is recommended when restrictions ease and activities come back on line.



## Tools and resources

Autumn/winter toolkit

[www.sportengland.org/how-we-can-help/coronavirus/return-play/autumn-and-winter-activity-toolkit](http://www.sportengland.org/how-we-can-help/coronavirus/return-play/autumn-and-winter-activity-toolkit)

Covid-19 physical activity tracker and dashboard

[www.sportengland.org/know-your-audience/demographic-knowledge/coronavirus?section=research](http://www.sportengland.org/know-your-audience/demographic-knowledge/coronavirus?section=research)

Active Lives Adult May 19/20

[www.sportengland.org/news/activity-habits-early-weeks-lockdown-revealed](http://www.sportengland.org/news/activity-habits-early-weeks-lockdown-revealed)

Active Lives Children and Young People  
Academic year 19/20

<https://www.sportengland.org/news/childrens-activity-levels-down-many-embrace-new-opportunities>



## Sources

### 1. Active Lives Adult May 19 /20. Published October 2020.

#### 2.Active Lives Adult May 19/20

Active Lives Adult (established November 2015), provides a world-leading approach to gathering data on how adults aged 16 and over in England engage with sport and physical activity.

The overall sample size is c.175,000 people in each survey. Our minimum annual sample size for each English local authority (excluding the City of London and Isles of Scilly) is 500, though some key areas involve larger samples.

surveys to track physical activity attitudes and behaviours

### 3. Active Lives Children and Young People Survey Coronavirus (Covid-19) Report. Mid-May-late July 2020. Published January 2021

Our Active Lives Children and Young People Survey, conducted by Ipsos MORI, gives the most comprehensive overview of the sport and physical activity habits of children in England.

It looks at the number of children taking part in a wide range of sport and physical activities (ranging from dance and scooting to active play and team sports) at moderate intensity.

The report's based on responses from, and on behalf of, more

than 100,000 children aged 5-16 in England during the academic year 2019/2020, making it the largest study of its kind in the world

### 4 Physical Attitudes and Behaviours Survey, Savanta ComRes, Wave 14. Carried out over 27.11.2020 – 30.11.2020. c.2,000 16+ adults

During the Coronavirus pandemic we commissioned an ongoing tracker to monitor physical activity behaviours and attitudes in the periods between Active Lives Survey releases. This provides a regular source of insight about the continuing impact of the pandemic which we share with the sector to inform our collective response.

Results for each wave come from interviews with 2,000 adults (16+), with data weighted to be representative of the population. It measures overall physical activity levels using a single validated question that asks how many days in the past week respondents achieved 30 minutes or more of moderate physical activity.





## Sources

### 5 Join the Movement Community. Wave 2 Report. 19.10.2020–26.10.2020

Online community exploring what has changed in people's experiences of physical activity, exercise and sport. Sample of 56 participants over five days.

### 6. RDSi, We Are Undefeatable Community and depth interviews. 25.11.2020

Online community and individual depth interviews to understand feelings and emotional temperature re Covid-19.

### 7. Unemployment rate. BBC, 10.11.2020. Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-52660591>

### 8. Understanding the impact of Covid-19 on the physical literacy of children and young people. EVERFI EdComs. September 2020

### 9. Family Kids and Youth Insight panel. Survey questions September 2020. England Nat rep sample of 1028 children aged 7–16

### 10. Children's experience of physical activity in lockdown. May 2020

### 11. Childwise Buzz Omnibus. May 2020

### Note to reader:

**Active Lives Adult and the Savanta ComRes Tracker use different methods and tools for measuring physical activity, reflecting the different purpose and role of each. Data cannot be directly compared.**

Use Active Lives Adult data if you need the most detailed and authoritative account of physical activity across England.

Use the Savanta ComRes Tracker if you want the latest insight on how behaviours and attitudes are changing during the Coronavirus pandemic.



## Restrictions timeline (1 of 3)

### National lockdown

(Mid-March-Mid-May 2020)

People were instructed to stay at home.

One form of exercise was permitted a day either alone or with members of your household e.g., run, walk, cycle or fitness.

Parks, leisure centres and gyms were closed.

### Easing of restrictions

(Mid-May-Mid September 2020)

A gradual phased lifting of restrictions including sport and physical activity including some domestic elite sport.

Nurseries and primary schools reopened for children in reception, Year 1 and Year 6 in June.

By mid-July indoor pools, gyms and leisure centres reopened.

### Reinforcing of restrictions

(Mid-September 2020-Early January 2021)

Expanded over the following pages



## Restrictions timeline (2 of 3)

### Reinforcing of restrictions continued (Mid-September 2020–Early January 2021)

#### 14 September: Rule of six introduced

New laws prohibited social gatherings of more than six people (apart from a set of limited exemptions).

#### 14 October: Three-tier system introduced

A three-tier system with increasing restrictions depending on the designated alert level.

Whilst tiers one and two did not alter which physical activities, sports and exercise could take place compared to the 'rule of six' period, in some tier three locations gyms and leisure centres were closed.

#### 5 November: National lockdown

England entered a second national lockdown. During this period people were asked to stay at home, avoid meeting people they do not live with and close certain business (except for specific purposes).

The restrictions significantly reduced which activities people could take part in, where and with who. Gyms, leisure centres and other sports facilities closed.

Where people could be active was largely limited to at home or outside in their local area, and the types of activities people could participate in narrowed to activities such as: walking, running, cycling, fitness (online and offline), active play (at home or in local environments) and playgrounds



## Restrictions Timeline (3 of 3)

### Reinforcing of restrictions continued (Mid-September 2020–Early January 2021)

#### 2 December: Three-tier system introduced

A three-tier system was introduced on 2 December. There were differences between this system and the previous three-tier system introduced in October 2020.

Most of the country entered tiers two and three. Organised outdoor sport and physical activity and exercises classes were permitted.

Indoor sports/activities were permitted at tiers one and two with some parameters. At all tiers there were exceptions for indoor disability sport, sport for educational purposes and supervised sport and physical activity for under-18s

#### 20 December: Four-tier system

The introduction of a fourth tier brought more stringent measures and 'stay at home' instruction for those in tier four. Gyms and indoor leisure closed and organised activity ceased (apart from a set of limited exemptions).

#### National lockdown (Early January 2021–Present)

England entered a third national lockdown. During this period people were asked to stay at home.

People could exercise in a public outdoor space by themselves, with people they live with, with their support bubble or, when on their own, with one other person from another household.