

Neurodiversity snapshot



**SPORT
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Overview

For the first time, in 2024/25 Active NZ included a measure of neurodiversity.¹ Active NZ is a nationally represented participation survey of New Zealanders aged 5 and over.

Since 2017, data has been collected continuously throughout each year. In 2024/25 ~15,000 adults and 4,500 young people responded to the survey.

This snapshot focusing on neurodivergent young people, aged 5 to 17, is significant as New Zealand has no official national prevalence estimate of neurodiversity.

There is no population-level measure spanning autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia and other neurodivergent profiles.

The only robust New Zealand-specific prevalence anchor we have comes from research – the Growing Up in New Zealand² longitudinal study which indicates around 15% of young people aged 8 are neurodivergent.

In the Active NZ survey, 13% of young respondents aged 5 to 17 were neurodivergent, peaking between ages 8 and 11 at 15%.



13%

of young people between the ages of 5 and 17 identified as neurodivergent.

- 1 Active NZ asks the following question to identify neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals. "Do you consider yourself to be neurodivergent, and/or have you been diagnosed with a neurodivergent condition?"
Neurodivergent conditions can include Autism/ASD, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette Syndrome, and other conditions not listed here.
- 2 The Growing Up in New Zealand longitudinal study is New Zealand's largest ongoing cohort study. It recruited and continues to follow 6,846 New Zealand children born between 2009 and 2010 – approximately 11% of all children born in the country in that period. Source: [Wikipedia](#)

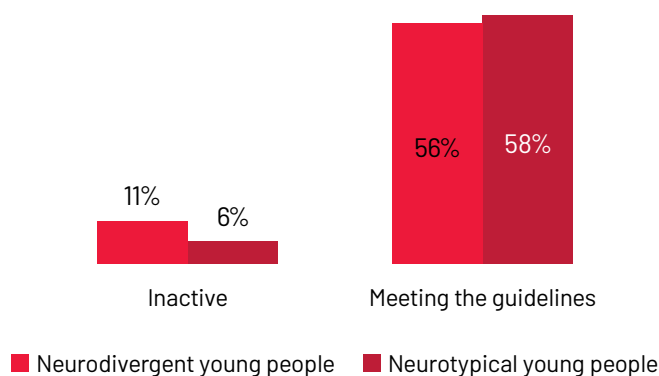
Key points

- Neurodivergent young people in New Zealand experience significantly **higher inactivity rates** than their neurotypical peers, despite having similar overall activity levels and a similar overall proportion meeting the physical activity guidelines.
- **Gender inequities** are pronounced, with neurodivergent young males the least active.
- Compared with their neurotypical peers, neurodivergent males and females face **more and stronger barriers** particularly affordability, motivation and confidence. Inactive friends is a stronger barrier for neurodivergent males, while access is a stronger barrier for neurodivergent females compared with their neurotypical peers.
- Neurodivergent young people report **lower physical literacy³, and weaker support environments**. They are less likely to have access to community support, and to have family engagement in their physical activity than their neurotypical peers.
- **Competitive settings are less appealing** for neurodivergent males compared with neurotypical males and PE is less appealing for neurodivergent females compared with neurotypical females.
- While fun motivates all young people, neurodivergent young people are more strongly motivated by **emotional wellbeing**.

1. Neurodivergent young people have higher levels of inactivity than neurotypical

Neurodivergent young people are almost twice as likely to be inactive⁴ compared with neurotypical peers. Overall, neurodivergent young people are just as likely to meet the physical activity guidelines⁵.

% weekly participation



³ Physical literacy is a combination of motivation, confidence and competence to be active, along with an individual knowledge and understanding of how being active contributes to their life.

⁴ Inactive: less than 30 minutes being active each week.

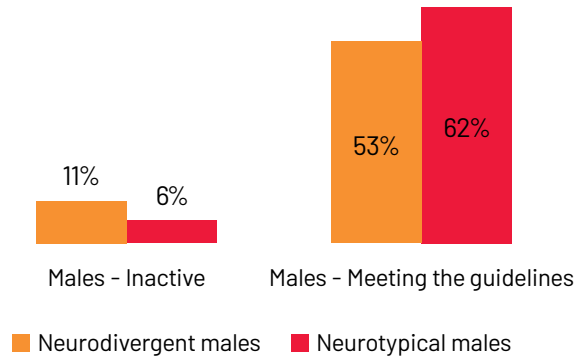
⁵ Meeting the physical activity guidelines: 420 minutes or more each week.

2. Gender inequities are evident

Neurodivergent males are the least active group overall. Compared with neurotypical males, neurodivergent males:

- Are almost twice as likely to be inactive
- Are less likely to meet the physical activity guidelines.

% weekly participation

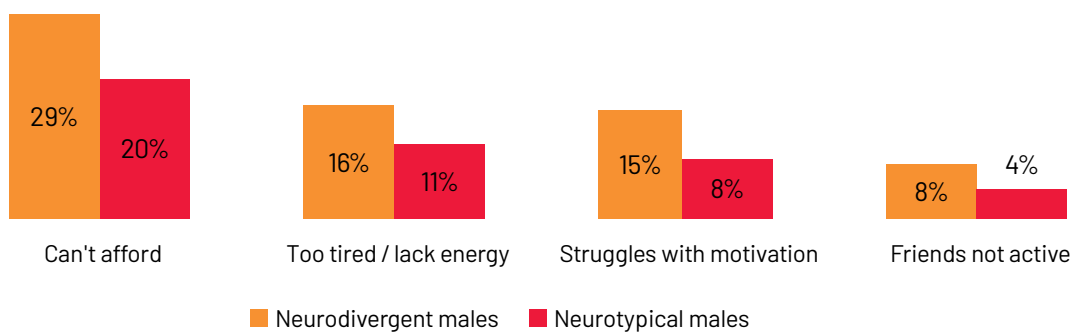


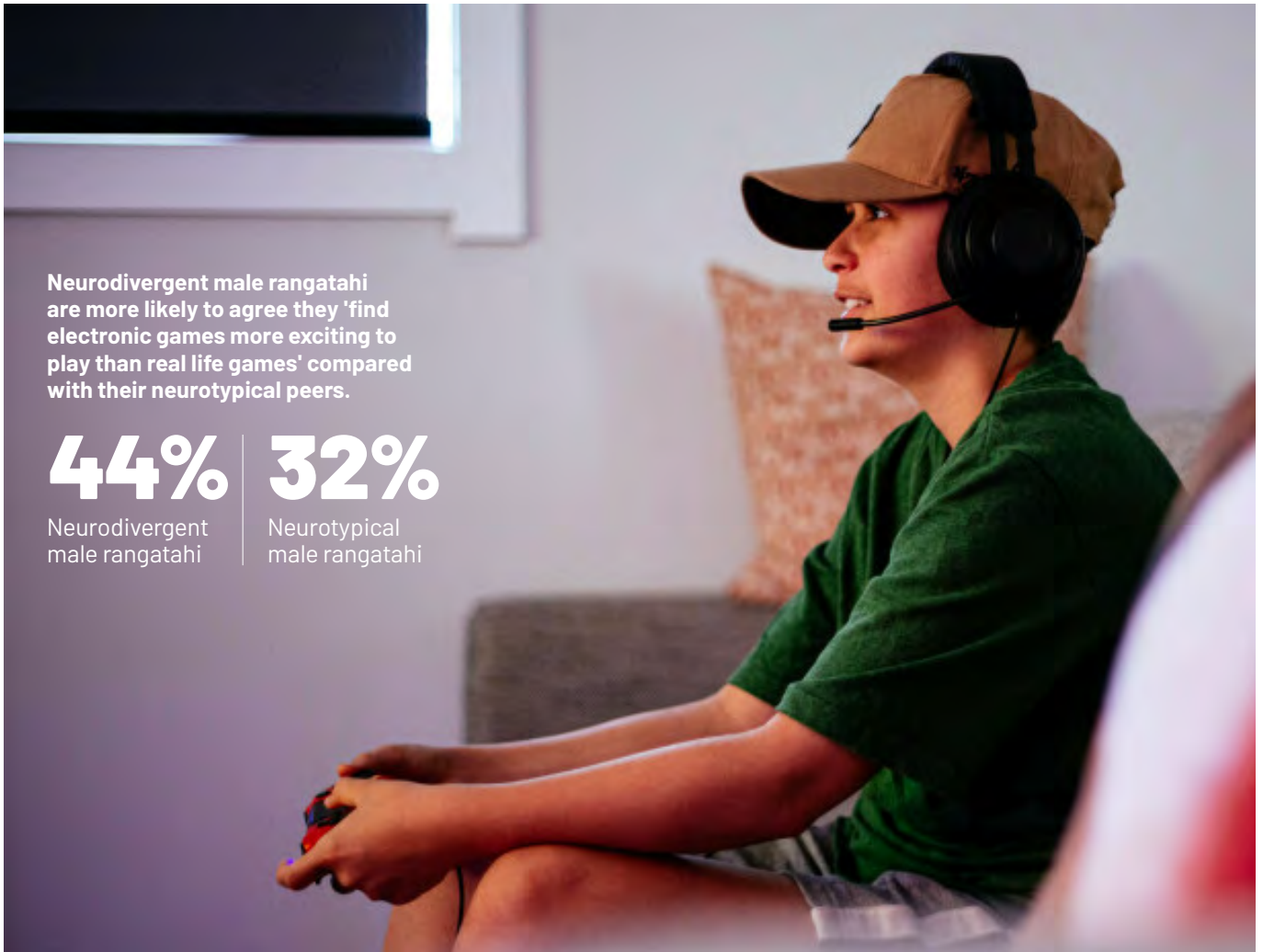
Neurodivergent males are less likely to want to increase their participation than neurotypical males (61% compared with 67%).

Neurodivergent males who want to increase activity levels have more barriers than neurotypical males (2.83 compared with 2.49). Stronger barriers are:

- affordability
- lacking energy
- struggles with motivation
- inactive friends.

Males – barriers to increasing participation % agree





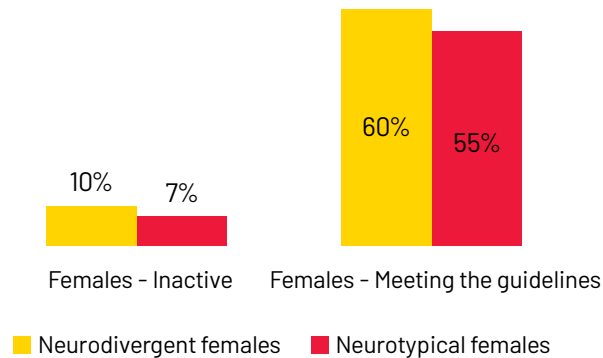
Neurodivergent male rangatahi are more likely to agree they 'find electronic games more exciting to play than real life games' compared with their neurotypical peers.

<p>44%</p> <p>Neurodivergent male rangatahi</p>	<p>32%</p> <p>Neurotypical male rangatahi</p>
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In contrast to the variation in activity levels between neurodivergent and neurotypical males, compared with their neurotypical peers, neurodivergent females:

- Have a similar level of inactivity (10% compared with 7%)
- Are just as likely to meet the physical activity guidelines (60% compared with 55%)
- Spend **more time on average** being active each week (12.62 hours compared with 10.28 hours).

% weekly participation



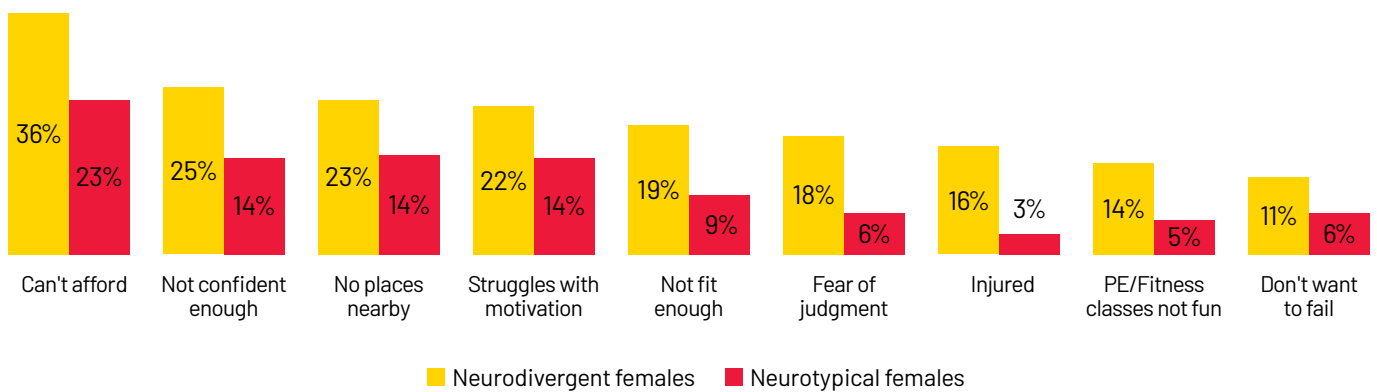
Although neurodivergent females have a similar appetite to increase their participation as their neurotypical peers (66% compared with 65%), they have substantially more barriers (3.91 compared with 2.78).

Compared with neurotypical females they are more likely to have the following barriers:

- affordability
- not confident enough
- access, no places nearby
- struggles with motivation
- not fit enough
- fear of judgement
- injury
- not wanting to fail
- PE/fitness classes not fun.



**Female – barriers to increasing participation
% agree**



3. Comparing neurodivergent and neurotypical sports and activity preferences

Neurodivergent males participate in fewer sports and activities each week than neurotypical males – 4.59 compared with 5.13.

Activities with more appeal for neurodivergent males are active recreation and outdoor focused with lower participation in traditional team sports.

Compared with neurotypical males, neurodivergent males are more likely to do:

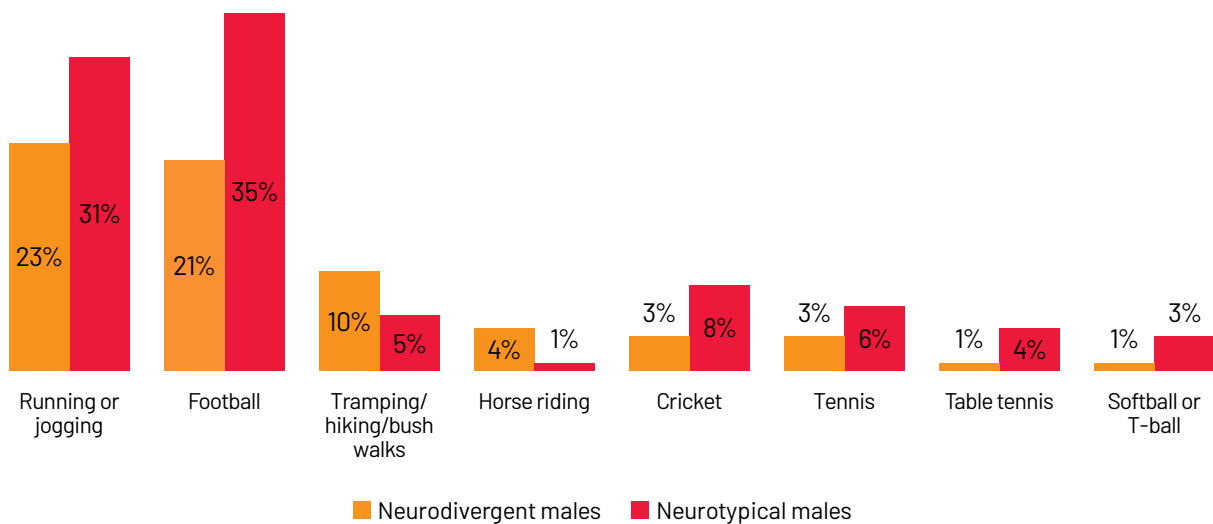
- tramping/hiking/bush walks
- horse riding.

They are less likely to do:

- running/jogging
- cricket
- football
- tennis
- table tennis
- softball or T-ball.



Males – variation in participation in sports and activities
% weekly participation

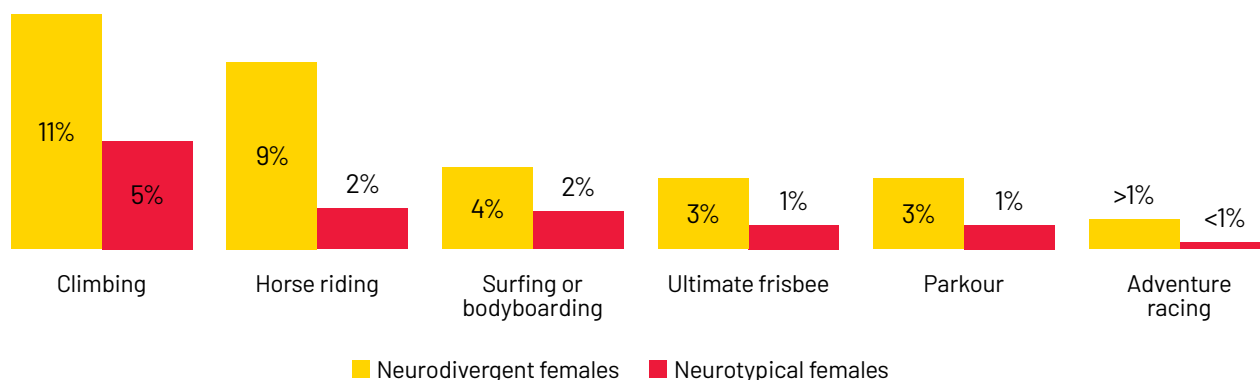


Activities more popular among **neurodivergent females** compared with neurotypical females are also more likely to be alternative outdoor focused activities.⁶

Compared with neurotypical females, they are more likely to do:

- climbing
- horse riding
- surfing/bodyboarding
- ultimate frisbee
- parkour
- adventure racing.

Females – popular sports and activities % weekly participation



The differences in preferences for activities neurodivergent young people participate in, compared with neurotypical, continue into adulthood. For example, compared with their neurotypical peers, neurodivergent adult males are more likely to do hunting, yoga and workouts, and neurodivergent adult females are more likely to do dance, kapa haka and waka ama.

4. Participation settings

Active NZ captures the settings where young people are active – informal (play and independent exercise) and organised (competition/tournament, training with a coach and PE).

Compared with their neurotypical peers, **neurodivergent males have lower weekly participation in every setting except PE, playing alone and independent exercise**, where the difference in participation in these settings is not statistically significant.

There is no variation for older rangatahi (aged 15 to 17) neurodivergent males and neurotypical males in belonging to a gym or fitness centre (28% compared with 32%).

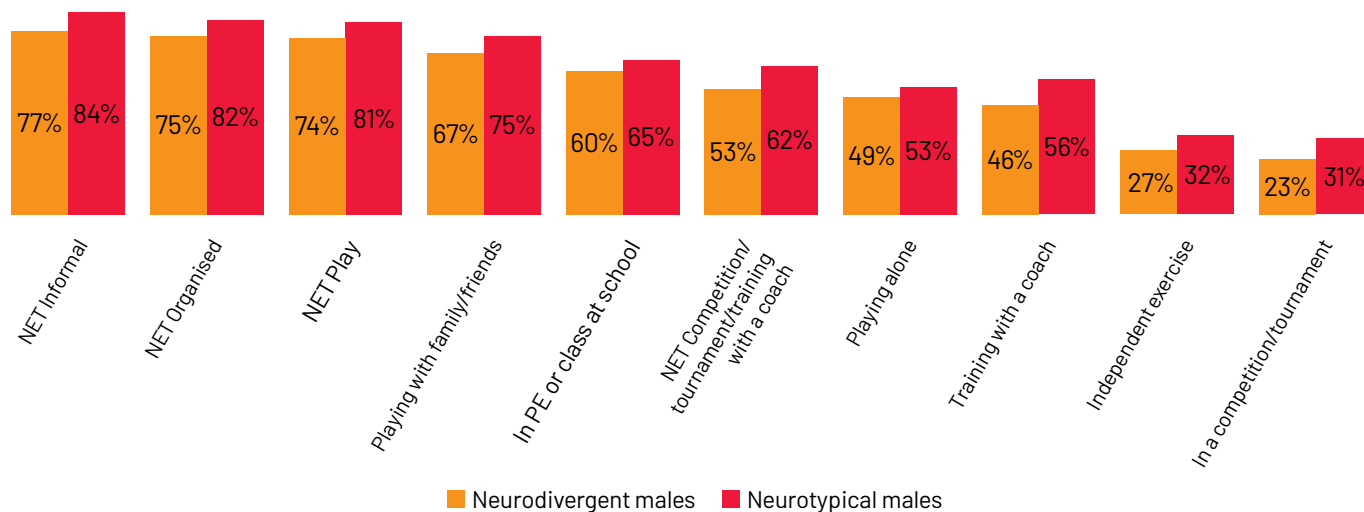
However, neurodivergent males are less likely to participate through competitions/tournaments/train with a coach.

They are also less likely to be:

- Club members in and outside school – 58% compared with 73%.
- Motivated by physical challenge/to win – 29% compared with 39%.

⁶ There are no sports and activities where participation is significantly lower for neurodivergent females compared with neurotypical females.

Males – participation in different settings
% weekly participation



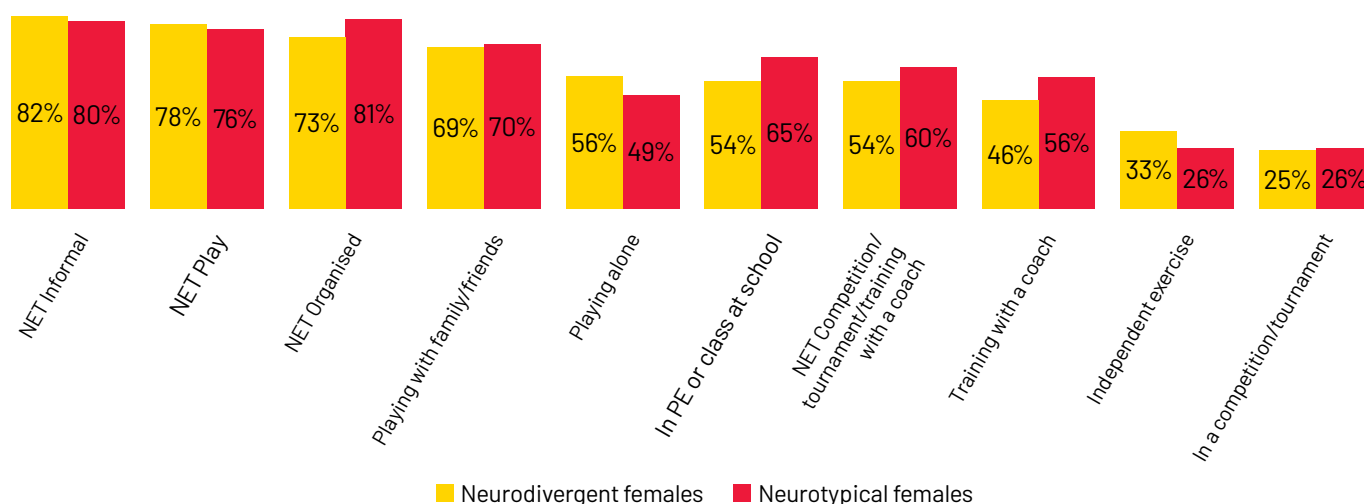
Compared with neurotypical females, neurodivergent females have a similar level of weekly participation in informal settings and **lower participation in organised settings.**

Neurodivergent females are more likely to play alone and do independent exercise than their neurotypical peers.

There is no variation in club or gym membership between neurodivergent and neurotypical females. Around 2 in 3 young females are club members and 3 in 4 belong to a gym or fitness centre.

Neurodivergent females are more strongly motivated to lose/maintain weight than their neurotypical peers - 17% compared with 9%.

Females – participation in different settings
% weekly participation



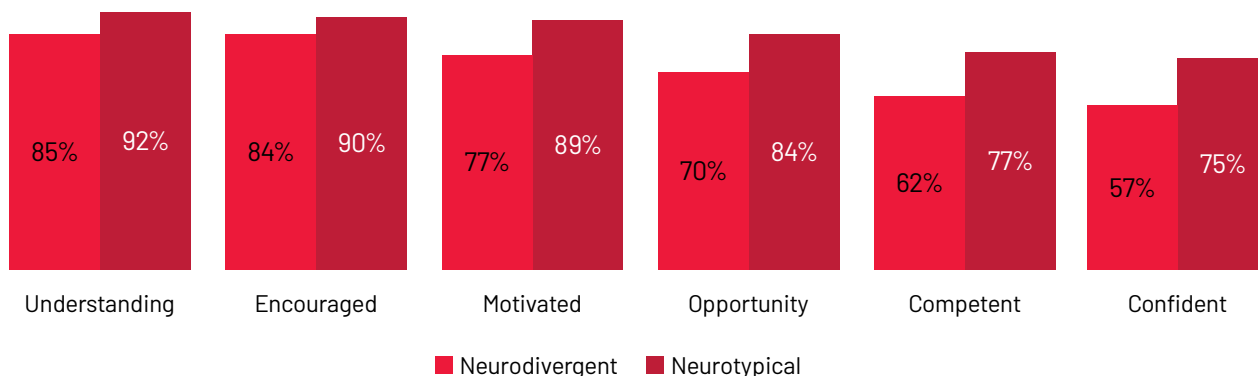
5. Lower physical literacy and support environments for neurodivergent young people compared with neurotypical

Physical literacy is a combination of young people’s motivation, confidence and competence to be active, along with their knowledge and understanding of how being active contributes to their life.

Compared with neurotypical peers, neurodivergent young people are less likely to:

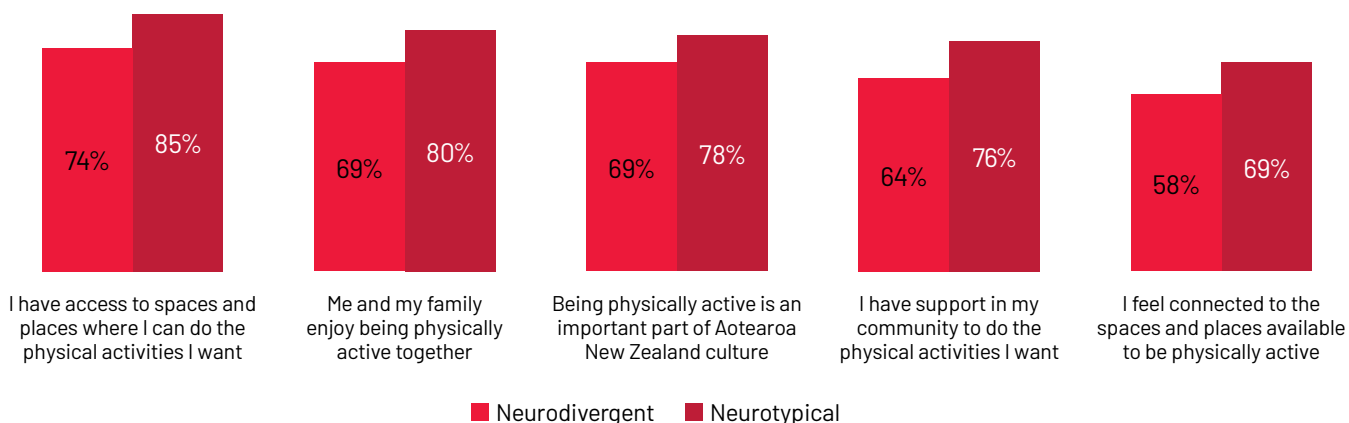
- Understand why being active is important
- Feel encouraged and motivated to be active
- Agree they are provided opportunities to be active
- Feel confident and competent in their abilities.

Young people – physical literacy % agree



Neurodivergent young people also report lower family engagement, less community support, reduced access and connection to spaces and places to be active, and are less likely to see being active as an important part of New Zealand culture than their neurotypical peers.

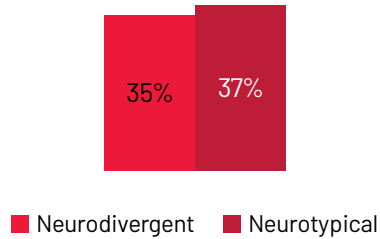
Young people – Relationship with being active % agree



6. Relationship with being active and motivations

Consistent across all young people is having the opportunity to explore their culture through physical activity.

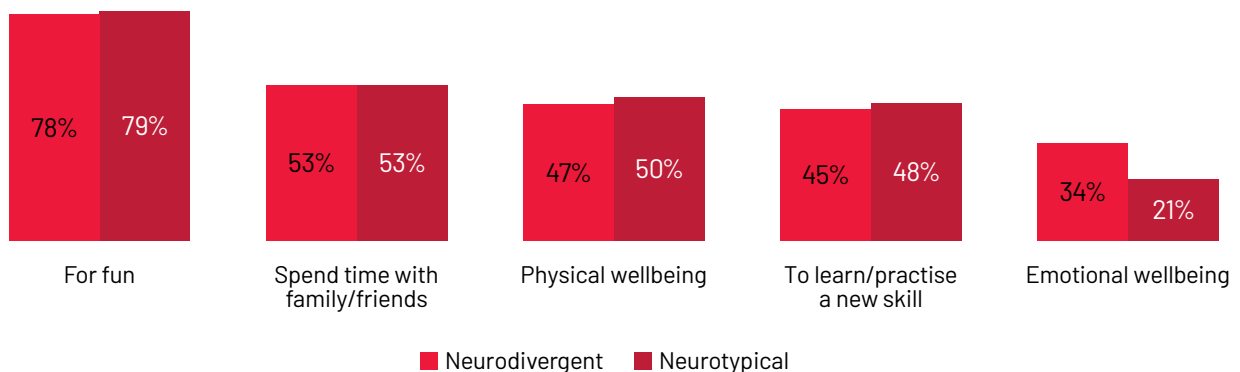
Young people – "I have the chance to explore my whakapapa/heritage and culture through physical activity"
% agree



The top motivations for being active are also consistent across all young people – fun, spending time with family and friends, physical wellbeing and learning/practising a new skill.

However, neurodivergent young people differ from their neurotypical peers in that they are more strongly motivated to be active for emotional wellbeing – 34% compared with 21%. This is consistent across gender and age.

Young people – Motivations
% agree



7. Intersectionality and broader wellbeing context

Neurodivergent young people who responded to the Active NZ survey are also more likely to:

- Be disabled
- Identify with the Rainbow community
- Experience poor mental health.

8. How can we better support neurodivergent young people to be active?

- Emphasise wellbeing as a key motivator, highlighting the emotional and mental health benefits of being active.
- Target inactivity among disengaged young males and explore how gaming could encourage participation.
- Make environments more inclusive by reducing pressure and social barriers, especially in competitive, club, and PE settings.
- Address practical barriers by improving affordability, access to suitable local spaces, and supportive peer and social environments.
- Build physical literacy by strengthening confidence, competence, understanding, and family and community support.



Summary

Neurodivergent young people participate in physical activity at broadly similar levels to their neurotypical peers, but overall face greater risk of disengagement, more and stronger barriers and less supportive environments.

Improving participation requires a shift from standard approaches towards inclusive, wellbeing-focussed systems that reflect their motivations, preferences and needs.



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