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School sport: Link made between fitness and showering

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By Adam Brimelow

Health Correspondent, BBC News

More than half of secondary school boys and two-thirds of girls never shower after PE, a study suggests.

The paper, in the European Journal of Sports Sciences, concludes pupils who do not shower are less active.

The researchers, from the University of Essex, say children may be holding back in PE lessons because of anxiety about showering.

But the study did not establish whether those who did not shower were unwilling to exert themselves during PE.

Public Health England says schools have an important role to play in shifting attitudes to encourage physical activity.

This study says showering routinely after PE is extremely rare.

'Less fit'

Nearly four thousand children took part in the study, from eight state secondary schools across Essex, covering urban, rural, affluent and deprived neighbourhoods.

All had hot working showers in male and female changing rooms.

The researchers say children may be holding back in PE lessons - and therefore missing out on the health benefits - because of anxiety about needing a shower.

Those who did not shower were less active, and - among girls - less fit.

Just over one in two boys in the study said they never showered, about one in three said they did occasionally, and one in 10 said they always had a shower after PE.

Two out of three girls said they never took a shower after a PE lesson, and one in four said they did sometimes. About one in 13 said they always showered.

Dr Gavin Sandercock, who led the study, said he was surprised at how rare showering had become.

"We know that children aren't getting enough physical activity because we have seen their fitness declining; if the unwillingness to shower is a barrier to working up a sweat or playing sport it's something we need to tackle to promote activity at schools."

'Potential barrier'

The paper points to the key role of PE in contributing to activity levels. But it emphasises the need to exercise intensively to have an impact on aerobic fitness.

Children who reported doing physical activity with adults in their families were twice as likely to shower after a PE class. Those who came from poorer backgrounds were 40% less likely to shower than those from less deprived backgrounds.

The study did not examine the reasons behind these decisions.

But the researchers say concerns over showering are "a potential barrier to intense, fitness-promoting exercise".

They cite evidence from previous studies which has highlighted fears of bullying and humiliation.

They argue lack of time is more a perceived barrier to showering than a real one, and point out that all the schools had at least some children who always took a shower.

'Body image'

In response, Pamela Naylor from Public Health England said body image was an important factor when it came to undressing and showering after PE - but said this was just one of many factors affecting activity levels.

"Schools, workplaces and local authorities all have a role to play in shifting attitudes so that physical activity, and what comes with it, like sweating and the need for showering, is encouraged and accommodated.

"The more we embed physical activity into daily routine, the closer we are to living healthier lifestyles where it is normal for everybody to be active every day."

Alison Oliver from the Youth Sport Trust said any obstacles preventing young people taking part in PE were a real concern.

"This research reinforces our own findings around the differences in participation levels between boys and girls, and that is why we have developed Girls Active, a groundbreaking programme which empowers and inspires girls to take part in PE and sport. "

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104. Stuart

17TH JANUARY 2015 - 11:44

+73

I am 18 and currently in Year 13, so my PE memories are very fresh in my

mind. None of us ever showered, there wasn't time to at the end of the lesson, but we certainly didn't 'hold back' during the lesson. The thought of having a shower didn't enter our minds, we just passed around somebodies deodorant and got on with it.

9. Karen_London

17TH JANUARY 2015 - 11:07

+39

The size of classes prevents pupils from showering. Most school timetables are far too full to allow time for pupils to shower. i hope things have improved but school changing rooms were pretty awful a few years ago, always muddy and cold. I hated school PE but did a lot of sport outside school. Kids just need to be more active in general.

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