

Spotlight on girls and young women

Participation

This spotlight shares the latest headlines on girls' and young women's participation in play, active recreation and sport.

It shows where progress is being made – and where gaps remain.

The data shows a clear pattern: girls and young women want to be active, but confidence, visibility and the quality of the experience can shape whether participation feels welcoming, enjoyable and worth continuing.

Use this spotlight to support conversations and actions that help create more equitable opportunities for women and girls.

Who took part

The data is drawn from a number of Sport NZ research projects, including [Active NZ 2024/25](#), [Voice of tamariki](#) and [Voice of rangatahi](#).

Through these projects, we gathered insights from 62,643 young people.

At a glance

Participation gap

In 2024/25, **57.9% of girls** and **49.8% of young women** met physical activity guidelines, with participation remaining lower than among boys and young men.

34%

of girls don't like people watching them be active.

School experience gap

Girls report lower enjoyment and satisfaction with physical activity at school.

Almost 3 times more

young women than young men say they are not confident enough to be active.

Confidence gap widens

Confidence and physical literacy gaps grow during teenage years.

Participation in physical activity varies by gender across age groups

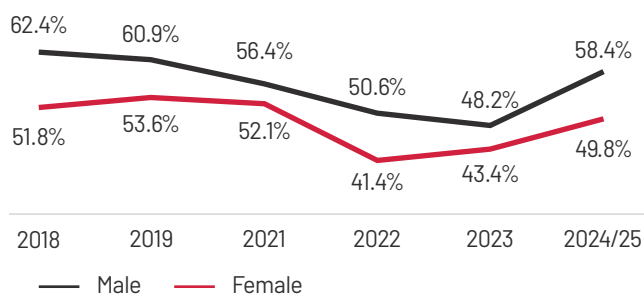
Girls are less likely than boys to meet physical activity guidelines across age groups.

For tamariki the gap appeared in 2022, narrowing again in 2025. The gap for rangatahi reduced in 2023, however in 2024/25 it had widened again.

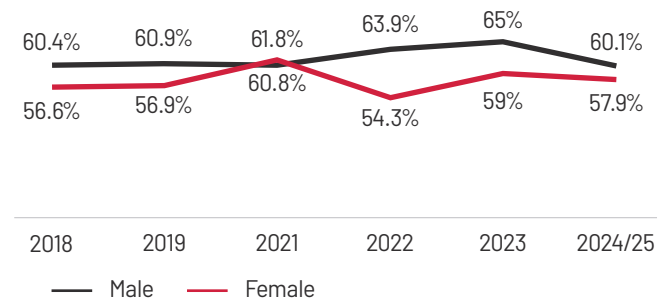
Similar trends are seen in schools/kura where girls are less active than boys. The gap becomes more pronounced during break times such as morning tea and lunch.

Percentage meeting physical activity guidelines, by gender

Rangatahi



Tamariki



What might be driving this gap across both tamariki and rangatahi?

Types of physical activities vary by gender for both tamariki and rangatahi.

Boys tend to participate in more activities than girls and are often focused on traditional organised sports. Girls tend to participate in activities that are more recreational in nature.

These differences are evident for both tamariki and rangatahi, with gaps in accessible or visible opportunities emerging early and persisting over time.

- What is being offered to girls – and how visible are these opportunities?
- Are participation patterns reflecting preference, or what feels available and welcoming?
- How can we better role model belonging and present a variety of opportunities that encourage girls to participate?
- What opportunities exist for girls to play with their peers and friends?

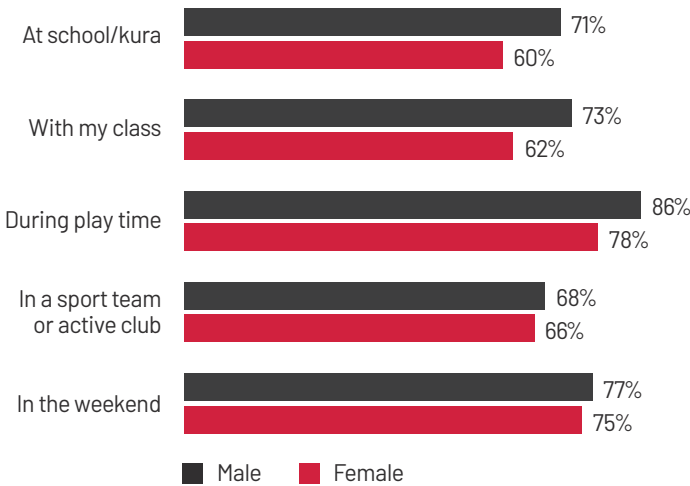
Gender differences in physical activity experiences at school

Where and how tamariki and rangatahi are active impacts their experience of physical activity.

Girls tend to report lower enjoyment than boys when taking part, and this gap widens as they progress through secondary school. The differences are evident in both break times and in structured activity in class, such as Physical Education (PE).

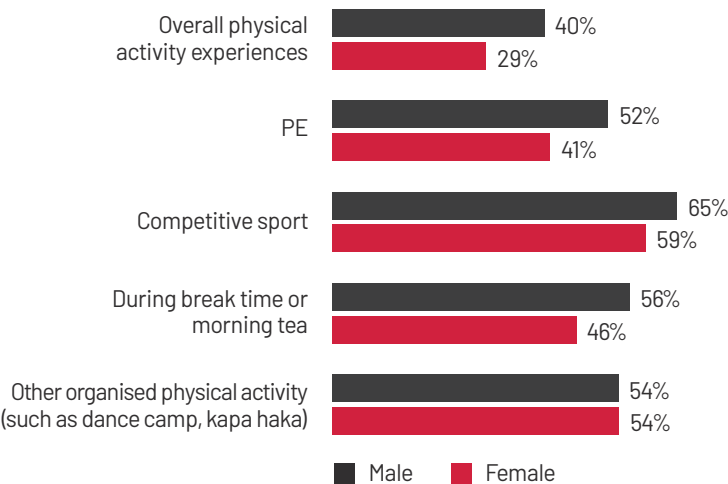
Interestingly, there is no difference in enjoyment by gender for tamariki when being active after school or at the weekend.

Tamariki enjoyment levels of being active (percentage shows ‘quite a lot’ or ‘heaps’)



For rangatahi, there is no gender difference in satisfaction for other organised physical activity (such as dance camps or kapa haka). However, across all other contexts, boys enjoy higher satisfaction levels than girls. Like tamariki, the difference is notable for break times and within class, such as PE.

Satisfaction with physical activity at school/kura by gender (percentage shows ‘very’ and ‘extremely satisfied’)



- Why do we see similar enjoyment levels between boys and girls outside of school, but differences within school time?
- What is different about structured or opt-in environments compared to unstructured ones like break times?

¹ Voice of rangatahi uses a skewed scale, with ‘satisfied’ as the midpoint. Figures shown represent rangatahi who were more than satisfied (very satisfied or extremely satisfied) with their experiences.

Young women and girls enjoy being active at school when physical activities are social, safe, inclusive and meaningful to them. Here's what we heard from them:

"Kapa haka has given me a new whānau I can go to for anything and PE is fun as well as playing at lunch time."

Year 10 student

"Because it's very inclusive and everyone is involved, and even if you don't want to be involved, the teacher is kind enough to let you take a break – it's a very calming and inviting environment."

Year 12 student

"I like playing with my friends on the playground it feels like I'm safe and they make me laugh, so I have fun."

Year 6 student

"I enjoy running around and climbing trees in morning tea and lunch. I also enjoy getting a break from learning and trying new sports."

Year 7 student

"I enjoy participating in sports or games at playtime like volleyball, basketball and more, even if it's one I'm not really good at. What makes it fun playing and being active at playtime is my friends, and fun experiences playing with my friends."

Year 8 student

"Because I got fitter, made new friends, and learnt heaps of new things."

Year 9 female rangatahi

"Our sports coordinator has put in 100% effort into improving and supporting all sports at our school which has led to me having plenty of positive opportunities in sports."

Year 13 student

"I enjoy being active at school in break time because it loosens my body and get ready for the next learning session."

Year 4 student



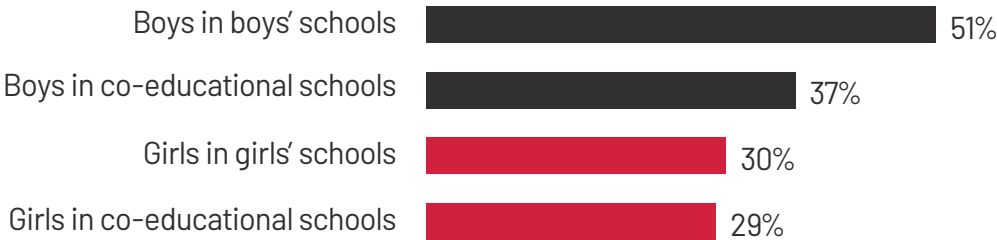


Satisfaction for girls at girls-only schools/kura is still significantly lower than boys at boys-only schools/kura.

Girls-only environments are often thought of as one way of addressing participation challenges for girls. However, girls' overall satisfaction with physical activity at school at girls-only schools/kura is significantly lower than boys at boys-only schools/kura and around the same as girls at co-educational schools/kura.

- What is the role of girls-only spaces?
- What makes a quality experience and quality environment for girls?
- Beyond girls-only environments, what helps girls feel confident, supported and engaged in physical activity?
- Why might girls-only spaces support participation in some contexts – but not all?

Overall satisfaction with physical activity at school by gender of students at school, percentages showing 'very' and 'extremely satisfied'



Girls and young women are more likely to perceive challenges to being physically active than boys and young men

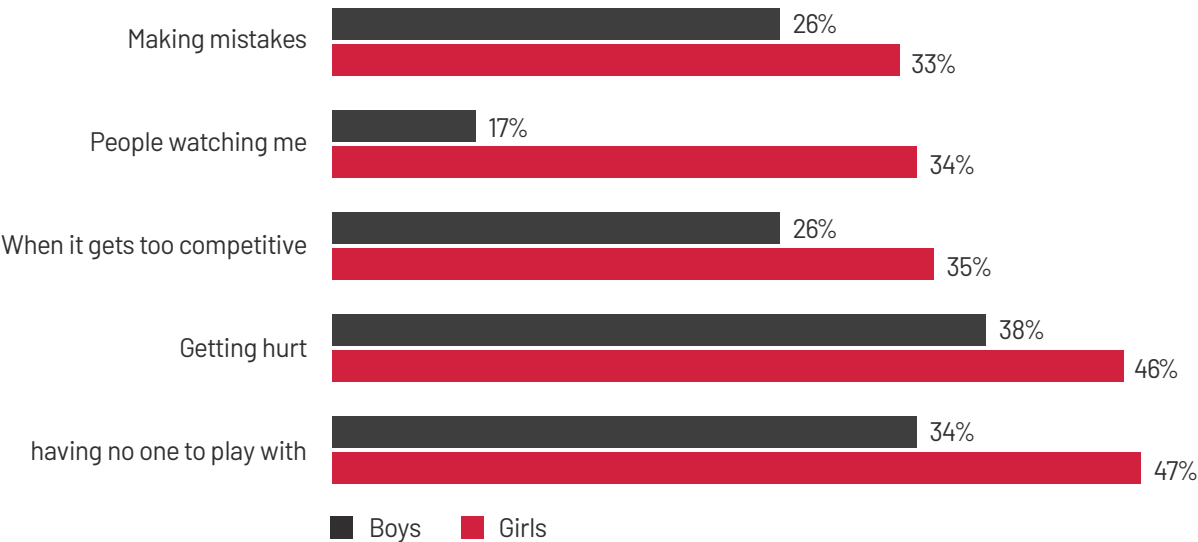
Girls are nearly twice as likely as boys to say that “people watching me” is something they don’t like about being physically active.

When this is considered alongside “making mistakes”, “getting too competitive” and “having no one to play with”, a clear pattern of lower confidence emerges.



What early interventions could help build confidence and reduce these pressures?

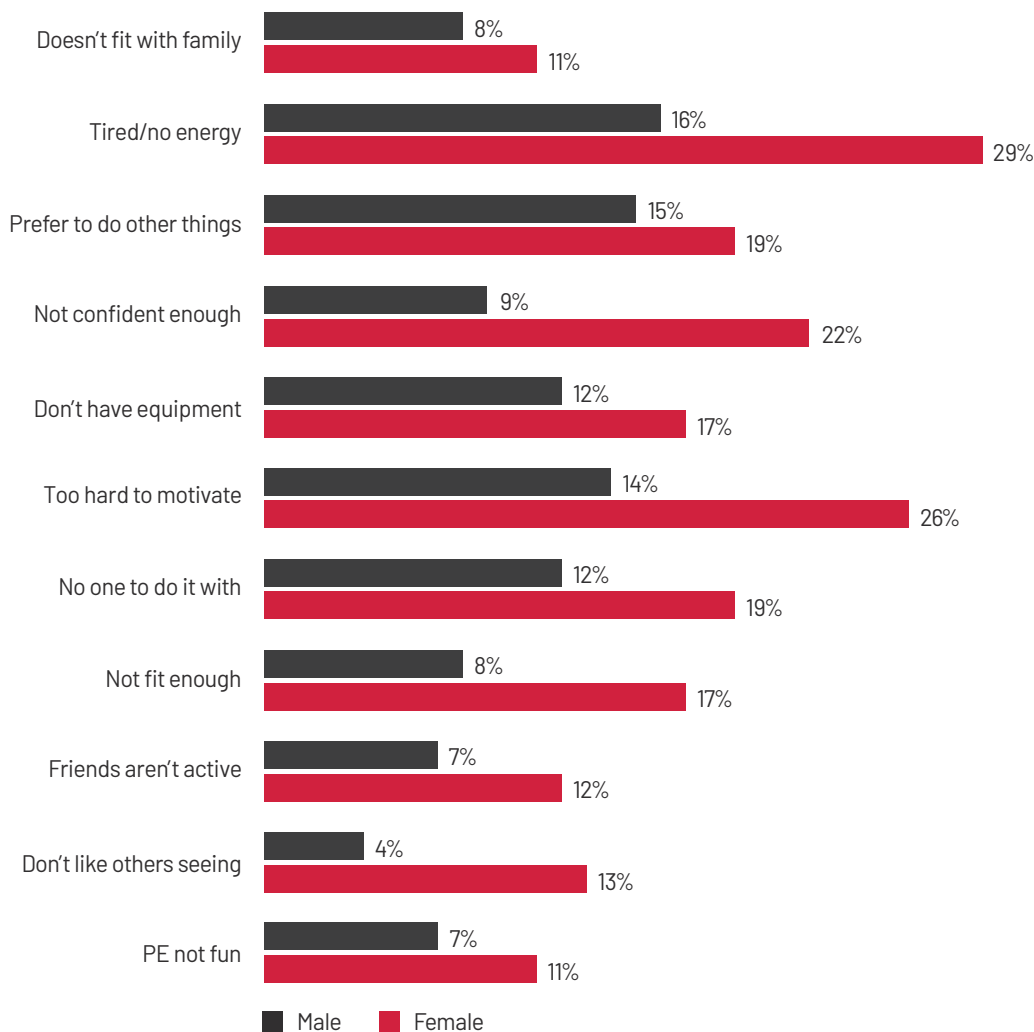
Things tamariki don’t like about being active at school



Young women experience more barriers to being active than young men and, on average, identify a higher number of barriers overall.

Confidence is a significant barrier. Young women are almost 3 times more likely than young men to say they are “not confident enough” and more than 3 times as likely to say they don’t like others watching them be active.

Perceived barriers to being physically active for rangatahi



- How do we design environments where young women feel safe to try, fail and build confidence?
- How important is having friends or social connection in overcoming these barriers?

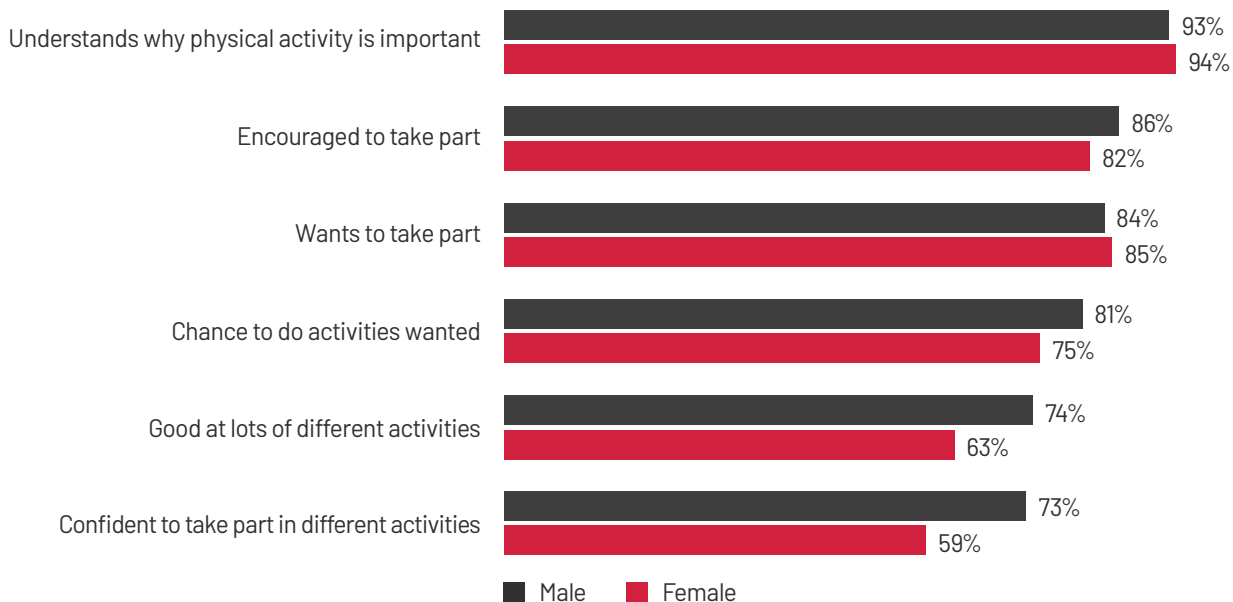
Gender gaps in physical literacy widen as young people get older

Young women are less confident than young men in their ability to take part in different activities and are less likely to feel they are good at a range of activities.

While girls tend to report slightly higher levels of physical literacy than boys in childhood, this shifts during adolescence.

These growing gaps in confidence are a key concern.

Perceived physical literacy for female and male rangatahi



If these confidence differences start to emerge in childhood, what can be done to prevent them from widening as girls get older?

- What role can coaches, parents and whānau play in helping girls build confidence and feel encouraged to participate?
- What should sport and recreation providers consider about messaging, language and imagery around girls' participation?
- What kinds of activities are being promoted to girls, and how?
- What would it look like if girls saw themselves reflected in every part of the system – from messaging and environments to opportunities?
- What practical changes could we make now to shift girls' participation and confidence?

Find out more, including examples of initiatives supporting girls and young women to be active: sportnz.org.nz