

Teens and sport

What the research shows

Fewer than one in three Australians today are getting enough physical activity to benefit their health. Long-term habits are often formed in childhood and adolescence. By focusing on young people we can capitalise on the opportunities for intervention before unhealthy behaviours are established.

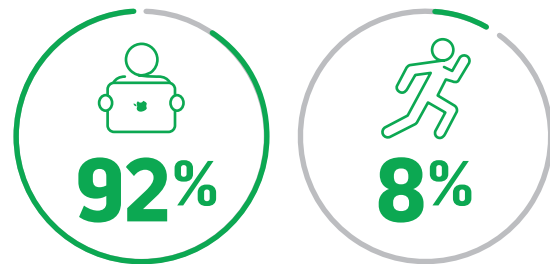
Young people (12–17 years): a period of massive change

Young people aged 12 to 17 years go through major transitions—from primary school to secondary school, and from childhood to adulthood. They experience significant physical, mental, social and intellectual changes, in addition to becoming increasingly independent.¹

During this period, young people spend their time across a range of activities including attending school, studying, part-time work, socialising, and other pursuits such as learning to drive. Some are physically active outside school, in gyms and sporting clubs, and in non-organised activities and places such as in parks and open spaces.

Not all 12–17 year olds are the same in their levels of physical activity and sport participation. As many adolescents become older, their lives become more complicated, with competing demands. Sport often becomes more stressful and as result a lot of young people become less active. Less active adolescents are typically far less confident that they have the skills required to play a sport. Some of these young people feel positively towards sport, but drop out or don't participate as regularly as they would like, either because of a lack of opportunity or because sport does not meet their needs and expectations.

The state of play



Nine out of ten (92%) Australian 12–17 year-olds DO NOT meet the Australian Physical Activity guidelines of 60 minutes of physical activity every day.² As children age, they tend to engage in less physical activity and more sedentary screen-based activity.³

Figure 1 from *The Australian Health Survey (2011–2012)* shows:

- For 5–8 year olds the ratio of physical activity to screen-based activity was almost 1:1, with more than 100 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous physical activity (not including active transport) and less than 100 minutes of screen-based activity.
- For 15–17 year olds, the ratio was almost 1:5, with fewer than 40 minutes of physical activity per day and more than 180 minutes of screen-based activity.

Figure 1: Average minutes per day spent in physical activity and sedentary screen-based activity, 2011–2012

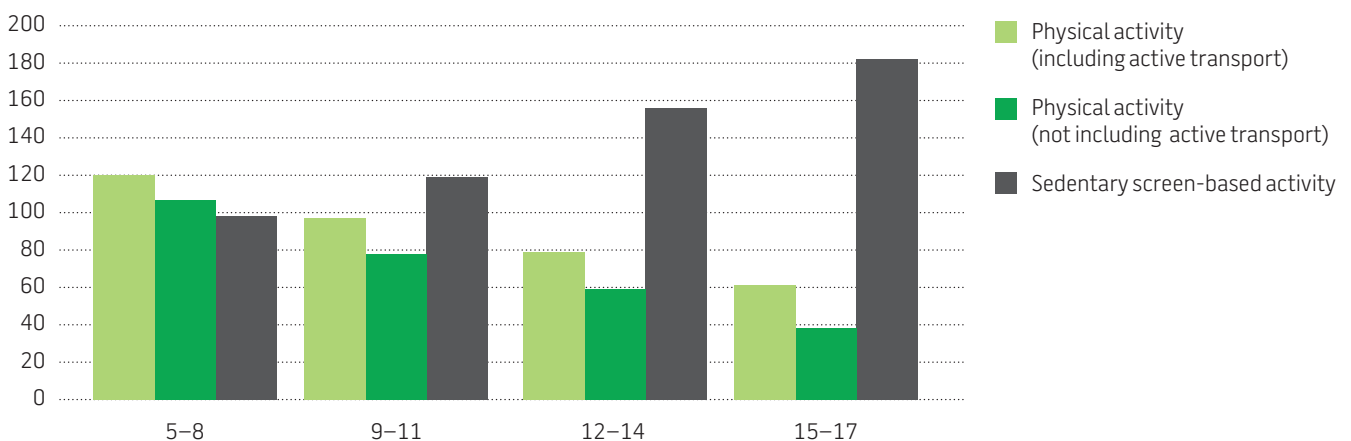
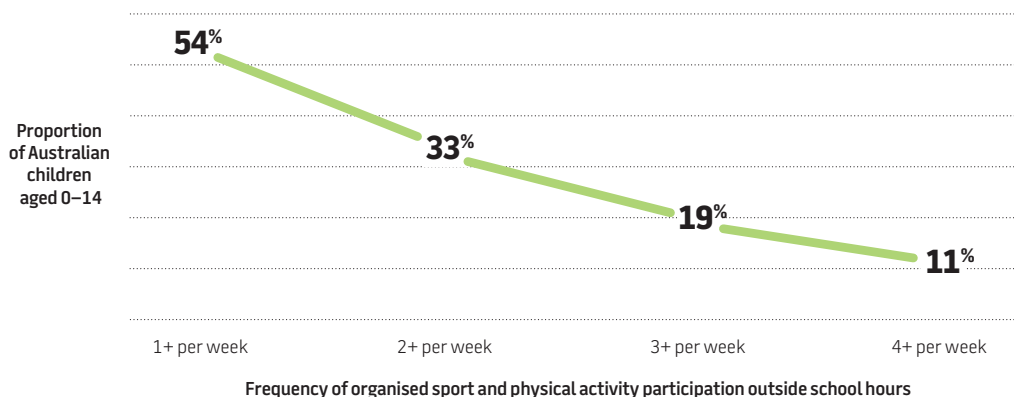


Figure 2: Frequency and proportion of organised sport and physical activity participation outside school hours among Australian children, aged 0–14 (2015–2016)



Almost half of children (46%) aged 0 to 14 years of age were not participating in sport at least once per week.

As illustrated in Figure 2 (Australian Sports Commission’s AusPlay data from 2016⁴), although half of all children (54%) aged 0 to 14 years were active at least once per week through organised sport or physical activity outside school hours:

- only one in three (33%) children aged 0 to 14 years were active at least twice per week
- fewer than one in five (19%) were active at least three times per week
- only one in 10 (11%) were active at least four times per week.

Participation in sport also halves during adolescence, dropping suddenly at age 15.⁵

The decrease in physical activity and increase in screen time, and the lack of frequency of organised sport and physical activity among children are concerning from a public health perspective.

But they also indicate that the potential market for social sport among less active 12–17 year olds is large.

Stressful sport: how can we change it?

For some people, sport is a relief from stress and an escape for their everyday routine. But for others, sport is perceived as stressful and can create anxiety.

A recent Australian Sports Commission (ASC) project on youth sport participation found that from the age of around 14, sport can become more stressful, which can cause young people to disengage or retreat from sport altogether.⁶ The study found that there are four main reasons why sport becomes more stressful for many adolescents and young adults.

1. **As children get older, sport increasingly becomes less about what motivates them** and more about what are considered barriers. Older adolescents are more motivated by fitness, social experiences and skill development, while the sport available to older adolescents becomes more about ability, skill display and competition. In essence, there is a disconnect between what 12–17 year olds want from sport, especially those who are less active, and what the sport experience is providing.

Recommended approach: In the design and development of your social sport product, try to ensure that the core activities are aligned with what motivates less active 12–17 year olds, such as fitness, social experiences and skill development. This will help with recruitment and retention.

2. **Sport requires a greater commitment of time, financial resources and family support**, some of which are scarce as children get older. The ASC study found that young people were often acutely aware of the costs of sport, as well as associated travel and equipment, and as a result did not ask to play or opted out.

Recommended approach: Try to ensure that activities are time-compressed and costs are kept as low as possible, or develop a flexible pricing schedule for different groups/markets/areas.

3. **Places on teams and competitive opportunities become more limited** as sport becomes more serious, which places pressure on adolescents to perform, at a time when their bodies are changing rapidly and they are becoming more aware of their peers’ perceptions of them.

Recommended approach: Try to ensure that the product and activities are not predicated on competition, thereby emphasising achievement, and in turn meaning that only the best get selected. Rather, communicate in both the marketing and through the design of the product that it is truly inclusive, and there is no pressure to perform.

4. **Sport is competing for time with adolescents’ other interests and commitments**, such as increasing academic responsibility, employment, social activities, electronic device/screen time and extra-curricular activities. In addition, as children get older, they become more independent and begin to make their own choices about how to spend their time.

Recommended approach: This might be addressed by emphasising social sport as a stress relief, which in turn improves academic performance by providing an environment for socialising among existing friendship groups; or by more clearly articulating the benefits of sport in terms of what is important to 12–17 year olds.

Understanding young people: barriers and motivations

Sport is effective at engaging those children and adolescents who have a long history of participation, and who are motivated by what traditional sport offers them. But there are many children and adolescents who do not participate and for whom there are barriers to sport participation. Different approaches are required to engage these groups.

The ASC youth sport participation project identified four groups of adolescents who had disengaged from sport, each of which were experiencing specific barriers. Three of these groups are appropriate to consider in designing social sport programs to appeal to 12–17 year olds.

It is important to acknowledge that members of this age group do not all perceive or experience sport in the same way.

A product that works for one set of 12–17 year olds because of their barriers and motivations may not work for another.

These three disengaged groups are not exhaustive, but provide a guide to the barriers and motivations experienced by three core groups – those who would like to participate, but don't have the opportunity; those who have never connected with sport; and those who have dropped out of sport.

GROUP 1



Adolescents who would like to participate in sport but are unable to due to environmental barriers

These adolescents experience environmental barriers in their local community, which might be related to the lack of facilities or sporting options in a specific location, or the distance adolescents have to travel to get access to programs and activities. This group is particularly prevalent in outer suburban, regional and rural areas, where the lack of opportunity is often compounded by a lack of family support for transport and the costs associated with sport participation.

Barriers:

- Lack of deliverers, facilities and equipment
- Travel
- Family support (fees and transport)

Motivations:

- A new interest or hobby
- Get active
- Learn new skills
- Establish and reinforce social connections.

GROUP 2



Adolescents who may have never connected with sport and do not currently participate

These adolescents can be considered long-term disengaged, having either not connected with sport or disengaged at a young age. This disengagement is likely due to lack of interest, ability or motivation, or to a past negative experience with sport. It might also be because the adolescent or their family values academic achievement above all else, or because the family does not support participation in sport, particularly for girls.

Barriers:

- Lack of interest, confidence, fitness or skill
- Academic results and study prioritised
- Girls' participation not supported within the family

Motivations:

- Try new or alternative sports
- Spend time with friends
- Improve fitness.

GROUP 3



Adolescents who have dropped out of sport

These adolescents once played sport, particularly when it was compulsory in primary school or the early years of high school. They may have enjoyed sport, but when sport became optional they dropped out, for a wide range of reasons, including that sport became too competitive and now doesn't align with their motivations, or that the increased pressure on their time from school work, employment, socialising and other commitments meant that sport was de-prioritised.

Barriers:

- Time pressures
- Sport has become competitive
- Sport is too much of a commitment
- Might have been injured and struggled to return
- Girls affected by gender stereotypes and social norms

Motivations:

- Fitness
- Learn new skills (e.g. sport related, or other, such as leadership or teamwork)
- Stress relief
- Challenge of competition without commitment/intensity.





Design and delivery principles

In designing and delivering a sport program for the less active 12–17 year old market, consider these principles:


Deliverers are important

<p>A deliverer to participant ratio of 1:15 for less active and low skilled groups.</p> 	<p>Use and train deliverers who are empathetic, confident, good communicators, fun and engaging.</p> 
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Tailor the program

<p>Session lengths of 50–70 minutes.</p> 	<p>Use a fun game-based format rather than drills.</p> 
<p>Consider the pace of activities and sessions. Provide challenges and opportunities for development, but avoid the risk of failure and humiliation among low-confidence participants.</p> 	<p>Ensure that the competitive activities or sessions are inclusive and do not alienate less active or low-confidence participants. Focus the competition on personal achievements and building confidence.</p>
<p>Try modified games or modified versions of sports.</p>	<p>Allow young people to co-design and be involved in shaping their own experiences.</p> 

Be social and inclusive

<p>Group participants by skill level and/or gender in order to promote inclusion and engagement.</p> 	<p>Make positive group engagement and social interaction a priority. For less active adolescents, the way in which the session or activity operates from a social or inclusion perspective is just as, if not more, important than the sport or physical activity taking place.</p>
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Make it a great experience

<p>Focus on critical interaction points, such as the marketing approach, registration process, managing mistakes and how you welcome and invite people back.</p>	
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References

- ¹ VicHealth 2017, *Victorians' physical activity across life stages*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.
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- ⁵ VicHealth, 2016, *Sport participation in Victoria, 2015 Research summary*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.
- ⁶ Australian Sports Commission 2017, *Sporting Schools Youth Participation Research Project* (Retrieved January 2018. www.sportingschools.gov.au/about/research)



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