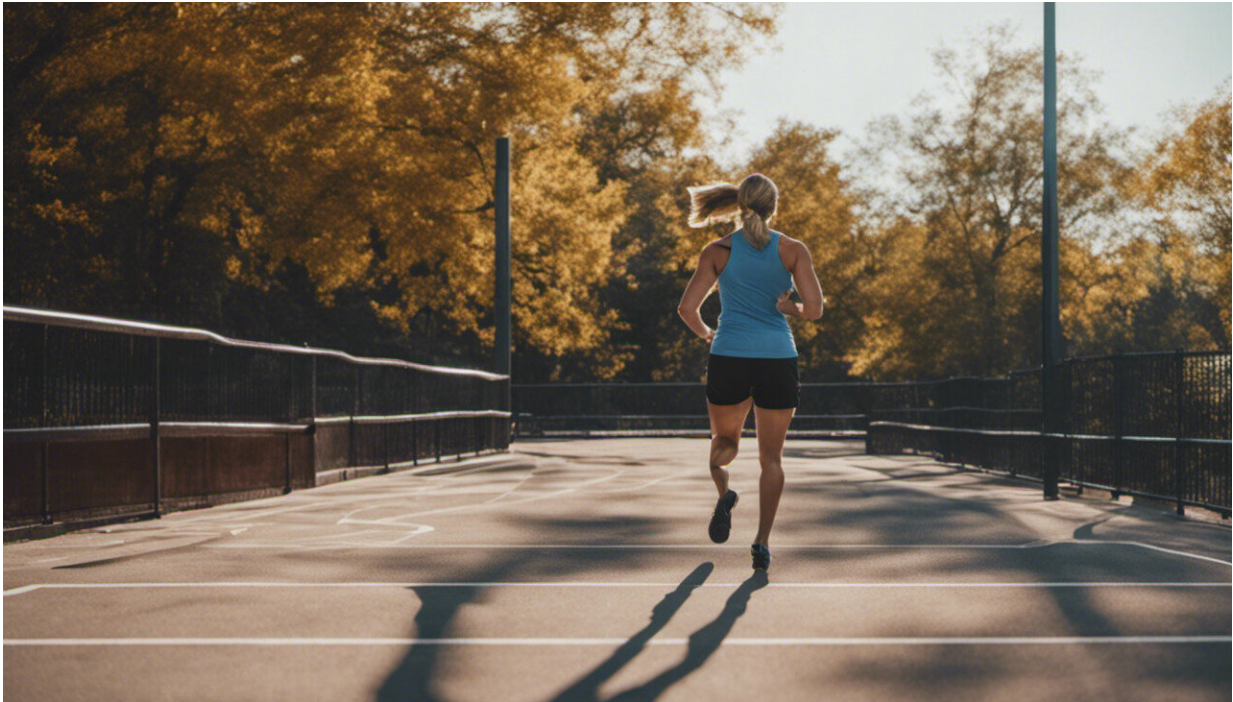


Physical education at school isn't like adult exercise, but maybe it should be

June 30 2023, by Ash Cox



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Physical education (PE) is a fundamental part of school life. It's more than just a series of lessons about how to kick a ball or run around a track. It should provide the [crucial groundwork](#) for a lifetime of physical activity. Often, though, the sport that children do in PE doesn't bear much resemblance to the physical activity we do as adults.

Historically, PE lessons have had a strong emphasis on [team sports](#) such as football and rugby. These sports undoubtedly have their merits, including promoting teamwork and competition.

But [recent data from Sport England](#) shows that adults tend to participate more in [fitness activities](#) such as circuit training, Pilates or weights, as well as running, walking and active travel such as cycling to work, rather than [team sports](#).

In [research with colleagues](#), I interviewed 32 [teenage boys](#) and found they wanted to participate in [fitness activities](#) that mirror those typically performed by adults, such as lifting weights. However, the boys told us that opportunities are lacking at school. "School is mostly football and that," one said. "When I go home I can do weights, it's just not something we do here [at school]."

Physical inactivity in the UK is tied to [alarming outcomes](#). It's linked with one in six deaths and exerts an economic burden of £7.4 billion each year on our society. Healthcare costs alone account for nearly £1 billion of this total. PE lessons could do more to introduce children to ways to stay active throughout their lives.

Competitive sports

[The UK government](#) recently demonstrated its commitment to PE in England. It pledged a further £600 million towards the PE and Sport Premium, a fund launched in 2013 to support children getting more active and to improve the quality of PE. In addition, it is providing an extra £22 million to support the School Games Organizers network, which promotes [competitive sports](#) and runs competitions within schools and between schools across the country.

While more money for PE in schools is always valuable, there is a risk

that this funding may reinforce traditional approaches to school sport. Teacher training in non-team sports and activities more aligned with lifelong physical activity may be overlooked.

[Our research with teachers has found](#) that they often lack knowledge to deliver activities focused on muscular fitness, such as weightlifting, or may have misconceptions about the suitability of this activity for young people. "We just don't have the knowledge and I wouldn't feel confident," one teacher said. Another commented:

"It would be useful to do fitness-type CPD [continuous professional development], but we don't really have the knowledge to share. We all go the gym, but what we can do with the pupils isn't really clear."

This is where a portion of the government's funding could be of great benefit. It could help enhance teaching practices in PE, possibly by the introduction of online [teacher training](#) platforms. These are popular in [medical professions](#) but are [surprisingly underused in PE teaching](#).

In my research with colleagues, I have explored how [this kind of online training](#) could help PE teachers. We provided an online training program to improve five teachers' knowledge of muscular fitness activity, a form of lifelong physical activity. It focused on activities such as weightlifting, gym exercise and plyometrics—explosive exercises focused on building muscle power, such as squat jumps—and on how these could be incorporated into the PE curriculum.

PE teachers told us that using this online platform allowed them to cover the material at their own pace, and talked about how they would include the content in their lessons.

Beyond school

Improving young people's access to physical activity that will help them stay active in adult life should be a priority [beyond schools](#).

Extracurricular initiatives, such as after-school programs and local sports clubs, could offer opportunities for physical activity such as circuit training that resembles adult fitness classes.

Another potential solution would be improved access to traditional gyms for those under the age of 18. Access for teenagers is currently limited, often comes at a significant cost, and may be restricted to use of only some equipment. More focus on teenagers at gyms could help cultivate a love for [physical activity](#) at an early age.

The government's funding commitment signals a clear dedication to PE. However, considering the potential long-term health implications, it's clear that a broader and more encompassing approach is needed across communities. Rather than PE focusing solely on traditional team sports, [young people](#) should be able to access a more diverse range of activities that reflects their changing interests and lifestyles.

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