

A young girl with blonde hair in a ponytail, wearing sunglasses, a grey t-shirt, and dark leggings with a white zig-zag pattern, is running across a green field. She is captured in a side profile, moving from left to right. The background shows a line of trees under a clear sky.

Children's experience of physical activity in lockdown

Insight July 2020

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● Introduction

Welcome to our latest research exploring the picture of physical activity behaviours and attitudes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This report focuses specifically on children and young people aged 7-16 who were surveyed by CHILDWISE during May 2020, when the majority of COVID-19 restrictions were in place¹.

The survey explores the sport and physical activity being undertaken by children and young people during lockdown, the extent to which this differs from pre-COVID-19 behaviour and the reasons behind any changes.

Not surprisingly, the findings reveal significant disruption for all children, and some interesting differences when analysed by various demographic characteristics. These differences are guiding lines of enquiry for follow up research with specific groups of children and young people.



Lisa O'Keefe
Insight Director

● Foreword

This report enhances our understanding of how hard it has been for the majority of children and young people to be active during the lockdown.

It also serves us with a stark reminder, that we must take-action collectively if we are to reverse the decline in activity levels highlighted in this report and address the inequalities faced by some groups of children and young people in England.

We need to ensure all young people have the space, or a place, to be active – whether that be dedicated sports facilities, community spaces or parks and playgrounds.

Given the increased pressure on schools to make space for social distancing, we hope schools set aside the space for physical activity and dedicate time for children and young people to take part in Physical Education, school sport, physical activity and play.

Equally, we need to recognise that some children and young people will be anxious about returning to sport or activity, so we must reassure them by making sessions safe and enjoyable.

There is an opportunity to learn from some of the more promising developments in these findings. We see some children enjoying being active more than usual, getting active with their family and many parents and carers making a positive difference to how often their children take part.

Together, let's take this report and build on the green shoots we see, to ensure that all children and young people are able to enjoy the benefits that come from being active.

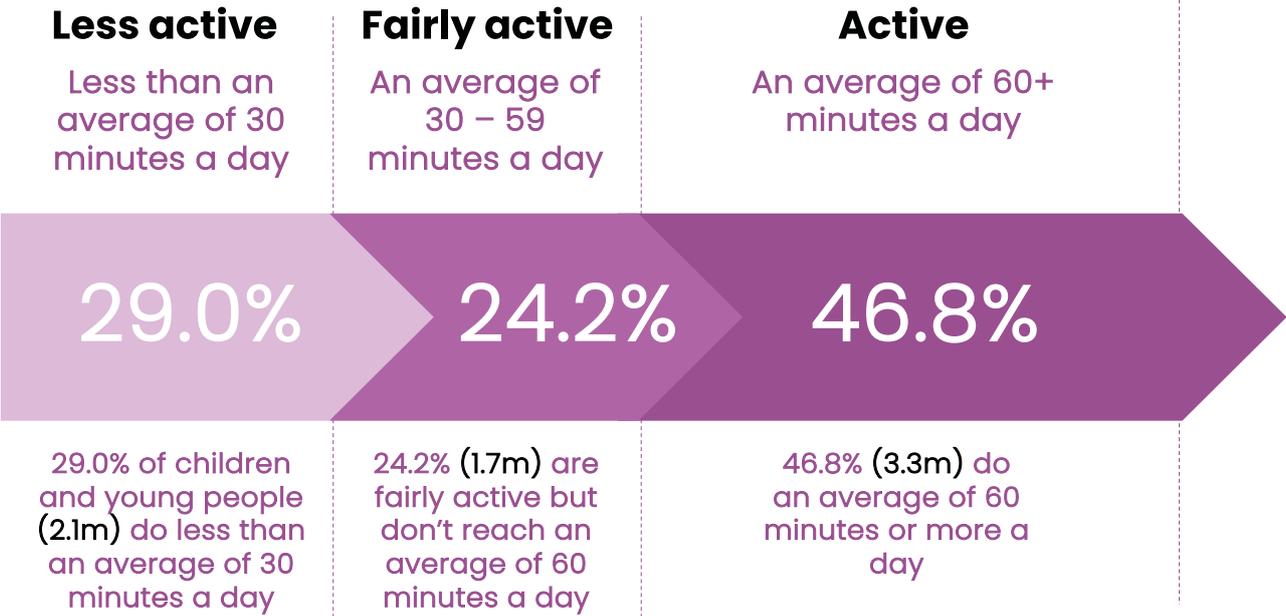


Jayne Molyneux
Director Children and Young People

● Life before Covid-19

Prior to Covid-19, the Active Lives Children and Young People survey showed that 46.8% of children and young people aged 5-16 years (3.3 million) were meeting the Chief Medical Officer guidelines of taking part in sport and physical activity for an average of 60 minutes or more every day. Meanwhile 29.0% (2.1m) were doing less than an average of 30 minutes a day.

Activity levels of children and young people aged 5-16, academic year 2018/2019



● Physical literacy

Physical literacyⁱⁱ, as defined by the International Physical Literacy Association, has four elements –motivation (measured through enjoyment), confidence, competence and knowledge and understanding. The more elements present, the higher the levels of reported happiness, resilience and social trust and the more active a child or young person is likely to be.



Competence



Understanding



Enjoyment



Confidence

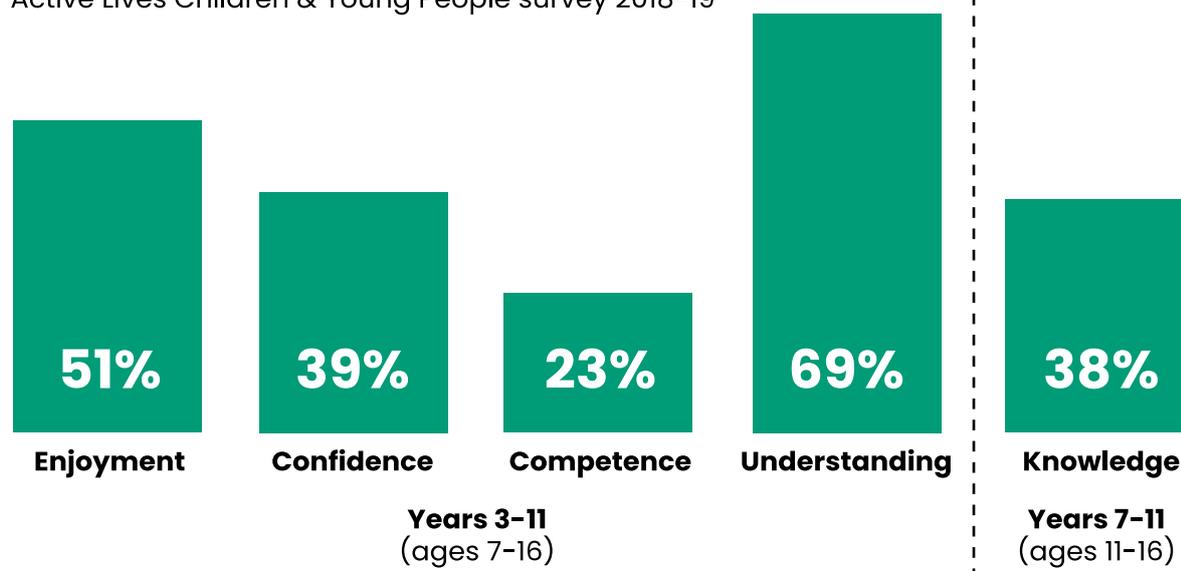


Knowledge

When it comes to physical literacy, although the majority of children and young people feel they understand why exercise and sport is good for them, just 51% strongly agree that they enjoy taking part (which we know is the biggest driver to get children and young people active).

Attitudes towards sports and physical activity (proportion who strongly agree)

Active Lives Children & Young People survey 2018-19



Before the Covid-19 pandemic, we saw significant inequalities within activity levels and physical literacy. Girls, less affluent children, children of Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds (BAME)ⁱⁱⁱ and those with a disability are all less likely to be active and physically literate than others¹.

We acknowledge the term BAME is inadequate for describing such a large and varied population and will continue to use alternatives where research sample size allows.

¹ Active Lives Child survey 2018/2019

ⁱⁱⁱ Definitions of ethnic group: In Active Lives Child survey we have the sample size to look at the following ethnic groups: White British; White other; Asian; Black; Mixed; Other. The CHILDWISE omnibus breaks ethnic groups down by White and BAME. We will be using qualitative, mixed methods research to explore the differences in ethnicity in more detail.

● Life in lockdown

Lockdown has been massively disruptive to children and young people



Widespread closure of spaces and places:

- Schools
- Playgrounds
- Leisure centres
- Gyms
- Pitches
- Courts

Many of the most prevalent activities for these ages² vastly limited:

- Team sports
- Gymnastics
- Trampolining
- Swimming
- Walking to get to school
- Gym/fitness
- Cheerleading
- Racket sports



² Active Lives Child survey 2018/2019

● Activity levels are lower in lockdown

Fortunately, the majority of children are doing something to stay active (93%) but the amount of activity they are doing seems to have fallen under lockdown³.

According to parents/carers^{iv}:

Just **19% of children** under 16 were doing an hour or more of physical activity (meeting CMO guidelines) on a typical day*.



And around **43% of children** under the age of 16 were reported to have been doing less than half an hour of physical activity a day.



Most worryingly, around 1 in 14 (7%) children aged 7 – 16 said they are doing nothing to stay active in lockdown.

³ Using Active Lives Child data to compare amount of daily activity with what parents/carers tell us in Savanta ComRes survey.

* The % of children doing an hour or more a day according to their parents fell to 14% on the last Savanta ComRes survey wave, 19 – 22 June. We can speculate this is as restrictions have lifted (shops are open, more opportunities to socialise, more adults back at work, more but not all children back at school), there are more choices on offer.

● Behaviour change

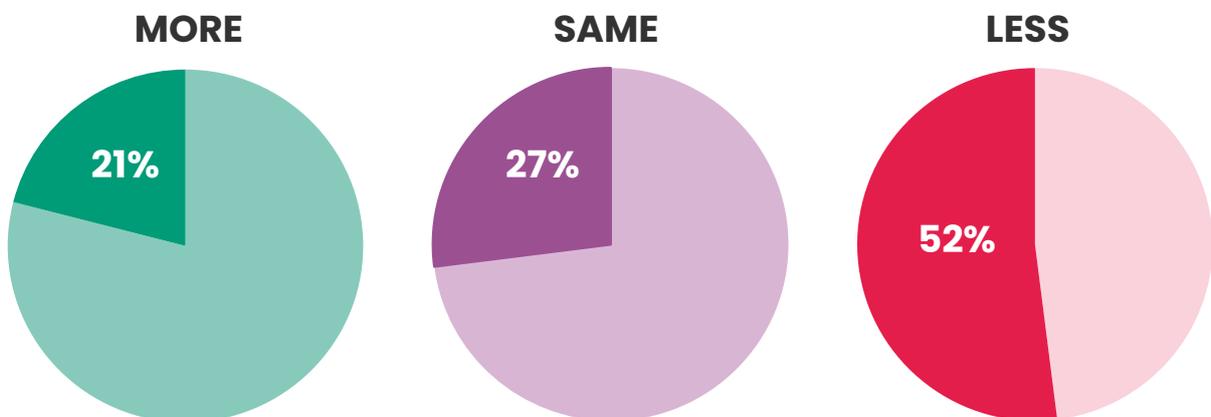
The lockdown has led to unprecedented behavioural change:

- Just 16% say “[physical activity in lockdown is] not that different to what I usually do”
- 21% say they are being more physically active with their family than usual
- Three in ten say they are being less physically active than usual (31%)
- While just one in eight say they are being more physically active than usual (13%).

The majority of responses (60% of all responses) to the question ‘how is this [physical activity in lockdown] different to what you usually do, referred to the amount of physical activity being different to usual.

Looking at those who said who said more/less/same as usual, the majority are doing less than usual:

How is this different to what you usually do?



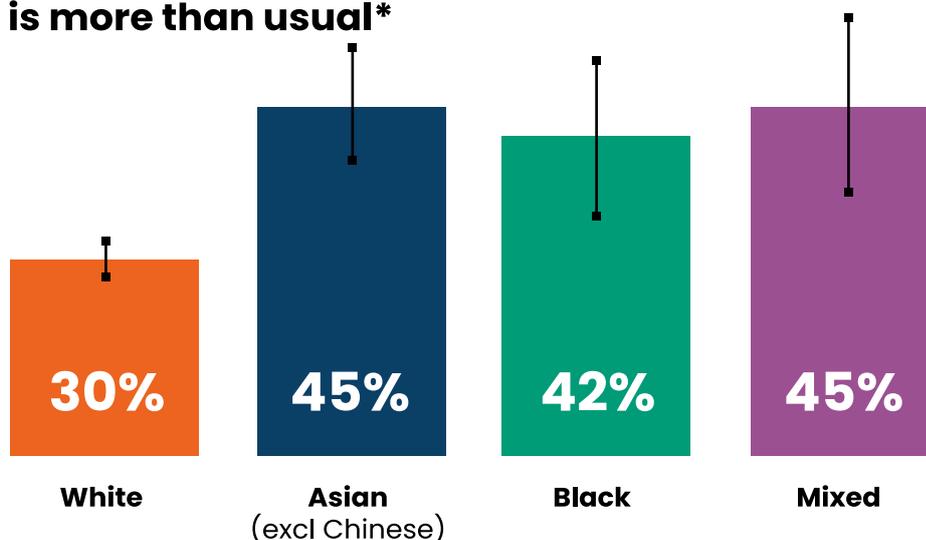
● Familiar inequalities

There are familiar inequalities in participation.

Sadly, we see some of the usual inequalities in participation under lockdown, with children from less affluent backgrounds, older children and children from a Black and minority ethnic background all more likely to be doing less than others:

- According to their parents/carers, children from less affluent families are more likely to have done nothing (13%) compared to those from more affluent backgrounds (6%)
- Secondary age children (9%) are more likely to say they're doing nothing to stay active during lockdown than primary age children (5%)
- Interestingly, children from Asian (excluding Chinese), Mixed and Black backgrounds are more likely than white children to be doing more physical activity than usual, according to their parents/carers⁶.

Average daily time spent doing physical activity is more than usual*

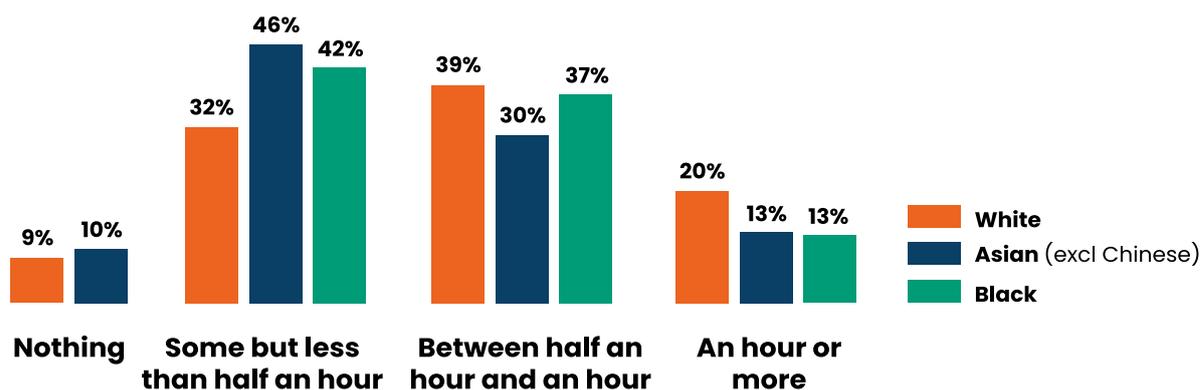


* According to parents/carers, Savanta ComRes Covid-19 activity tracker wave 6, 8th to 11th May 2020.

⁶ Those from Asian (excluding Chinese), black and mixed backgrounds are all more likely to have done more than before lockdown compared to those who are white - 30% of those from white backgrounds, 45% from Asian (excluding Chinese) backgrounds and 42% from Black backgrounds from Savanta ComRes Covid-19 physical activity tracker.

However, children from a BAME background are also twice as likely as children from a white background to say they are not doing any exercise, sport or physical activity in lockdown (12% vs 6%), and parent/carer data shows they are less likely to have done an hour or more of sport and physical activity on a typical day (13%) compared to those from white backgrounds (20%)⁷.

Amount of physical activity and exercise each child does on a typical day



From what we can tell, despite all the restrictions, children from a BAME background are doing more activity than before lockdown but it is not enough to meet recommended guidelines.

Girls are also typically under-represented in sport and physical activity participation⁸ but lockdown seems to be making a positive difference to their behaviour. We do not have data on the amount of time spent on physical activity by gender^v but according to our survey, girls are not only more likely to say they are being more active under lockdown (16% vs 11%), they are also less likely to say they are being less active than usual (26% compared to 37% of boys). As we have seen above, this doesn't necessarily mean they are now meeting CMO guidelines but it is worth asking ourselves:

What is it about physical activity in lockdown that enables girls to be active more than boys and, for some girls, more than usual?

● Barriers to being active

Barriers to being active are felt more keenly by some.

Amongst those that say that the sport/exercise/physical activity they are currently doing is different to normal^{vi}, the barriers are either related to lack of access to their usual space or place, or concerns about the virus.

Lack of access to their usual space or place

- More than one in three say this is because their usual clubs / leisure centres / gyms / classes are closed (36%)
- and/or that their local playground / skate park / pitch or court is closed (24%)

Concerns about the virus

- One in six say that their parents / carers are too worried about Coronavirus to let them leave home (16%)*
- One in seven are too worried about it themselves to leave home (14%).

“I’m scared to leave the house”

Boy, school year 9 – 11

* 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%).

⁷ and more likely to have done some but less than half an hour (46% Asian excluding Chinese, 42% Black, 32% white), according to their parents/carers, data taken from Savanta ComRes survey

⁸ 51% of boys are active compared to 43% of girls, Active Lives Child Survey 2018/2019

● Impact of school closure

Not going to school makes it harder for some children to stay active.

The absence of school provision as a result of Covid-19 restrictions is affecting children and young people's engagement with sport and activity:

- Amongst those that say that the sport and exercise they are currently doing is different to normal, over a third (36%) say they don't have as much chance to be physically active as they are not at school
- Of those who said they **aren't doing any** sport or exercise in lockdown, the data indicates that around 1/5 of those say they are "not going to school so they have less chance to be active"⁹

We know that teen girls, less affluent children and those from Black and Asian backgrounds rely more than others on 'at school' provision to be active in their everyday lives¹⁰. There are signs that this is also an issue in lockdown.

"I usually ride my bike around and if its not raining i ride my bike to school, now i have nowhere to ride my bike, i used to play football with my friends in school now i can't even see my friends"

Boy, school year 5 – 6

⁹ Caution needs to be taken with these figures as sample counts are too low to be statistically significant

¹⁰ Black and Asian children are more likely to be active for an average of at least 30 minutes per day at school but not outside of school than those from other ethnic backgrounds; Over 20% of children and young people who are active at school but not outside of school come from the least affluent families compared to 13% from the most affluent families. Taken from analysis of Active Lives Child data 2017/2018

When asked **how** physical activity is different in lockdown, girls and children from a BAME background are more likely to say that they “usually only exercise at school” (16% of girls vs 10% of boys, and 18% of children from a BAME background vs 12% of white children^{vii}).

When asked **why** it’s different in lockdown, the data indicates children from BAME backgrounds are more likely than white children to say it’s because “I’m not going to school so I have less chance to be physically active¹²”.

Note we do not see significant differences between socio-economic groups in the answers related to schools.

“I do not have the same equipment they have at school for PE or sports so I cannot do what I usually do at school”

Girl, school year 5 – 6

¹² Note sample size is small so caution required with statistical confidence

● Reasons to be active

There are good reasons to keep active in lockdown.

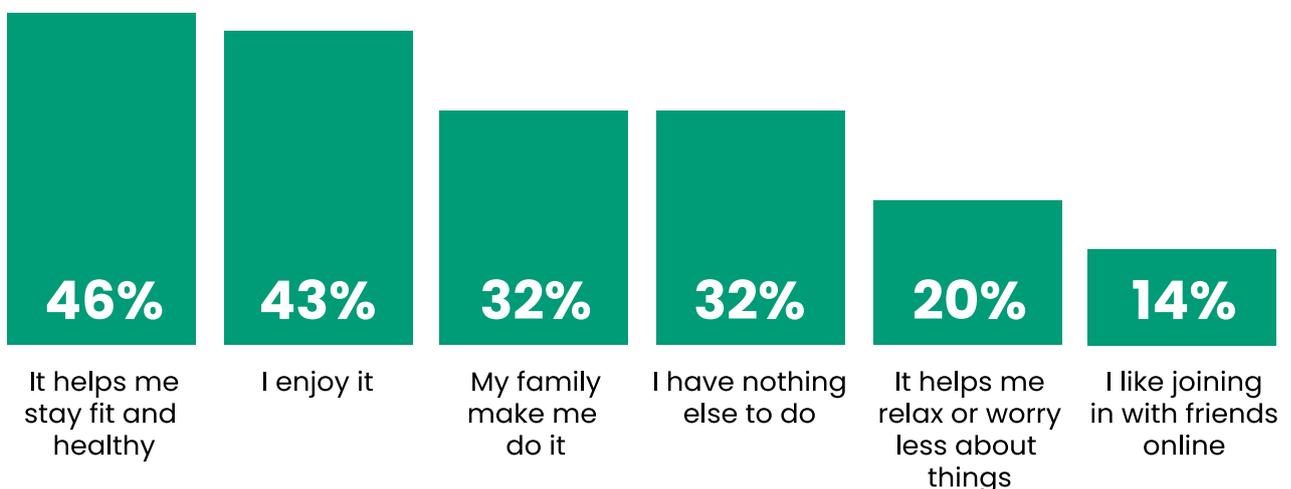
Amongst the vast majority who are doing some physical activity (93%), reasons for staying active are largely related to the benefits of sport/activity and the fact they find it enjoyable.

Unfortunately, half of all children (52%) are exercising because they are being “made to do it”, or have nothing else to do, but a larger proportion (69%) are exercising for the benefits. It’s good to see nearly 7 in 10 children finding good reasons to be active in lockdown.

What are some of the reasons you are physically active in lockdown? (Years 3-12, UK)



What are some of the reasons you are physically active in lockdown? (Years 3-12, UK)



● Role of enjoyment

Enjoyment continues to play a key role

We know enjoyment is a key driver of behaviour¹³ and this remains the case with 43% saying they are active because they enjoy it.

Interestingly, other findings buck the usual trends in motivation¹⁴:

- Where enjoyment usually increases with family affluence^{viii}, in lockdown family affluence makes no difference to enjoyment (43% enjoy for both more and less affluent children)
- We have seen a clear gender difference in enjoyment in Active Lives Child Survey data, with 58% of boys saying they enjoy sport/activity compared to 43% of girls. During lockdown there is no significant difference between the genders and girls are actually more likely to say they are enjoying being active than usual (16% compared to 10% of boys).

With just 41% of boys saying they are active in lockdown because they enjoy it, when compared with Active Lives Child Survey data it seems boys are finding less enjoyment in being active than usual. With significantly more boys saying they are being less active than usual (37% boys vs 26% girls), are they finding it harder than girls to find new ways to enjoy being active in lockdown and doing less as a result?

Looking at ethnicity, those from BAME backgrounds are more likely to say they are enjoying being active more than usual than white children (20% vs 12%).

These reversals in typical trends prompts the question:

Could the shift away from organised sports towards non-competitive, informal activity be good news for some girls and children from a BAME background?

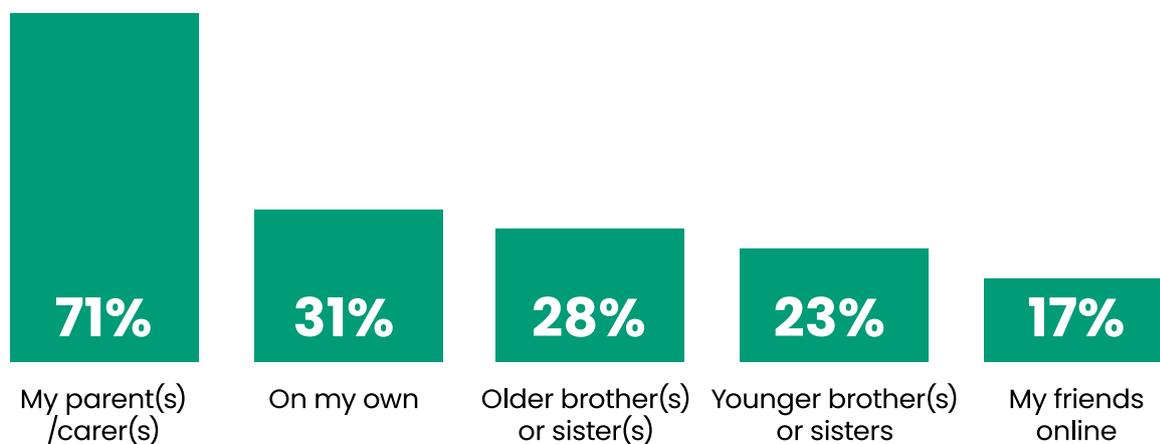
● Role of family

The family has a major influence on participation.

Children don't always get to choose how, when and whether or not they can exercise or play sport. With parent/carer time available to be active, their concerns around Covid-19 and whether or not families "make me do it", children have told us that their families make a big difference to how they are taking part in sport/exercise under lockdown.

Parents and carers are role models for physical activity.

Who are you being active with? (Years 3-12, UK)



How is this different to what you usually do?

“Spending quality time with my family”

Girl, school year 12

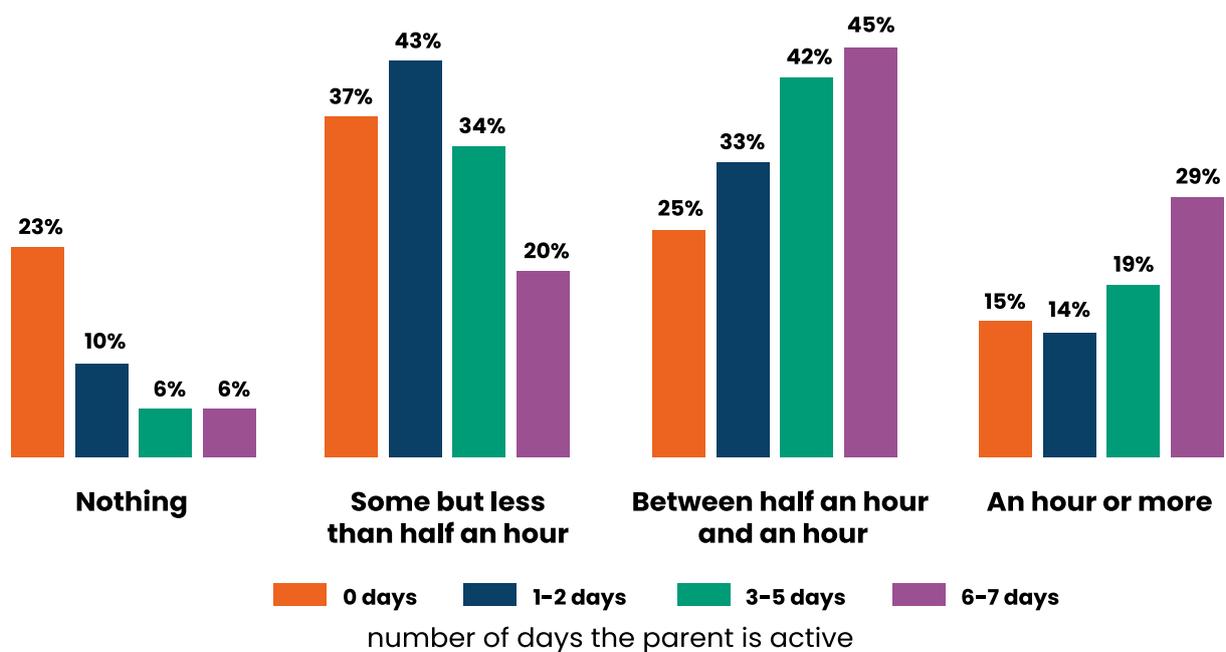
¹³ Active Lives Child survey 2017 – 2018 Attitudes report

¹⁴ When compared to Active Lives Children and Young people data

The potential for parents and caregivers to be positive role models for their children is well documented and we are seeing some great examples of this under lockdown:

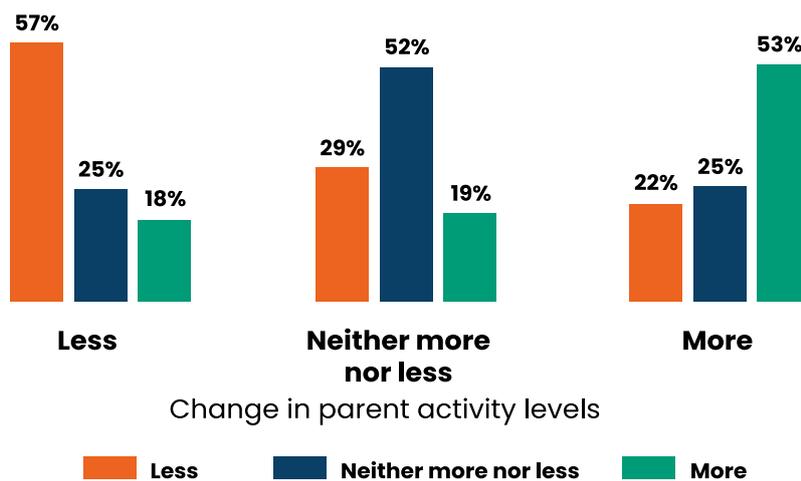
The more active the parent is the more likely the child is to be active.

Child activity level on a typical day by the number of days the parent is active



The change in activity levels of children is likely to reflect the change in activity levels of their parents or carers. In other words, where the parent/carer is doing less activity than pre-lockdown, the child is also likely to be doing less (57%) and when the parent/carer is doing more, the child is also likely to be doing more (53%).

Change in child activity levels by change in parent activity levels compared to pre Covid-19



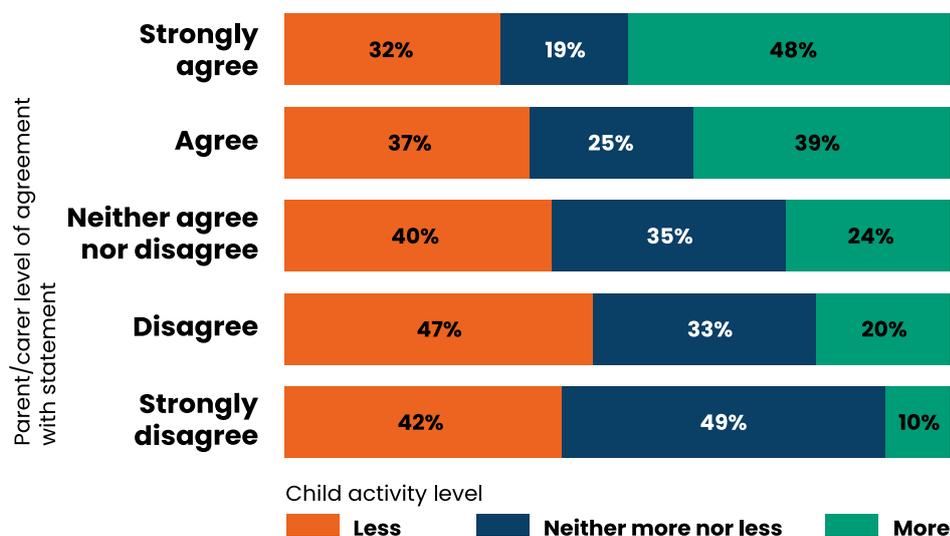
Parent/carer attitudes make a difference too.

Although there are many influences on our behaviour, for someone to be physically active, they have to feel sufficiently capable of taking part; feel they have access to an appropriate opportunity to take part and be sufficiently motivated^{ix}. We have evidence for a strong association for each of these elements and activity levels of adults and children across the nation^x.

We have taken a look at the relationship between how a parent/carer feels about sport or activity and how active their children are likely to be in lockdown, with fascinating results.

If the parent/carer enjoys sport and physical activity, feels they have the ability to be physically active and/or feels they have the opportunity to be active, the child is more likely to be active and more likely to be doing more compared to pre lockdown¹⁵.

I find exercise enjoyable and satisfying



¹⁵ Analysis of Savanta ComRes covid-19 activity tracker

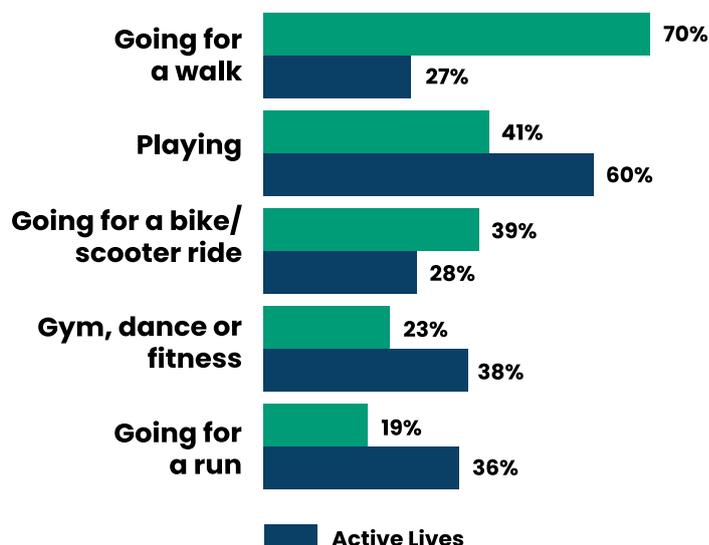
● Increase in walking

Children are walking (with their families) to stay active.

'Going for a walk' has substituted many of the usual activity types for this age range¹⁶, becoming by far the most prevalent way to stay active in lockdown. More than twice as many children are going for walks, compared to those who said they went for a walk in the last week during 2018–19¹⁷.

Given 71% of these young respondents say they are being active with their parents/carers, it's likely that the majority of those walks are taken as a family. The only other type of activity that seems more prevalent than usual is going for a bike or scooter ride (39%).

What exercise, sport, or physical activity are you doing during lockdown? (Years 3–12, UK)



¹⁶ For years 3 – 6: active play; team sports; running; gymnastics, trampolining, dance; swimming; walking for travel; going for a walk; cycling; scooting

For years 7 – 11: team sports; active play; walking for travel; running; going for a walk; gym/fitness; gymnastics, trampolining, cheerleading; dance; cycling; racket sports

¹⁷ Active Lives Child Survey 2018/2019

Walking is the one activity that is not affected by affluence but we do see some differences in ethnic backgrounds, with 52% of children from BAME backgrounds going for walks compared to 73% of white children.

We know, from the Active Lives Children and Young People Survey, that more affluent children tend to do more traditional or organised sport, such as team sports, than those from less affluent backgrounds. Given the restrictions on those types of activities, we might expect more affluent children to be doing less activity in lockdown. But our findings don't support this.

In fact, as we have already seen, more affluent children are less likely to have done nothing (6%) compared to those from less affluent households (13%) and they are no more likely than their less affluent counterparts to say they are doing less during lockdown.

More affluent children are more likely to:

- usually do a different type of sport, activity or exercise (23% vs 18%)
- cite the closure of clubs, classes, leisure centres and gyms (41% of more affluent children, 28% of less affluent¹⁸) as a reason why lockdown is different to usual
- take part in all types of activities than less affluent respondents (excluding walking).

Are more affluent children finding it easier to take up new or alternative ways to stay active in lockdown?

¹⁸ Of those who say it is different under lockdown (around 77% of sample)

● **Playing has changed**

Playing is not the same in lockdown.

Where 'active play' is usually the top activity for primary school children (72%) and the second for those at secondary school (49%)¹⁹, the figures fall to 59% for years 3 - 6 and just 32% for years 7-11. Although those from more affluent backgrounds are more likely to say they are playing to stay active than those from less affluent backgrounds (43% vs 37%)^[4], the findings suggest children from all backgrounds are playing less than usual in lockdown²⁰.

This doesn't come as a great surprise, given the closure of play spaces and the lack of opportunities to play with friends. But it is cause for concern when we know playing is so central to keeping children active, regardless of affluence, ethnicity, gender or ability.

The definitions of play we used were - running games, kicking a ball about, ball games, dancing around.

“[I] Can't see mates play football have a kick about”

Boy, school year 12

“I can't go out to play with friends”

Boy, school year 3 - 4

The places children play are more important than ever

The most popular places to be active are outside, with half of all children being active in their garden or balcony.

When supplemented with insight from parents and carers, we can better understand what a difference having access to outside space makes to how much activity children do in lockdown.

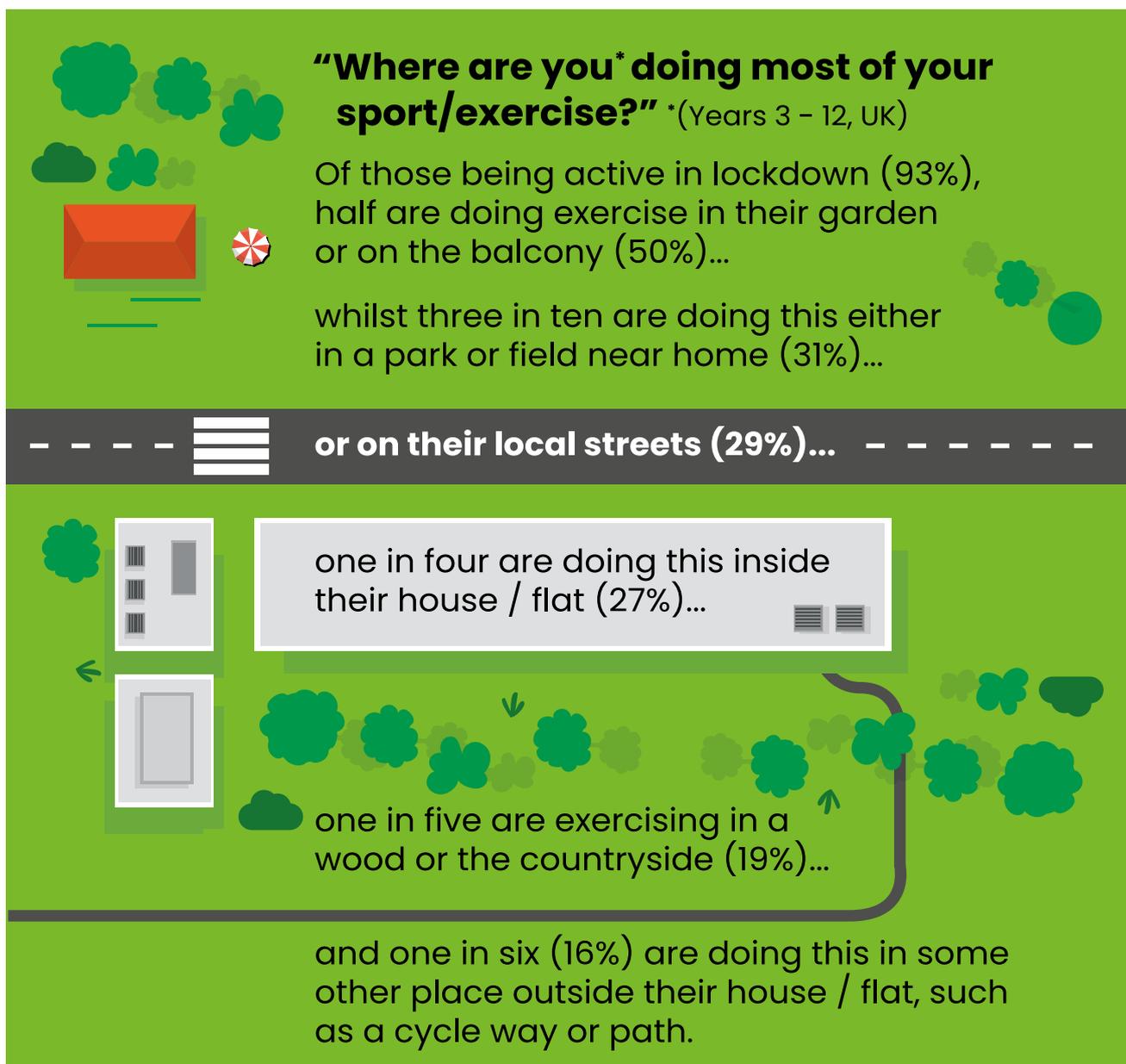
¹⁹ Active Lives Child Survey Academic Year 2018/2019

^[4] 90% confidence Interval

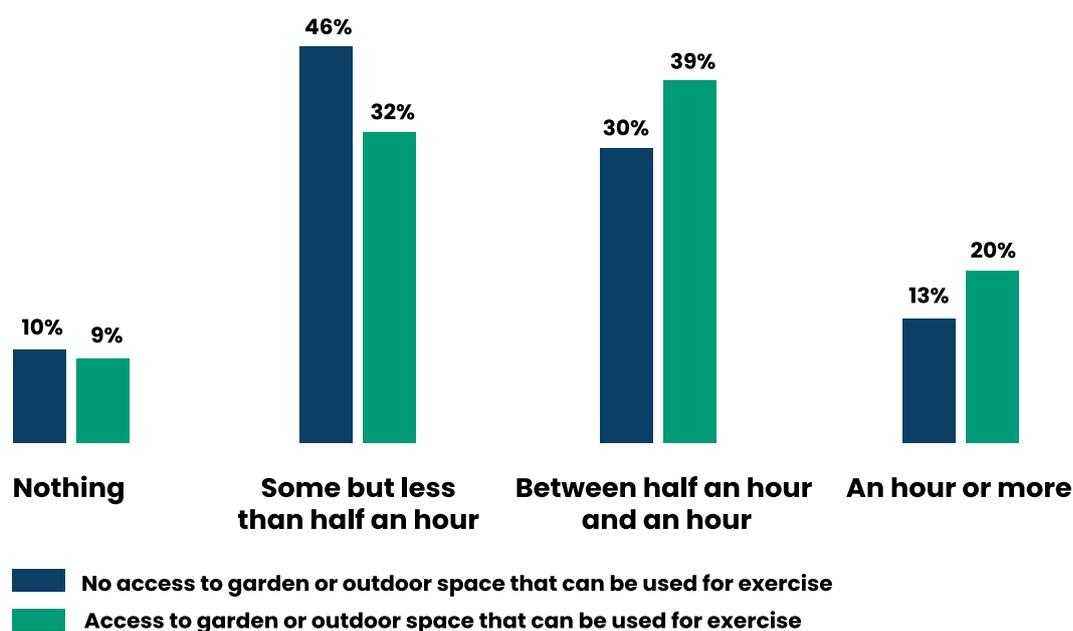
²⁰ When compared to Active Lives Child Survey data

Those with access to outdoor space for sport and exercise are more likely to have done an hour a day of sport and physical activity (20%) than those who don't (13%).

For those who don't have access to outdoor space, they are more likely to be doing some but less than half an hour (46% vs 32%).



Amount of physical activity and exercise each child does on a typical day.



We have also seen that those from BAME backgrounds are more likely to exercise inside (38% compared to 25%) but we don't know why. In our next phase of research in this area we will explore if this is related to their increased likelihood to have concerns about leaving the house, a lack of access to space outside, or a combination of these and other factors.

While there's still so much more to learn about the impact of Covid-19, with restrictions still in place²¹ for leisure centres, gyms, clubs, pools and schools, we believe playgrounds, skate parks, basketball courts and other places that facilitate play and informal activity are more important now than ever.

²¹ At time of writing June 2020

● About the research

The following questions were submitted to a nationally representative sample of 1,164 children aged 7 – 16 years old (schools years 3 – 12) as part of the CHILDWISE omnibus Summer 2020 via an online survey.

- What sport, physical activity or exercise are you doing during Lockdown?
- For those who said they are doing nothing
What are your reasons for this?
- How is this different to what you usually do?
- What are the reasons for these differences?
- For those who said that during lockdown they are doing a different type of sport, activity or exercise than usual, what is it that you usually do?
- What are some of the reasons you are physically active in Lockdown?
- Who are you being active with?
- Where are you doing most of your sport/exercise?

The fieldwork took place in May 2020.

All parents/carers' data has been taken from the Savanta ComRes survey.

Savanta ComRes Covid-19 physical activity tracker https://www.sportengland.org/know-your-audience/demographic-knowledge/coronavirus#the_story_so_far

Respondents were asked about average daily time spent doing physical activity (average per child in the household) and if this is more or less than usual.

ⁱ This report covers attitudes and behaviours during May 2020, before most of the Covid-19 restrictions on sport or physical activity had been lifted. Sports courts (basketball, tennis), bowling greens and golf courses had opened from the week prior to when the CHILDWISE survey was in field. Outdoor gyms, indoor swimming pools, leisure centres and playgrounds were still closed. Schools were still closed to all students except those from key worker families, vulnerable children and those with an EHCP in place. People were not yet allowed to exercise with other households.

ⁱⁱ About physical literacy: The International Physical Literacy Association's definition of physical literacy has four elements: motivation, confidence, competence and knowledge and understanding. The organisation says these help an individual "value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life". Source: The International Physical Literacy Association. We used this definition to develop statements covering each of the five attitudes that we added to the survey.

When talking about individual attitude statements, we report where a child strongly agrees with a statement as evidence of positive feelings towards it. For example, when a child strongly agrees that they enjoy taking part in sport, we describe that child as enjoying sport and physical activity. These statements were developed by an expert advisory group commissioned by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Sport England. By looking specifically at those who “strongly agree”, we both mitigate the tendency of children and young people to “agree” to socially desirable statements, and focus on how the firmest attitudes relate to activity and health and social outcomes.

iii Definitions of ethnic group: In Active Lives Child survey we have the sample size to look at the following ethnic groups: White British; White other; Asian; Black; Mixed; Other. The CHILDWISE omnibus breaks ethnic groups down by White and BAME. We will be using qualitative, mixed methods research to explore the differences in ethnicity in more detail.

iv Where we have cited findings ‘according to parents/carers, data is taken from Savanta ComRes Covid-19 physical activity tracker https://www.sportengland.org/know-your-audience/demographic-knowledge/coronavirus#the_story_so_far

v This is because we asked respondents of the Savanta ComRes Covid-19 activity tracker about the children in their household, not about each individual child. By analysing respondent demographics and making some assumptions that the ethnic background and socio-economic group of the adult respondent is in line with the children in the household, we have been able to explore how much activity children are doing by ethnic background and socio-economic group but not by gender.

^{vi} Children who say physical activity in lockdown is different to usual is around 77% of the total sample.

^{vii} When asked how physical activity is different in lockdown, BAME children are more likely to say that they “usually only exercise at school” (18% of children from a BAME background vs 12% of white children, reportable at 90% confidence interval).

^{viii} It’s important to note the measures of affluence are not the same where we use the family affluence scale in Active Lives Child Survey and ABC1 vs C2DE in the CHILDWISE omnibus.

^{ix} We use the ‘COM-B model’, developed by Susan Michie, Lou Adams and Robert West, to understand the drivers and context that influences how likely someone is to do something (e.g. become more active).

^x See Active Lives Adult Survey Understanding Behaviour, February 2019.