

Young Women Profile

SEPTEMBER 2021



SPORT
NEW ZEALAND
IHI AOTEAROA

Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa
New Zealand Government

A resource to assist organisations
in understanding the needs of young
women, and support quality experiences
in active recreation and sport.

About this resource

It is well-known that teenage girls and young women face diverse barriers to participation in sport and active recreation. This is corroborated by national research that highlights a strong decline in physical activity for this demographic.

This report provides key insights into the perceptions of young women aged 12-17 – their behaviour, experiences, needs and desires – to help those working with young women navigate these complexities and support young women on their physical activity journey. It is designed to be a starting point for those looking to better engage with and provide for young women as we recognise that not all environments and communities are the same, and young women are a diverse group with different and evolving needs.

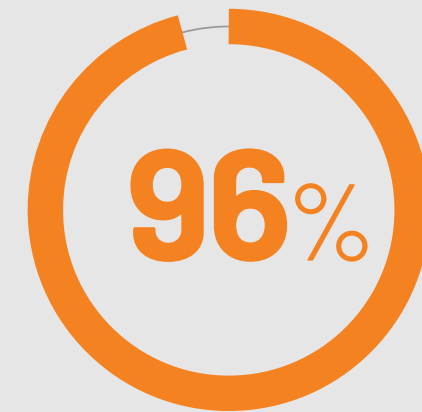
Young women experience a complex range of personal and social factors in their lives that influence their involvement in sport and active recreation, resulting in a drop-off in participation and engagement.

Key insights and perceptions



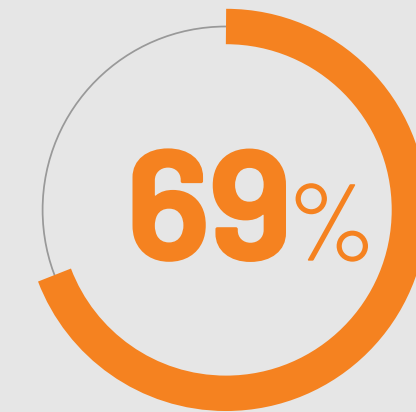
9 in 10 young women want to be active.

As young women get older, the activities they participate in change from organised physical activities to self-driven activities.



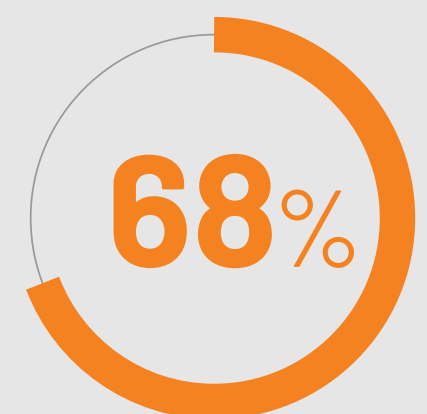
96% of young women understand why taking part in physical activity is good for them.

By age 17, the top three activities young women undertake are running, workouts and walking: all informal activities.



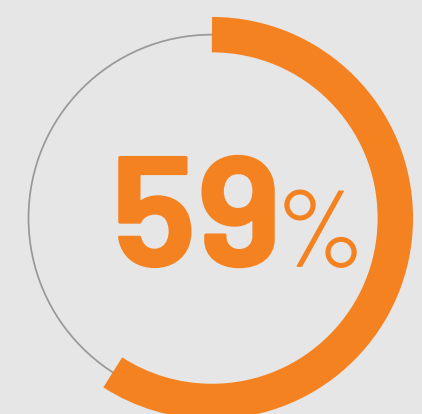
69% participate for fun overall, but this decreases from 80% at age 12, to 51% by age 17.

Maintaining social interaction and having fun are two of the main motivators for young women to continue participating in physical activity.



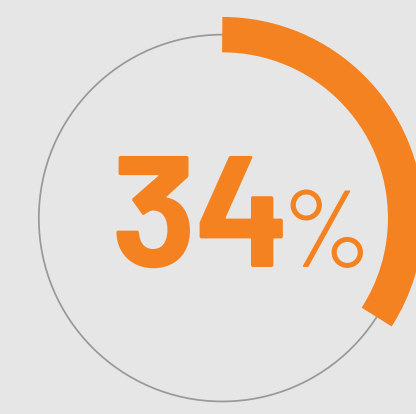
68% will avoid participating in activities in their day-to-day lives when they do not feel confident about their bodies.

A positive environment complete with friends allows girls and young women the opportunity to forget their fear of judgement and simply enjoy being active.



By the time they reach 17, 59% of young women state they are too busy to participate.

When time is precious, young women will choose to spend their time doing something they enjoy and where they feel confident and supported. Unless physical activity offers that support and enjoyment, they are unlikely to access it.



34% of young women use technology for physical activity, and this increases from 31% at age 12 to 40% at age 17.

Some young women will elect to pursue physical activity at home, often using technology such as YouTube to provide guidance.

How are young women participating?



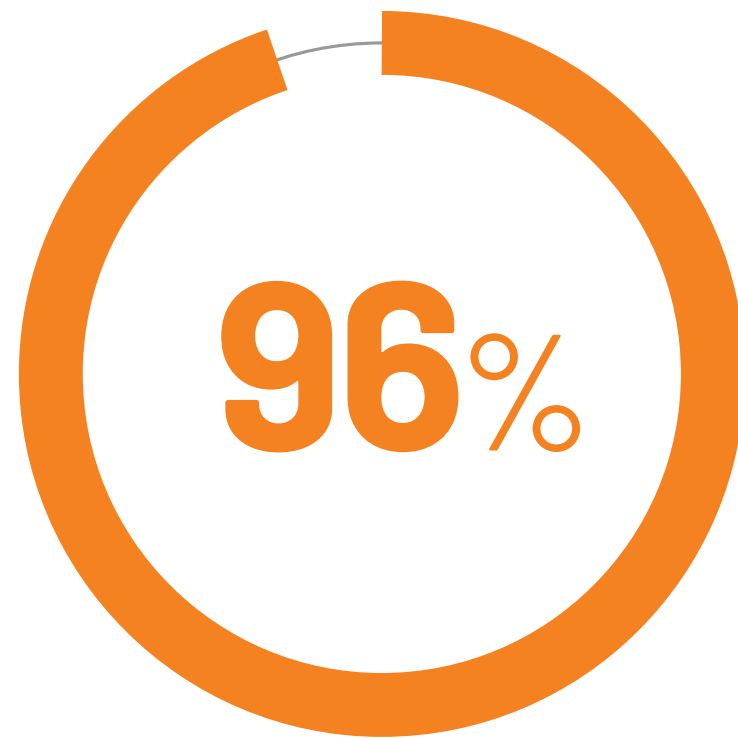
How are young women participating?

Understanding the value of physical activity

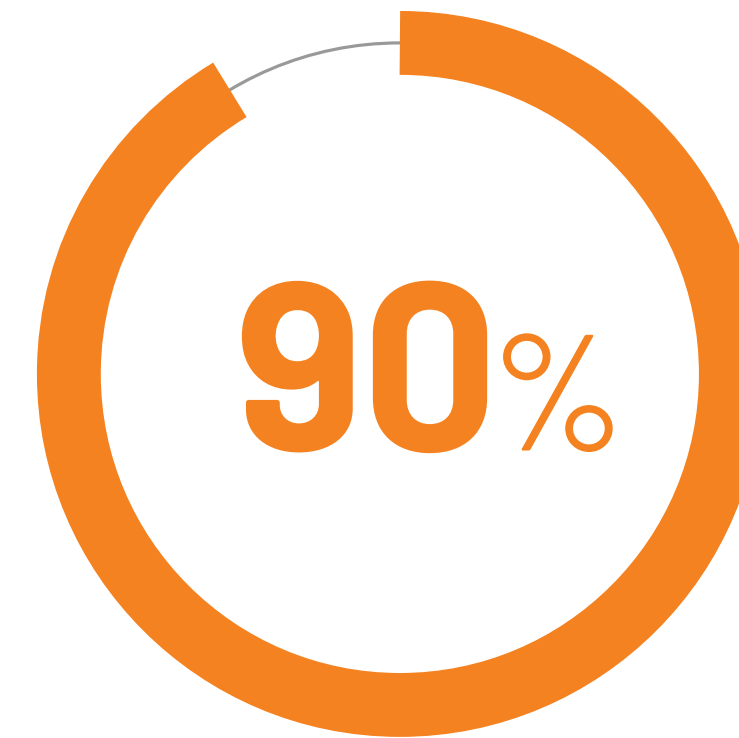
This evidence suggests that there is a clear difference between how young women behave and their knowledge and intentions.

It is important that the reasons for the difference are understood in order to design experiences that support young women and provide opportunities to establish a life-long love of being active.

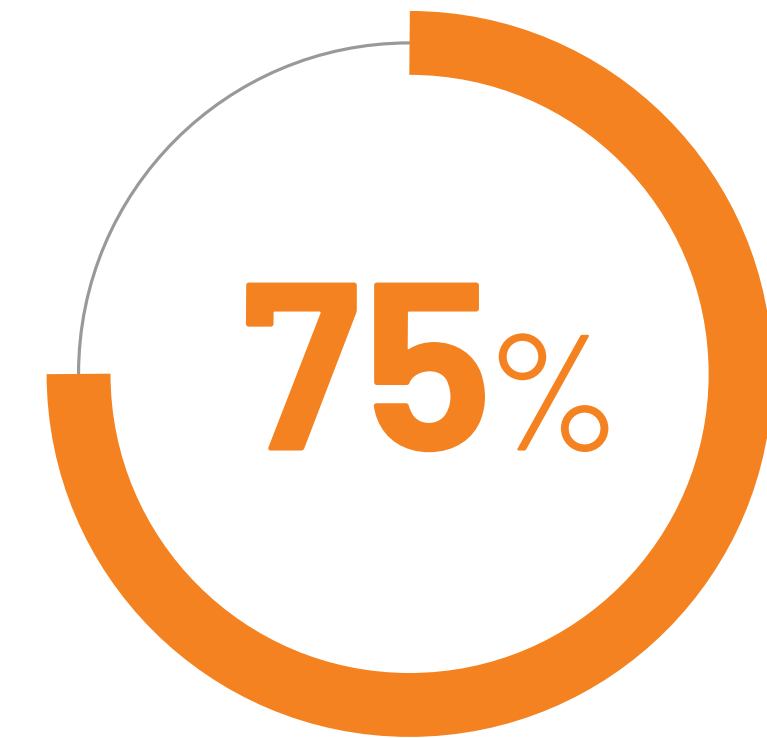
The good news is that young women understand the value of physical activity and want to be more active.



Of young women understand why **taking part in physical activity is good** for them



Of young women **want to be active**



Of young women aged 12 **want to increase participation** and this rises to 83% by age 17

How are young women participating?

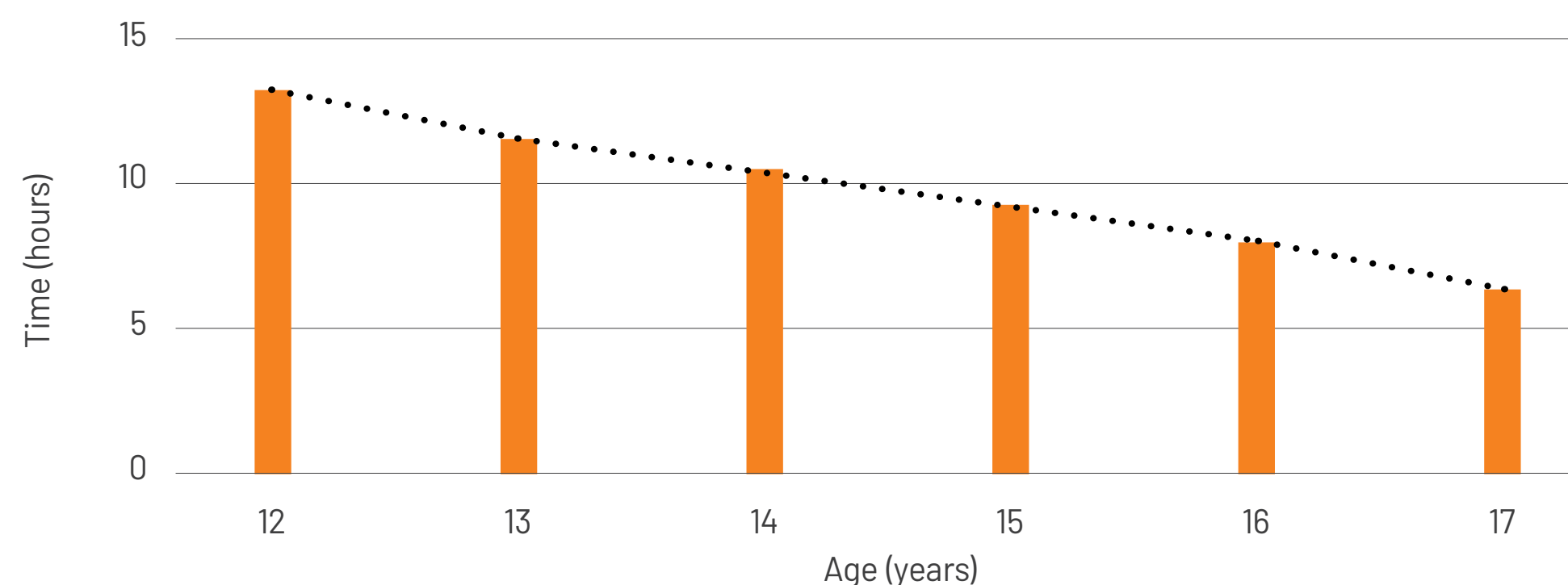
Participation over time

There is a consistent decline in participation as young women get older. Māori and Pacific young women spend more time being active than their Pākehā counterparts while Asian young women have significantly lower levels of participation.¹

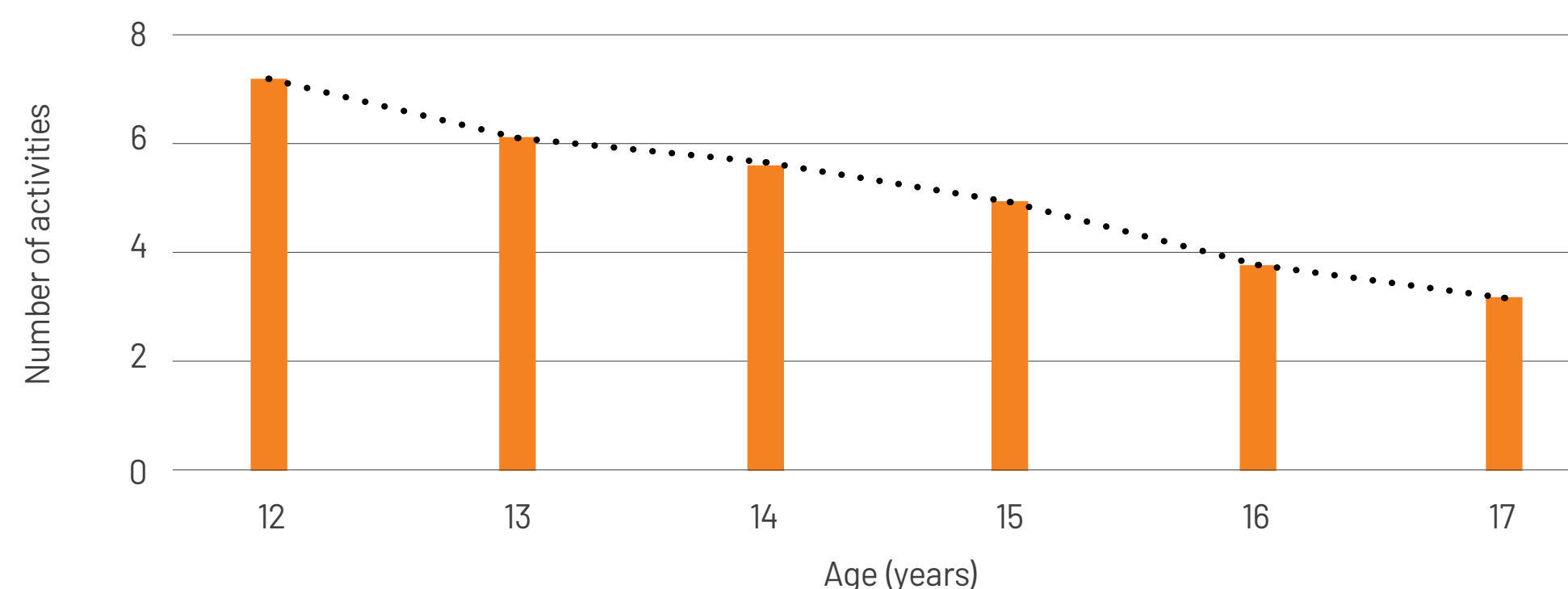
However, for the most part, the experience of growing up female in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the relationship with physical activity within that, is more similar than it is different across ethnicities.^{1,3}

The number of activities young women participate in also decreases with age. Amongst other reasons such as increased pressure on time, this is a reflection of how young women narrow their focus as they figure out what they enjoy, It is also a function of young women believing they need to be good at an activity to join in or continue participating.^{1,3} Later sections of this report explore the reasons behind the declining participation in more detail.

Average time spent participating weekly (hours)



Number of activities



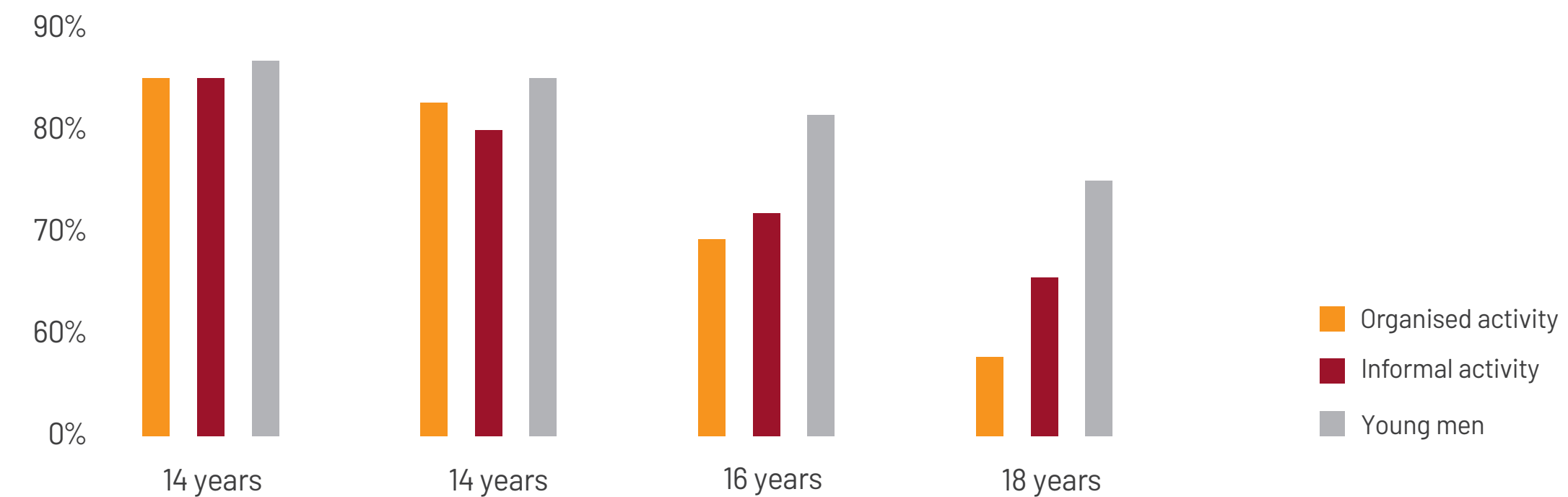
How are young women participating?

Activities over time

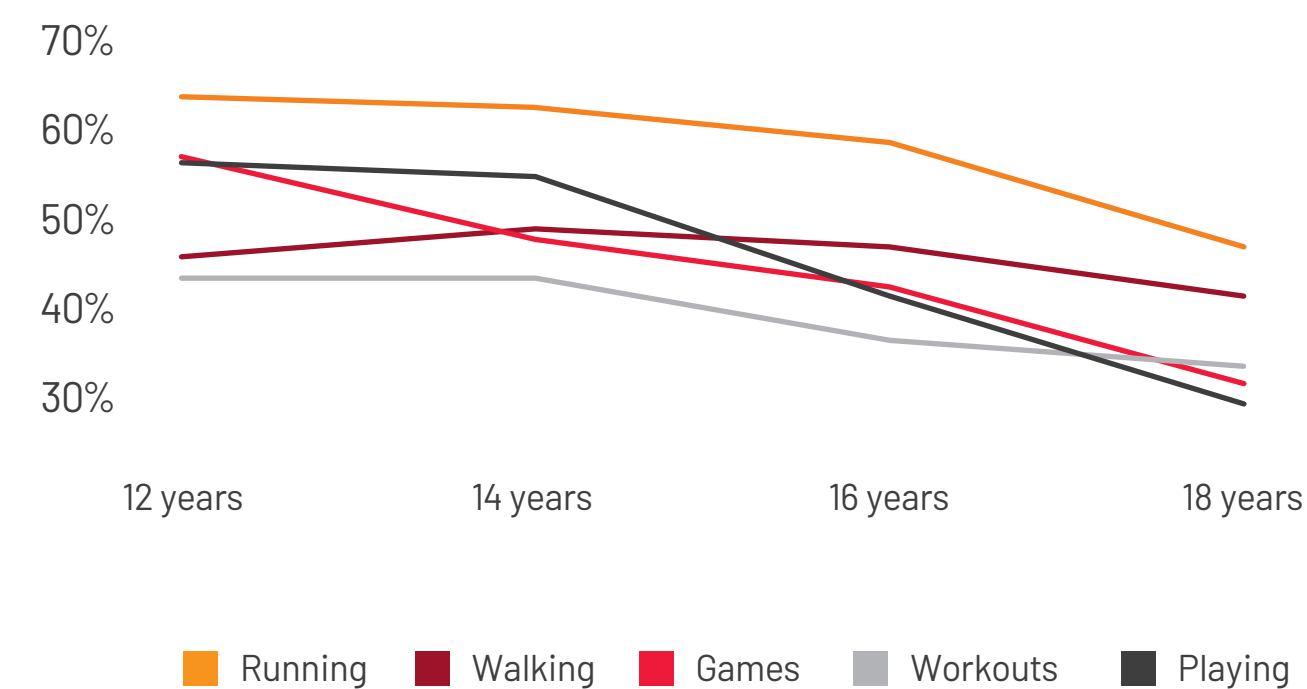
From age 15, the number of physical activities young women participate in drops by 29% compared with 18% for young men. As young women get older, the kind of activities they participate in also changes from organised physical activities to self-driven activities. By age 17, the top three activities young women undertake are running, workouts and walking: all informal activities. The average number of hours young women spend informally participating in activity is significantly lower than it is for young men.¹

If young women drop out of organised activity it does not necessarily mean they will participate in or increase informal activity.³ As we will discover, young women struggle to maintain motivation to participate in informal activities, leading to a decline in overall activity levels.

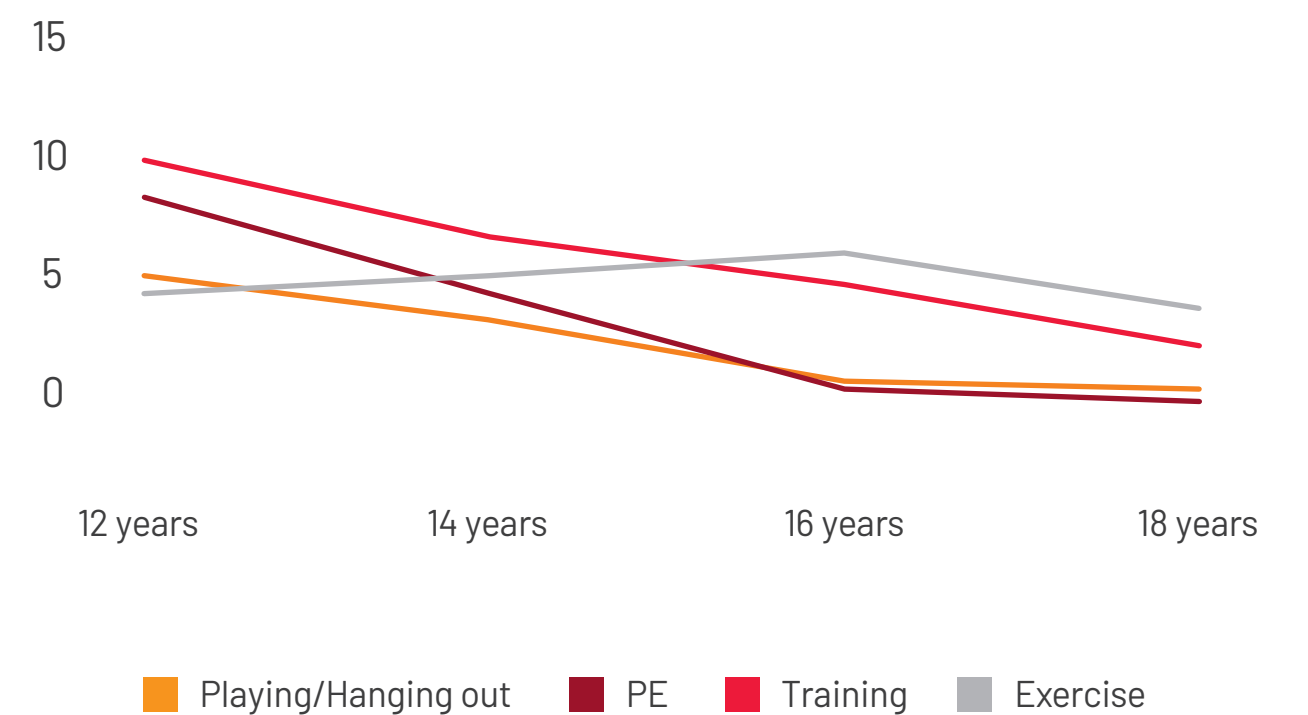
Participation in organised and informal activity



Top activities



Top participation by hours



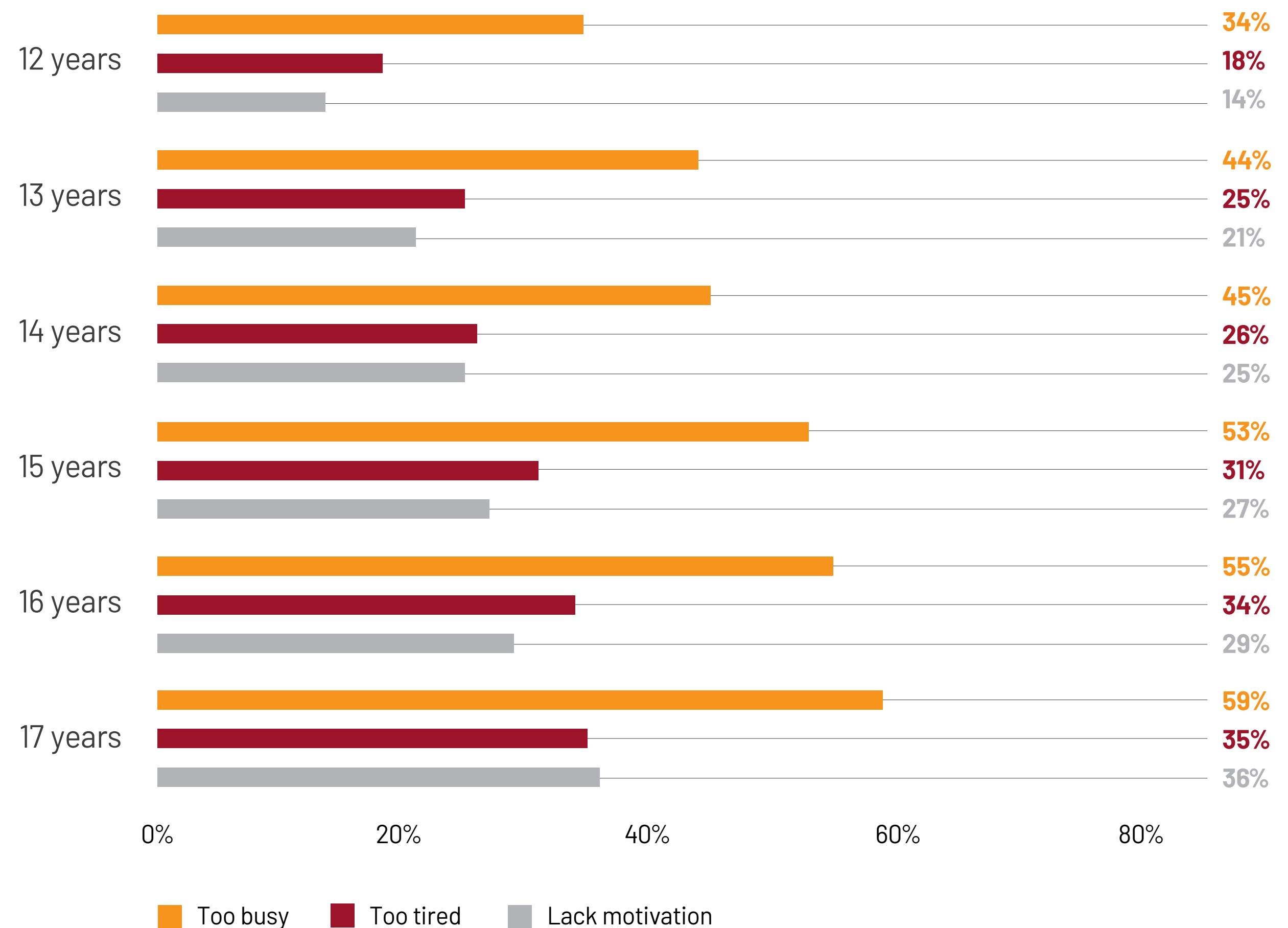
How are young women participating?

Barriers to participation

Overall, young women experience more barriers to participation in physical activity than young men, regardless of their participation levels and whether they want to increase their participation or not.¹

In addition, compared with young men, young women who want to increase their participation are more likely to identify 'too busy', 'struggle to motivate myself', 'I am not confident enough', 'I have no one to do it with' and 'I don't want to fail' as barriers.¹

The top three barriers young women aged 12-17 have to being physically active are being too busy, too tired, and lacking motivation.



When time is precious, young women will choose to spend their time doing something they enjoy and where they feel confident and supported. Unless physical activity offers that support and enjoyment, they are unlikely to access it.

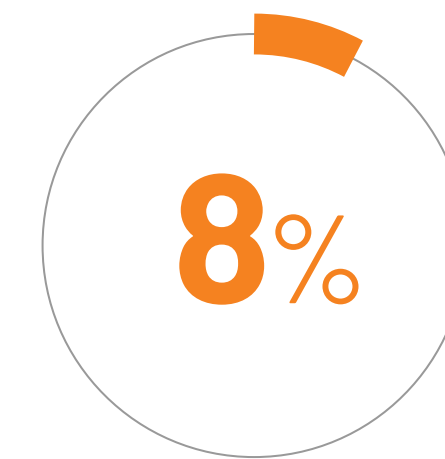
A New Zealand qualitative study commissioned by Sport NZ in 2020 focused on how young women felt about physical activity. It found that the level of engagement in activity underpinned the barriers to participation mentioned above.³ This data has been cross-referenced with quantitative data to understand young women's attitudes and beliefs towards physical activity.

Young women who are disengaged or moderately engaged are more likely to be influenced by environmental and social factors when it comes to maintaining their activity levels.

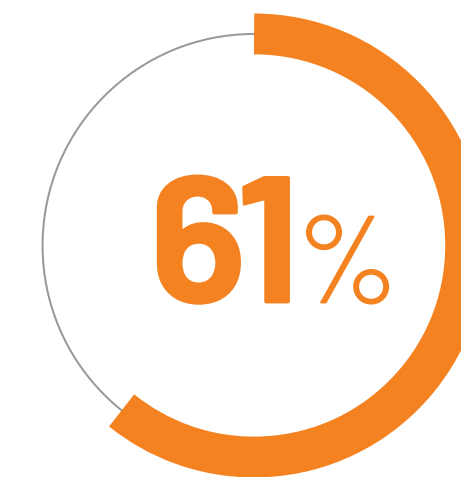
For example, within the qualitative interviews they may initially say they are 'too busy' or 'too tired' to participate in physical activity; however the discussion uncovered they were intimidated by an environment, or worried about their performance.³ In comparison, highly engaged young women will prioritise physical activity.

In summary, engagement suffers when fun disappears, particularly for moderately engaged young women. Social judgement, body confidence, and confidence in their abilities all factor into young women's decision to disengage with physical activity or not, as we discuss later in this report.

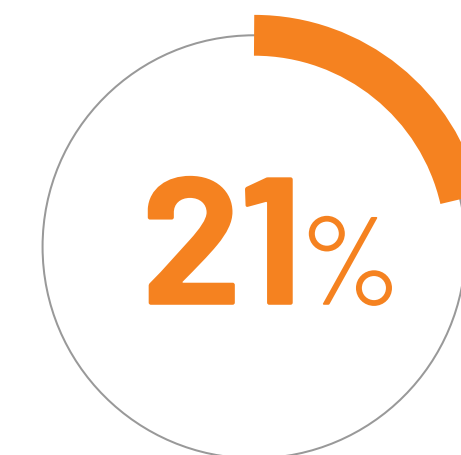
Young women choose to spend their time doing something they enjoy, and where they feel supported.



Disengaged
Will engage in physical activity under duress



Moderately Engaged
Enjoy physical activity but environmental factors impact this



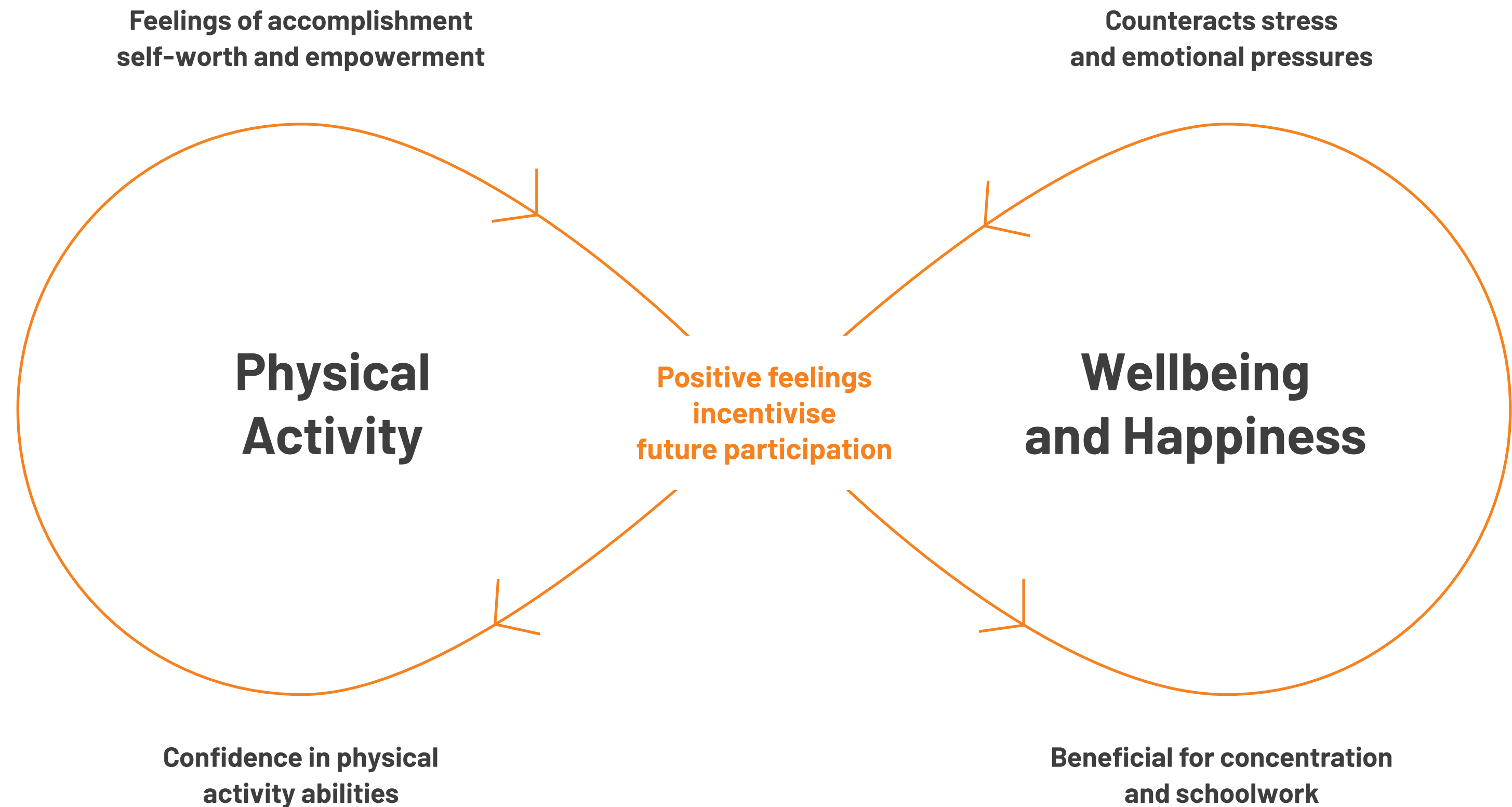
Highly Engaged
Will prioritise physical activity

What's important to young women?

What's important to young women?

Understanding key motivators and influences

This section introduces what research indicates are key motivators and influences for young women's participation in physical activity. The following section provides more detailed qualitative and quantitative data, with the aim of providing a base-level understanding of the perspectives of young women, in order to identify the opportunities to develop quality opportunities and support for them.



Overall, feelings of enjoyment, happiness and fun play a key role in young women's positive physical activity experiences. This relationship flows both ways, with the benefits of being active having a positive impact on wellbeing and satisfaction. Young women who participate in over seven hours of physical activity a week have higher levels of happiness and are more likely to find concentrating on schoolwork easier after being active.¹

The importance of 'fun' in physical activity cannot be over-emphasised; it outweighs and counteracts the stress, emotional pressures, and social and family complications of young women's daily lives. Many young women report the outcomes of physical activity are feelings of accomplishment (through completion not skill), self-worth and empowerment. This sense of accomplishment incentivises continued or future participation.³

“ I'd prefer her to be doing something a bit more competitive, she's good enough. But she just wants to be with her friends and muck about. ”

“ Beforehand I normally will dread it, but afterwards I am always really happy, talkative and motivated to do more... ”

Maintaining social interaction and having fun are two of the main motivators for young women to continue participating in physical activity. However many young women believe that participation for fun is not universally endorsed by adults in their lives. This leads some young women to believe that an activity must have elements of competition or skill development for them to continue participating in it.³

Young women also believe schools expect participation to have a performance element, which is measurable and competitive. They believe schools demonstrate limited support for non-competitive activities and can make it quite challenging to form socially oriented, friendship-based teams. Many schools are focused on trials and putting participants together based on their ability rather than their social connectedness.³

“ I guess when you get to that age you kind of decide if you want to do it seriously or just for the fun of it. I wanted to do it for the fun of it, but like everyone else was getting really good. The people who I was like really close with in my classes, we all just kind of went for the fun of it. In order to dance next year, you have to pass your exams. You have to put more time and effort in (to pass), and I didn't want to do that.”

As well as being a motivator, the influence of friends can inhibit young women from joining or continuing with an activity. Some young women believe physical activity interferes with their opportunity to socialise because their friends do not participate. Young women are:

- 1. more likely than young men to have friends who are not physically active**
- 2. less likely to have friends who favour the same activities as they do.**

In the United Kingdom, 63% of young women would not play sport or exercise without a friend by their side⁶ and this is also evident in Aotearoa New Zealand.¹ Friends who participate in the same physical activity act as a buffer to dropping out.³

When young women talk about really enjoying physical activity, it is a situation in which they are having so much fun they have forgotten that barriers exist. This includes those who have low engagement with physical activity.

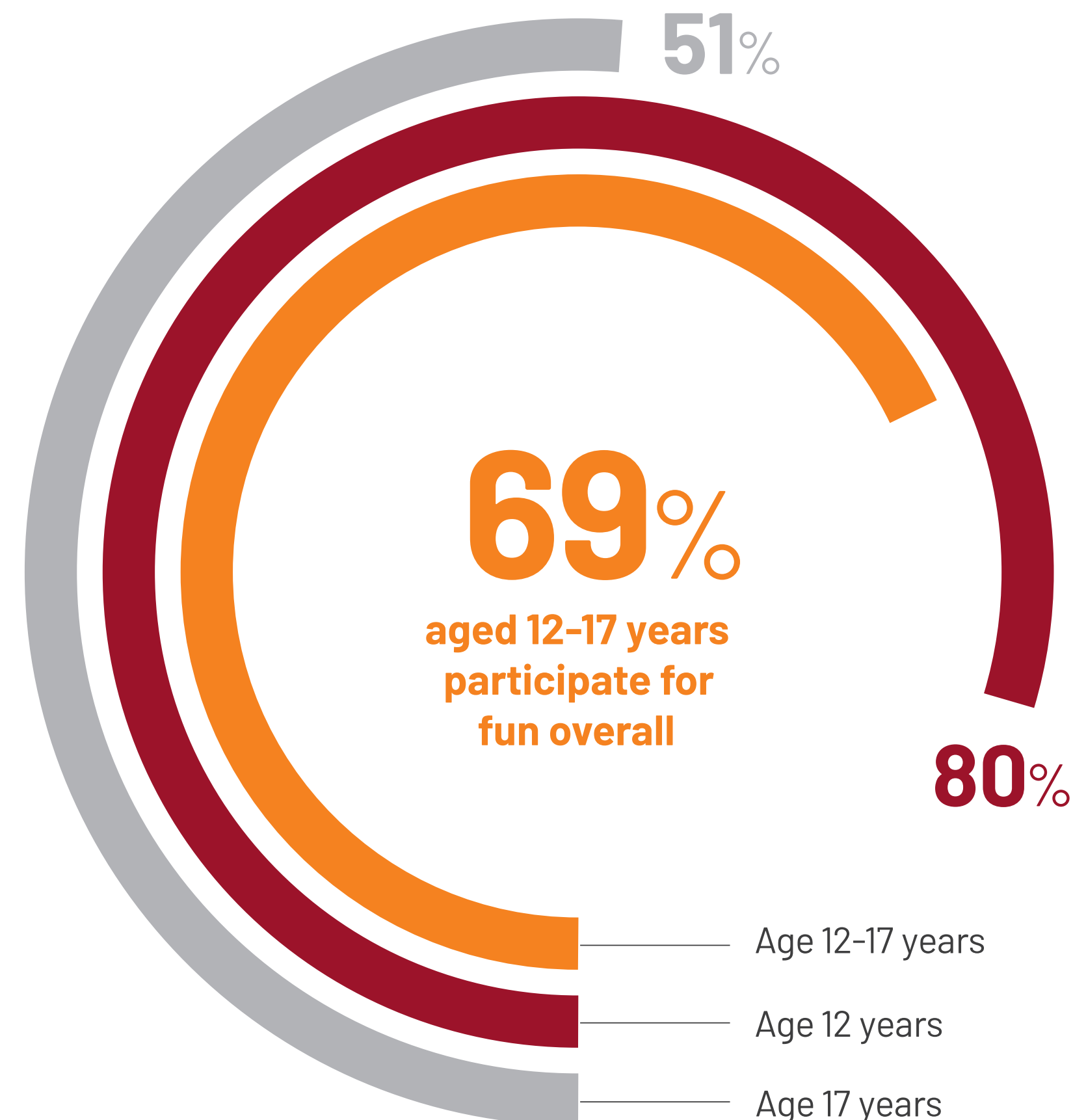
What do young women want?

What do young women want?

I want...to have fun and socialise

Throughout their teenage years young women believe that organised physical activity becomes increasingly serious and competitive. This includes sport, physical education at school and other structured activities such as dance. The increasingly competitive nature of the physical activities on offer is a consistent deterrent for many young women.⁴ For many, the fun component of physical activity disappears, so they are no longer motivated to participate.³

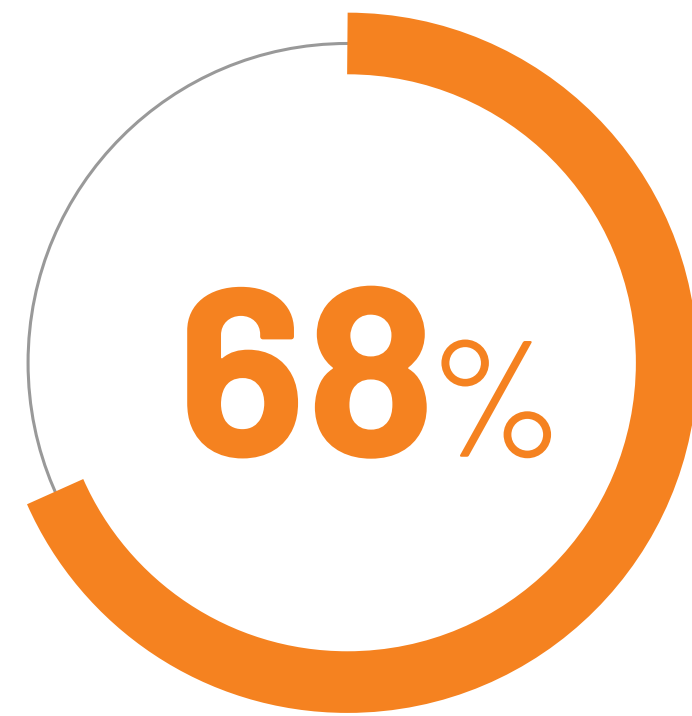
“ It became too serious, I just wanted to have fun with my friends. ”



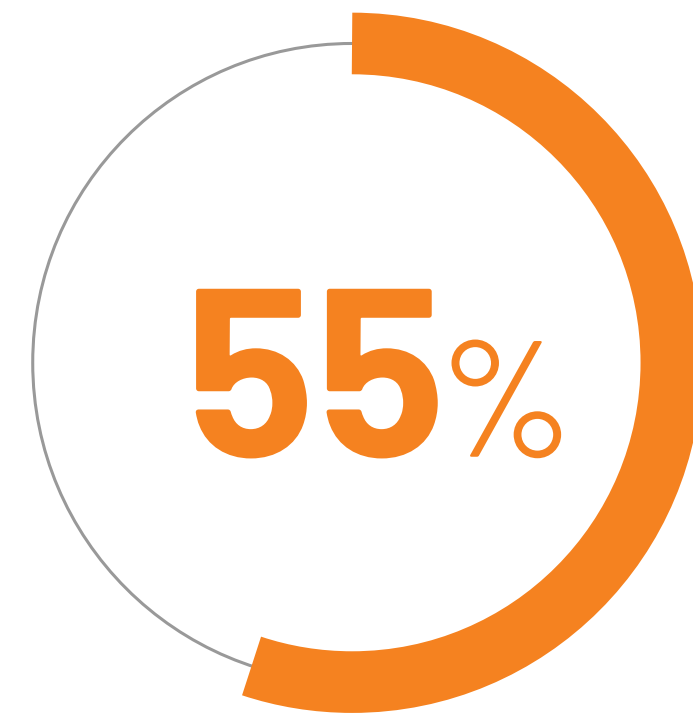
What do young women want?

I want...to feel safe to participate and not judged

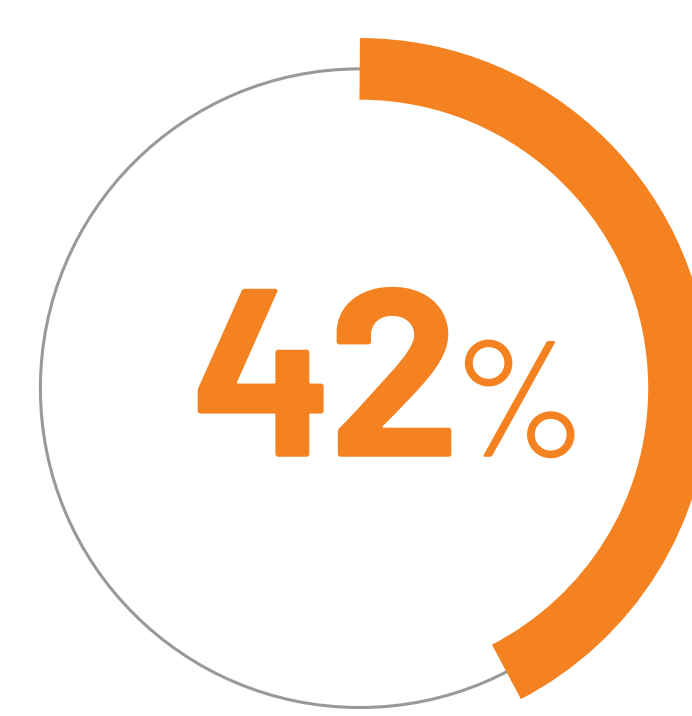
Young women feel that judgement is prevalent in every facet of their lives. Three in four young women are concerned about how they look every day.



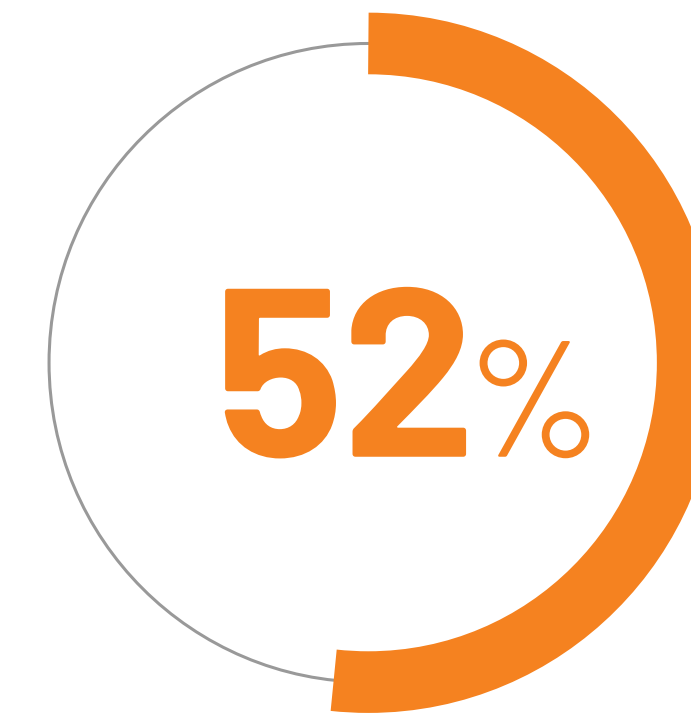
Will **avoid activities** when they don't feel confident about their bodies



Feel judged on their appearance by others **when they go out**



Feel judged when they are **on the street**



Feel judged on **social media**

What do young women want?

I want...to feel safe to participate

The competitive and comparative basis of sport and PE are environments that expose young women to judgement by both their peers and adults present in that environment. This has been reinforced over time by constant comparison and the measurement of capability in all physical pursuits.³ One in two young women says she does not enjoy PE or fitness classes at school.¹

Young women desire safe spaces free from judgement, or where they feel less vulnerable to judgement. They will choose not to participate in environments that condone such judgement and will drop out of activities when they feel continually compared to others.³

Some young women will elect to pursue physical activity at home, often using technology such as YouTube to provide guidance. More young women across all ages use technology while being active.¹

“ Being around crowds of people watching me exercise can give me anxiety and restrict me from going to places like the gym, this is something I wish to overcome and grow out of.³ ”

“ I don't like people looking at me when I exercise, like judging me. They might tell their friends, I saw Ava running weirdly. It's awkward. I used to do hard core runs in my garden because I didn't want to run in public. I went back and forth for ages because I didn't want people to see me.³ ”

“ You can't wear your own fashion as people will think it looks ridiculous. Girls are horrible, honestly. You see girls sitting at one end of the bus stop and they'll look at you and you'll suddenly feel scared.³ ”

“ They'd punish us with fitness. The coaches would count how many mistakes in a game and, like, things you shouldn't have done... just like small mistakes and then you'd do that many shuttles. If you couldn't do the shuttles then the whole team would get theirs doubled. That's why I don't really feel safe there, especially with the girls that do sport at my school.³ ”

What do young women want?

I want...to keep fit and healthy

Young women believe there are societal pressures to observe certain weight and health standards, and this affects their reasons for participating in physical activity.³

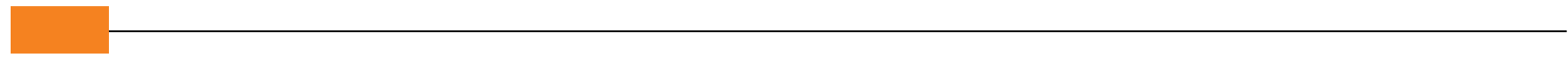
An Otago study of young people aged 15–18 years (2016) found that 54% of young women believed their body was “too fat” while only 22% of young men felt the same way.⁵ A 2018 youth wellbeing report of those aged 12–24 years found body image was a top issue for 46% and 82% of those with body image concerns identified as female.⁸ It is not surprising that concerns about body image underpin the relationship some young women have with physical activity.

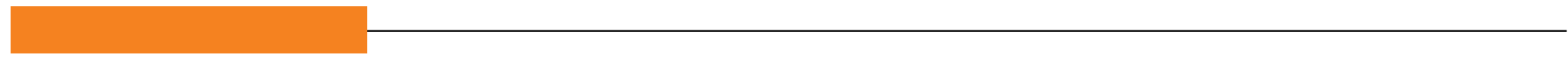
Young women are aware the social media world of beauty does not reflect reality; however despite rejecting unrealistic physical ideals intellectually, they feel the emotional pressure to be a different shape. The continued societal emphasis on body image means many young women are resistant to untrusted sources discussing their bodies without permission, irrespective of whether the discourse is positive, negative or neutral.³

At age 12  **45%**

At age 17¹  **60%**

54% of young women aged 12–17 years **participate for fitness or health** - increasing from 45% at age 12 to 60% at age 17¹

At age 12  **6%**

At age 16¹  **23%**

For young women, **participation to lose or maintain weight** increases from 6% to 23%.

Body confidence can significantly impact how young women feel about taking part in physical activity as well as their willingness to continue participating, particularly in public settings.⁷ Situations where young women feel physically on show are demotivating and young women will remove themselves from situations where they feel unaccepted physically or socially.³

Whether or not body image is the motivator to participate, positive outcomes of being active are the same. Positive outcomes include feeling 'better about myself', 'more capable', 'more confident' and 'less stressed'.³

Creating environments that promote body confidence without directly referencing weight or shape is therefore important for ensuring young women feel safe to participate.

“ Body image is a big thing. I have a friend who is like bigger and taller all over. She loves to dance, but she got bullied out of it by the girls in her class because she wasn't skinny or tiny.”³ //

“ I can be happy before a workout then I'll get into a gym or dance studio and feel judged or that I'm not good enough and I end up leaving feeling terrible about myself.”³ //

“ For girls, people look at them and their bodies like especially. If a girl's fat they just straight up shame them and stuff. Like you wish you were a boy, so you didn't have to worry about your breasts and stuff like that. Like how big your bum is, and your period and stuff like that.”³ //

What do young women want?

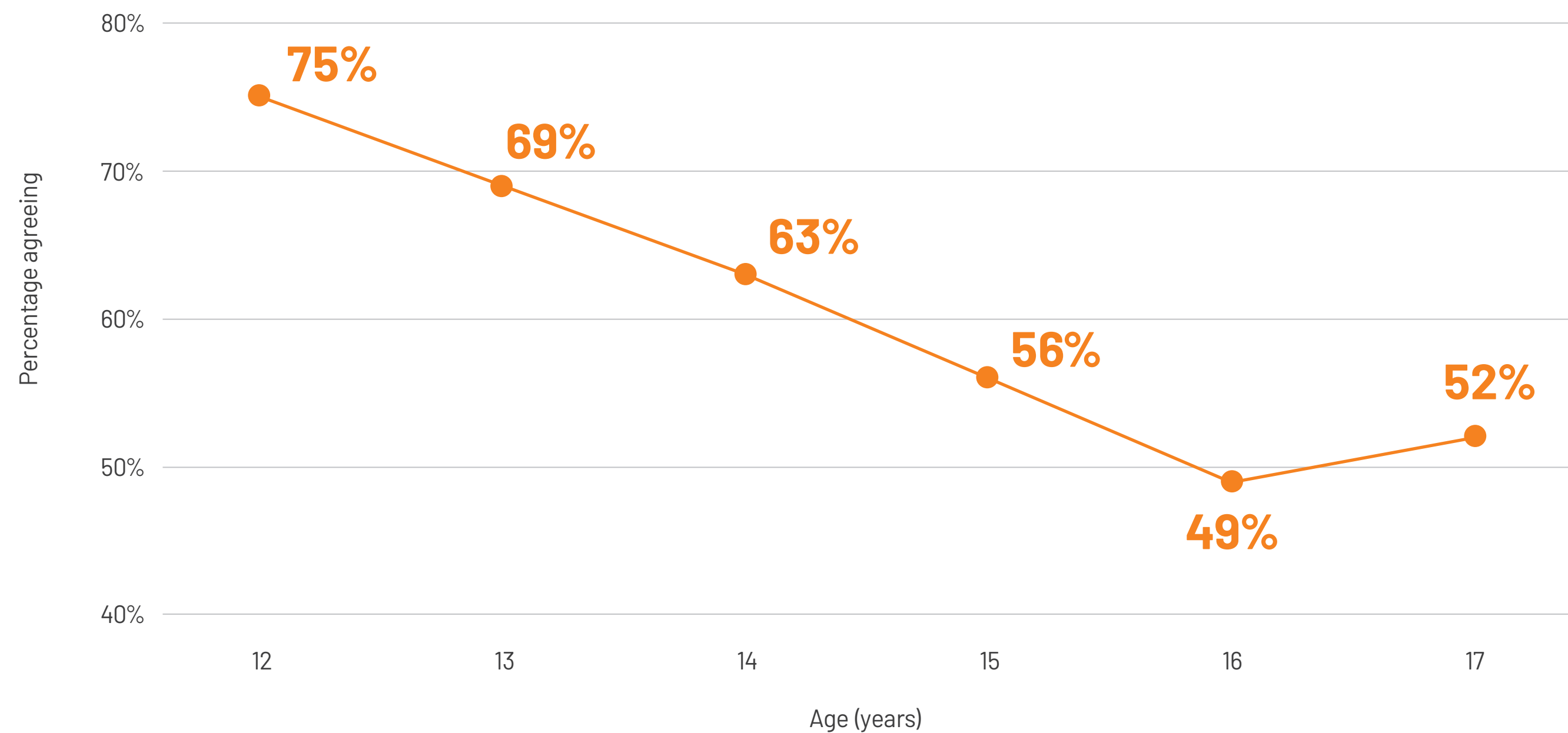
I want...to feel confident in what I am doing

Young women's confidence decreases during their teenage years. Agreement with the statement 'I feel confident to take part' declines from 76% at age 12 to 53% at age 17.¹

There are two components to confidence: confidence in abilities and confidence in the environment.

Participating in physical activity makes many young women feel better about themselves, increasing their feelings of capability and competence, and bolstering their confidence. Confidence is the result of physical activity, not the main reason for participation. This sense of confidence is based on personal achievement rather than ability.³

I am good at physical activities



Confidence in their own abilities is challenged when young women feel judged poorly on their physical competence. No matter how capable they are, their confidence and perceptions of competence are affected by negative social and environmental feedback. They place greater emphasis on others' attitudes towards their competence, than on their actual skill level. Being in situations where others make young women feel physically inferior reduces their confidence and causes them to disengage from physical activity.³

A lack of confidence in the safety of the environment and culture of a specific physical activity, will negatively affect young women's participation. As young women get older, the more competitive nature of sport promotes an increasingly pressured environment that can drive them away from participating. Young women lacking in confidence will not participate in trials and may find it

difficult to re-join sports they enjoy.⁴ If young women lose their confidence to participate, they are more likely to drop out.³

In comparison, physical activities with a more social emphasis have the same wellbeing benefits as competitive physical activity, while young women also feel better about themselves and more confident in addition to enjoying a potentially less stressful environment.

Challenging or intimidating physical activity environments are also experienced by young women when they participate outside traditional sporting environments, e.g., gyms. Feeling unsafe or intimidated will discourage young women from participating and if they are not confident that a new environment will be safe and/or welcoming, they are unlikely to try to participate in the first place.

It is clear the confidence levels of girls and young women impact on their willingness to participate in or continue with an activity. Welcoming and supportive environments that focus on positive outcomes and encourage young women to evaluate their competence favourably are critical to keeping them engaged in physical activity.

“ It was just like really like intense, and especially with like racing and like doing time trials and like testing. I’ve never been so stressed and anxious. For like weeks before a test I’d just be like stressed. Everyone is trying to be better than each other. It’s just the environment.³ ”

“ School is not that encouraging. They want the naturally gifted ones, don’t want newbies. If there are fun social sports events at school e.g., mini games, they are dominated by the athletic people. They don’t want average people to slow them down.³ ”

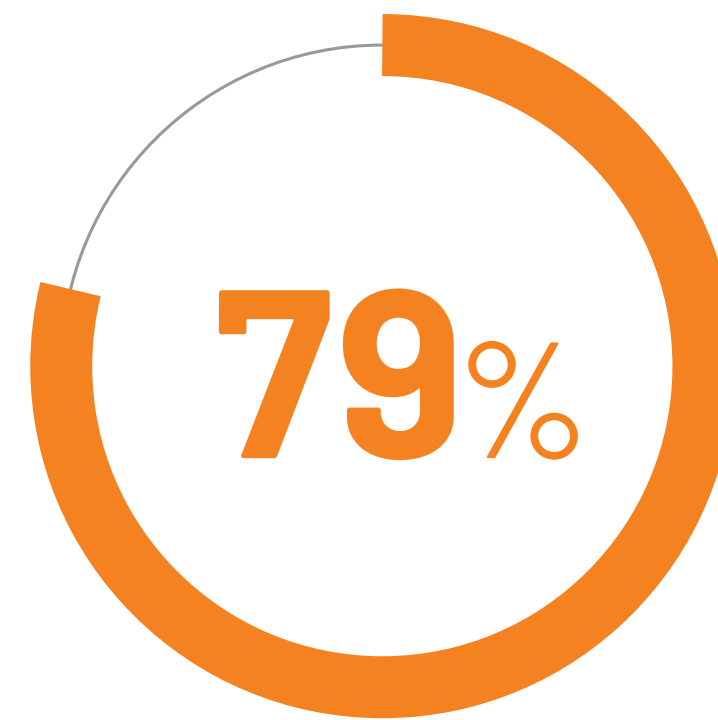
“ I gave up football because it was too competitive, and I was always letting my team down. ”

“ One year I almost quit (rep) netball as someone told me I wasn’t good enough to be in that team. I just feel on the outside and just don’t feel accepted.³ ”

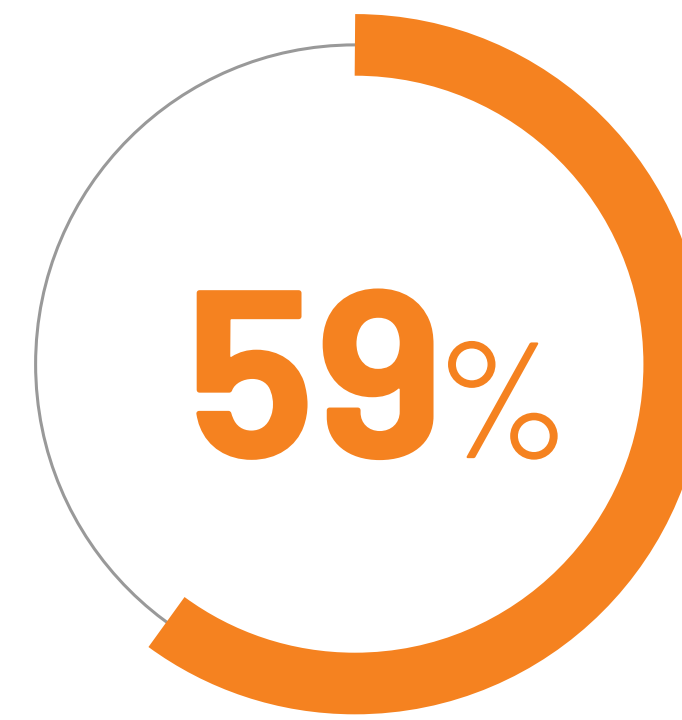
What do young women want?

I want...activities to fit around my other commitments

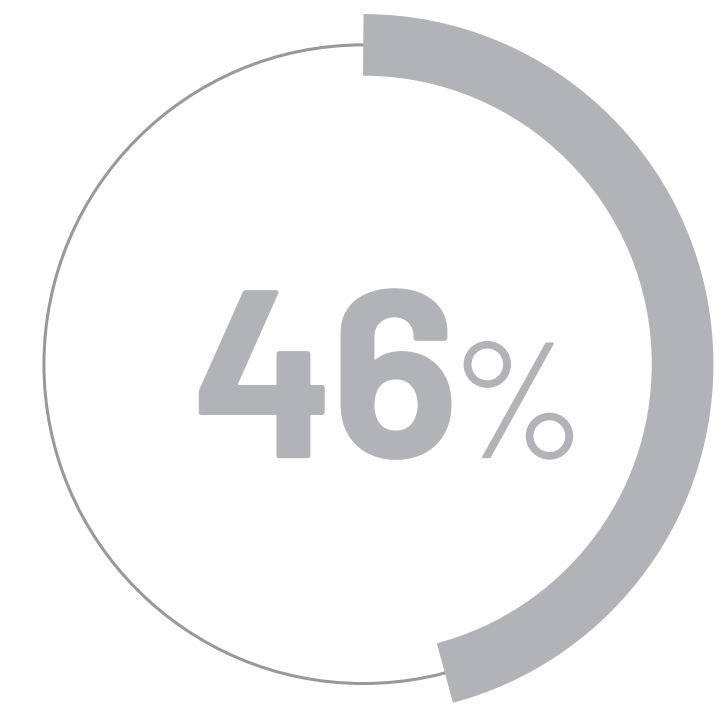
As they get older, young women cut back on a variety of activities, not just physical activity. As young women move through their teenage years, they experience increased competition for their time. Obtaining National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) qualifications places greater demands on time and contributes to increased mental and emotional strain as young women try to focus on achieving and maintaining good grades. In addition, the reduction in physical activity, among other activities, corresponds with beginning employment for those aged 15 to 17 years.⁴



79% of secondary school students indicated that schoolwork was the main reason for their **lack of time to participate** in physical activity.⁴



By the time they reach 17, 59% of young women state they **are too busy to participate** compared with 46% of young men.¹



Many young women find it difficult to commit to structured activity or sport if they either: a) are aware they might have difficulty maintaining that commitment for the season, or b) believe the environment punishes them when they demonstrate a (perceived) lack of commitment. At a competitive level, sport is seen to be time-consuming.⁹ In addition, different sporting commitments clash as sports seasons are lengthened.⁴

The higher the pressure for pure performance, the greater the likelihood young women will opt out. Even amongst young women who focus on and enjoy competition and achievement at a more elite level, the expectation placed on them by others and their own desire to succeed can be hard for them to manage and become demotivating.

The solution for some young women is to transfer their sporting involvement to self-driven, unstructured activity. However, committing to unstructured activity is difficult. By age 17, 36% say 'it's too hard to motivate myself'.¹ It is more challenging for young women to maintain a commitment to physical activity without the external expectations to attend that are present in organised physical activity.³

Young women who successfully navigate this transition are more highly engaged with the benefits of physical activity and have built a support network of friends around them to help motivate them. They also motivate themselves with positive self-talk that focuses on the personal benefits of physical activity. This helps them to overcome the major barriers linked to starting the activity. Additionally, some young women have created a 'no judgement, no pressure' environment and ensure they have fun while participating.³

The opportunities for young women to participate in physical activity need to be balanced with increasing school workloads, after-school responsibilities, paid work, and the need to remain socially connected. While it is not possible to avoid clashing timetables, it is possible to create environments where young women want to prioritise physical activity because they know the environment is fun, supportive, builds up their confidence and will not punish them when life gets in the way.

“ It's just stress, school and sport and trying to fit it all into one day.³ ”

“ I've just got to the point where I'm more independent and I like doing things by myself. I don't like being forced to be around people anymore.³ ”

What insights tell us

Insights tell us young women understand the value physical activity plays in their lives and their wellbeing, and they want to do more.

Here are some tips for sport and active recreation providers to consider when planning, developing and delivering opportunities for young women in their teenage years .

How can activity better meet the needs of young women?

1 Focus on wellbeing

Enhance young women's holistic wellbeing by creating opportunities and environments in which young women can thrive, enhancing wellbeing rather than adding stress and pressure.

2 For young women, with young women

Take time to engage with them, understand their world, their fears, their concerns, their worries, their aspirations, their motivations and their wants.

3 Every move counts

Value and encourage all forms of physical activity and some physical activity is better than none.

4 For 'the feels'

'Feel good' moments are key motivators for young women and most of the time these come from fulfilling their own goals and aspirations, not from competitive results.

5 Free of judgement

Create physical and social environments free of judgement, embarrassment and expectation.

6 Young women as leaders

Create opportunities to give them a voice and a platform to lead.

7 The power of sisterhood

Use the power of friendship and peers to motivate young women to join and engage in activity by creating offerings that encourage social connection.

8 Digital lives

Think how you can use devices, digital platforms and social media to engage with young women and offer your products/activities.

9 Not just for the sporty

Quality physical activity can look like, feel like and sound like lots of different things, not just traditional sport.

10 Physical activity 'on demand'

Think about options that can fit around young women's lives, opportunities and activities that young women can decide when and how to engage with.

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