

Article

# Children's engagement with the outdoors and sports activities, UK: 2014 to 2015

Analysis of the UK Time Use Survey to provide insight into the amount of time children spend engaging with the outdoors and sports activities.

Contact:  
Claire Shenton, Eleanor Rees  
qualityoflife@ons.gov.uk  
+44(0)1633 456562

Release date:  
30 January 2018

Next release:  
To be announced

## Table of contents

1. [Main points](#)
2. [Statistician's comment](#)
3. [Things you need to know about this release](#)
4. [Why is spending time outdoors and being active important?](#)
5. [Children spent 68 minutes of their leisure time per day on average engaging in an outdoors activity, sports-related activity or actively travelling](#)
6. [Boys spend more time participating in sports activities](#)
7. [14- to 15-year-olds are less likely to spend time in parks, countryside, seaside, beach or coastal locations than younger children](#)
8. [Children enjoy entertainment and culture-related activities and sports activities the most](#)
9. [Acknowledgements](#)
10. [Related links](#)

# 1 . Main points

- Children aged 8 to 15 years in the UK spent just over an hour (68 minutes) of their leisure time on average per day taking part in an outdoor activity, sports-related activity or travelling on foot or by bicycle.
- Children spent three times longer on sports and exercise activities (33 minutes) than entertainment and culture activities (11 minutes).
- Boys spent on average 40 minutes per day on sports activities compared with 25 minutes for girls.
- The average amount of leisure time children spent in parks, countryside, seaside, beach or coastal locations was 16 minutes per day.
- Children reported greater enjoyment ratings when taking part in entertainment and culture activities (6.4 out of 7) and sports and exercise activities (6.3) than for other outdoor activities.

## 2 . Statistician's comment

"This is the first time we have looked at how children are spending their leisure time on sports and outdoor activities. Of their outdoor leisure activities, taking part in sport is by far the most popular among 8- to 15-year-olds. Boys spend significantly longer than girls on sport but interestingly, boys and girls who do participate in sport, enjoy it equally."

Dawn Snape, Assistant Director, Well-being, Inequalities, Sustainability and Environment (WISE) Division, Office for National Statistics

## 3 . Things you need to know about this release

This analysis takes advantage of the latest UK Harmonised European Time Use Survey (UK HETUS; Gershuny and Sullivan, 2017) and is a first examination of children's leisure time use to measure children's engagement with the outdoors and sports activities.

This analysis defines children as those aged 8 to 15 years.

### Definitions of activities:

- sports and exercise activities<sup>1</sup> (physical or productive exercise) includes sports activities such as walking, jogging, biking, ball games, swimming and water sports, productive exercise such as hunting and fishing and picking berries and other unspecified sports-related activities, as well as activities that usually take place indoors such as gymnastics and fitness
- entertainment and culture activities<sup>2</sup> includes visiting historical, wildlife and botanical sites, leisure parks, urban park playgrounds or designated play areas
- pet care and gardening<sup>3</sup> includes gardening, tending to domestic animals, caring for pets, walking the dog, and other specified gardening and pet care, and gardening or pet care to help other households

Due to the way activities are recorded, it is not always specified whether an activity takes place indoors or outdoors. As such, the categories cannot be broken down further into indoor or outdoor categories. All activity categories may therefore include some activities that take place indoors. The same is also true for leisure time. Although this analysis focuses on leisure time, due to the way activities are recorded a small fraction may be coded during school time.

## **Definitions of location and mode of transport:**

- outdoor location includes time spent in parks, countryside, seaside, beach or coastal locations<sup>4</sup>
- active travel includes travelling on foot and travelling by bicycle<sup>5</sup>

Other locations may also include time spent outdoors – for example, a person may be in the garden when recording they are at home or on an outdoor pitch at a sports facility. However, as per activity type, the location codes aren't explicit in identifying whether the individual is indoors or outdoors so other locations have not been included.

## **How is time measured in this report?**

The average time takes into account all children aged 8 to 15 included in the survey whether or not they participated in an activity. Where specified, average times have also been given for those children who participated in the activity of interest. Participation rates refer to the proportion of children who took part in an activity as a percentage of all children aged 8 to 15 surveyed on any given day.

This data was collected during April 2014 to December 2015. Children aged 8 and over were asked to complete time diaries on two days – one weekday and one weekend day. The survey captured a representative sample of children living in private residential households in the UK during this time period.

## **Notes for: Things you need to know about this release**

1. Includes UK HETUS codes 6000 to 6312.
2. Includes UK HETUS codes 5290 to 5299
3. Includes UK HETUS codes 3410 to 3490 and 4230
4. Includes UK HETUS code 18. Other location codes include UK HETUS codes 11 (Home), 13 (working place or school) and 19 (Shopping centres, markets and other shops)
5. Includes UK HETUS codes 31 and 32

## 4 . Why is spending time outdoors and being active important?

[In the past it was quite common for children to spend most of their leisure time outdoors](#), however, today things can be very different (Natural Childhood Report, National Trust, 2012). The average home can be the centre of a child's social life where they can access the outside world via their mobile phone, TV or computer, which may result in them not venturing outside for very long and contributing to a more sedentary lifestyle. Childhood obesity levels are now at record levels and [fewer than a quarter of children meet the minimum daily physical activity recommendations](#) (NHS Digital, 2017). However, spending time outdoors and participating in physical activity has been attributed to improving a child's short- and long-term well-being due to a variety of factors including [improvement in physical and mental health](#) (Children's Society, 2013).

The government's approach to encouraging greater physical activity throughout our lives is set out in [Sporting Future: A New Strategy for an Active Nation \(PDF, 1.19MB\)](#). It focuses on the benefits of engagement with sports to physical health, mental health and individual development, as well as collective benefits in terms of social and community development and economic development.

Sport England, which plays an important role in delivery of the strategy, has been given dedicated funding to get children and young people active from the age of 5 years. Several other government departments also share this important goal of improving sport and physical activity outcomes for children and young people including Department of Health and Social Care, Department for Education, and Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Public Health England.

A fundamental message from the [Sporting Future strategy](#) is that positive experience of sports and physical activity must start when we're young to lay solid foundations for future participation, with all the positive mental and physical benefits that can bring:

"A positive experience of sport and physical activity at a young age can contribute to a lifetime of participation... We need to ensure the sport and physical activity "offer" is right for children and young people. This is particularly true for under-represented groups, such as girls and disabled children, where drop-out rates in childhood are high." Page 32, Sporting Future: A New Strategy for an Active Nation.

Progress towards achieving these goals is being monitored via the Active Lives Survey for adults and Sport England are also developing new approaches to measuring children's engagement in sports and physical activity.

Our new research complements these other initiatives, using the latest UK time use data to provide a fine-grained picture of children's engagement with sports and physical activity, including the time devoted to this versus a range of other leisure activities, time spent in outdoor activities, and how much children and young people say they enjoy each activity.

## 5 . Children spent 68 minutes of their leisure time per day on average engaging in an outdoors activity, sports-related activity or actively travelling

The average amount of leisure time children aged 8 to 15 years old in the UK spent per day in 2014 to 2015 taking part in an outdoors activity, sports and exercise-related activity or actively travelling, was 68 minutes <sup>1</sup>. This takes into account all children surveyed in this age group whether or not they actually participated in any of these activities.

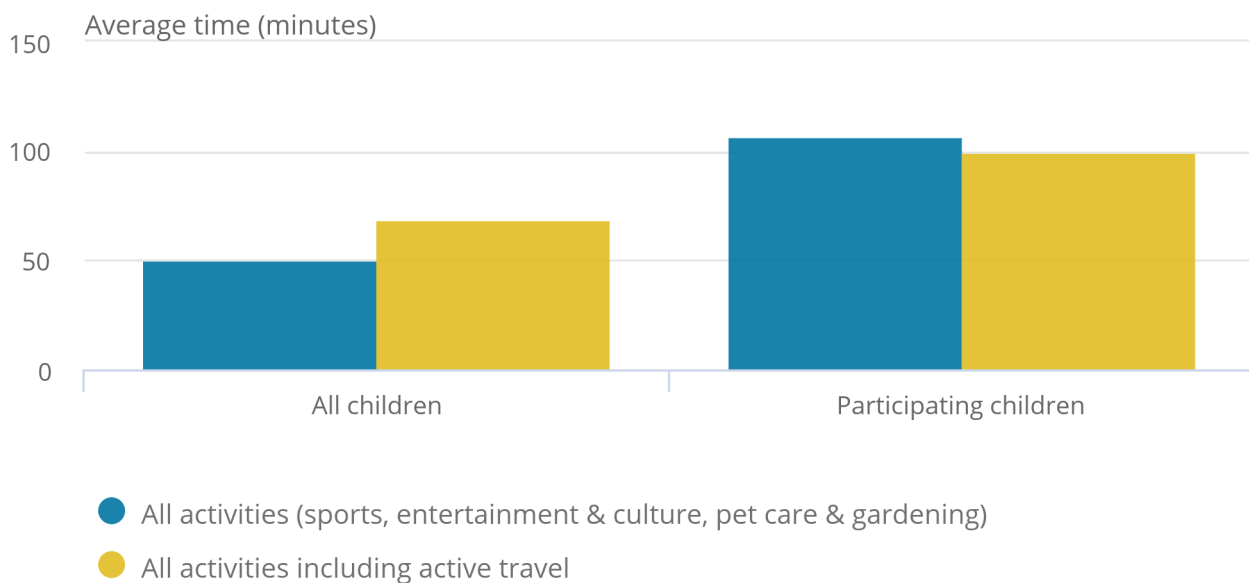
Just over two-thirds (68.8%) of children participated daily in an outdoors activity, sports or exercise-related activity or active travel on an average day<sup>2</sup>. For those children participating in any of these activities the average time they spent on these activities was 99 minutes per day. Figure 1 shows the average time spent per day across all activities for all children and those who actually participated.

**Figure 1: Average leisure time spent per day on all activities for all children and participating children**

UK, 2014 to 2015

Figure 1: Average leisure time spent per day on all activities for all children and participating children

UK, 2014 to 2015



Source: UK Harmonised European Time Use Survey (Gershuny and Sullivan, 2017)

Notes:

1. Children are defined as aged 8 to 15 years old.

The daily participation rates for pet care and gardening, and entertainment and culture were 12.5% and 9.5% respectively, which tells us that the activities included within these groups are a relatively infrequent activity for children during their leisure time.

For example, while children may take part in a regular sports activity after school, they may be less likely to visit a historical site after school. This is shown to be the case when we look at the data by weekday compared with the weekend, in particular for entertainment and culture activities. There were significantly higher daily participation rates and correspondingly higher average times spent on these activities at the weekend (14.8% daily participation rates and 17 minutes) than during the week (7.3% and eight minutes).

**Notes for: Children spent 68 minutes per day on average engaging in an outdoors activity, sports-related activity or actively travelling**

1. Total activity time including active travel does not equal all activities + active travel due to some active travel occurring whilst engaging in other specified activities.
2. Participation in sports does not include school based sports.

## 6 . Boys spend more time participating in sports activities

Of all types of activities analysed, children aged 8 to 15 years in the UK in 2014 to 2015 spent most time on sports and exercise activities, with an average of 33 minutes per day. This was three-times higher than the average time spent on entertainment and culture and over five-times higher than time spent on pet care and gardening activities.

Boys spent significantly longer on sports activities at 40 minutes per day on average compared with 25 minutes per day for girls (Figure 2). Boys were also more likely to participate in sports activities than girls, with a daily participation rate of 38.8% compared with 26.4% for girls.

This finding is consistent with a range of other studies showing a [gender imbalance in participation in sports and physical activity between boys and girls, which continues throughout childhood and adolescence, becoming greater over time](#). This analysis is also able to provide us with insights into enjoyment levels of activities. Interestingly, although girls have a lower participation rate and average time engaging with sports activities, girls who participate in sports have the same level of enjoyment participating in sport as boys who participate in sport.

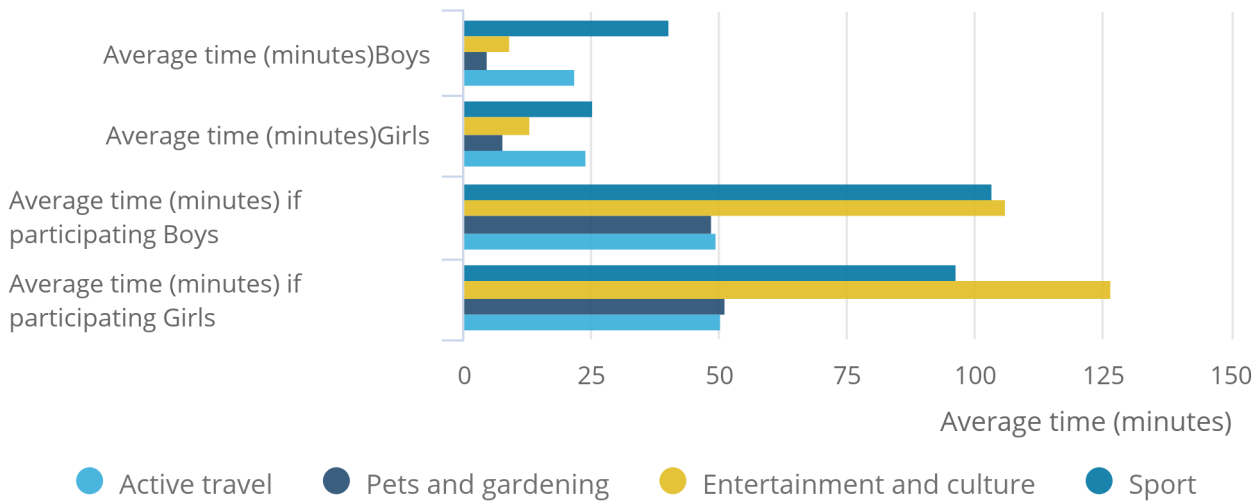
There was no statistically significant difference between boys and girls for the amount of time spent on other types of activity.

**Figure 2: Average times spent per day by activity type for all children and participating children by sex, 2014 to 2015**

United Kingdom

Figure 2: Average times spent per day by activity type for all children and participating children by sex, 2014 to 2015

United Kingdom



Source: UK Harmonised European Time Use Survey (Gershuny and Sullivan, 2017)

Notes:

1. Children are defined as aged 8 to 15 years old.
2. Sports and outdoor activities (physical or productive exercise) includes outdoor sports activities such as walking, jogging, biking, ball games, swimming, water sports, hunting and fishing, picking berries etc and other unspecified sports related activities as well as indoor activities such as gymnastics, dance and fitness.
3. Entertainment and culture includes visiting historical, wildlife and botanical sites, leisure parks urban park playgrounds or designated play areas.
4. Gardening includes gardening, tending domestic animals, caring for pets, walking the dog, and other specified gardening and pet care and gardening/pet care to help other households.
5. Active travel includes travelling on foot and travelling by bicycle.

There was no significant difference in the average leisure time spent on any individual type of activity for children of different ages, but daily participation rates differed according to age group for entertainment and culture activities. Children aged 14 to 15 years were significantly less likely to participate in entertainment and cultural activities than those aged 8 to 10 years or 11 to 13 years<sup>1</sup>.

**Notes for: Boys spend more time participating in sports activities**

1. Although differences highlighted are significant, due to small sample size of children aged 14 to 15 years old participating in entertainment and culture activities, results should be interpreted with caution.

## 7 . 14- to 15-year-olds are less likely to spend time in parks, countryside, seaside, beach or coastal locations than younger children

The average daily leisure time children aged 8 to 15 years in the UK in 2014 to 2015 spent in parks, countryside, seaside, beach or coastal locations was 16 minutes. Whilst there was no significant difference in the average daily time spent at these locations between age groups or between boys and girls, those aged 14 to 15 years were significantly less likely to visit these locations than children aged 8 to 10 years (Table 1). Whilst the average daily time spent in these locations was higher at weekends than during the week, the difference was not significant.

**Table 1: Children’s time and participation rates spent in parks, countryside, seaside, beach or coastal locations by sex, age group and day, 2014 to 2015**

United Kingdom, 2014 to 2015

		Average time (minutes)	Daily participation rate (%)
Overall		16	12.2
Sex	Boys	18	12.6
	Girls	13	11.8
Age group	8 to 10 years	18	15.4
	11 to 13 years	18	11.9
	14 to 15 years	10	8.0
Day	Weekday	13	10.6
	Weekend	20	16.2

Source: UK Harmonised European Time Use Survey (Gershuny and Sullivan, 2017)

Notes:

1. Outdoor location includes parks, countryside, seaside, beach or coast.
2. Children in this analysis are defined as those aged 8 to 15 years old.

## 8 . Children enjoy entertainment and culture-related activities and sports activities the most

Children aged 8 to 15 years in the UK participating in the time use survey in 2014 to 2015 were asked to rate their enjoyment out of seven<sup>2</sup> for each activity they recorded in their time use diary. Of the leisure time activities covered within this analysis, children reported greatest enjoyment on average for entertainment and culture-related activities (6.4 out of 7) and sports and exercise activities (6.3), both significantly higher enjoyment than pet care and gardening activities (5.8) or active travel (5.2) (Figure 3)<sup>1</sup>.



Interestingly, sports and exercise activities were recorded as being more enjoyable on a weekday (6.4) than at a weekend (6.0). In contrast, active travel, which was considered to be the least enjoyable activity included within this analysis, was reported as being more enjoyable at the weekend (5.6) than during the week (5.0). This latter point may be related to why they are actively travelling and to where. More detailed analysis would be required to assess if, for example, children may enjoy travelling to a leisure activity at the weekend more than to and from school during the week. As we have not compared enjoyment of active travel during the week to enjoyment of other forms of travel such as the school bus, we cannot say from these findings whether riding a bike or walking to school is more or less enjoyable than other forms of travel to school.

When looking at all activities combined (including active travel), children found them to be more enjoyable at the weekend (5.9) than during the week (5.6). Whilst there was no difference in enjoyment levels by age group for individual activity types, when looking at the activities collectively (including active travel), children aged 14 to 15 (5.3) generally reported lower enjoyment than those aged 8 to 10 years old (5.9).

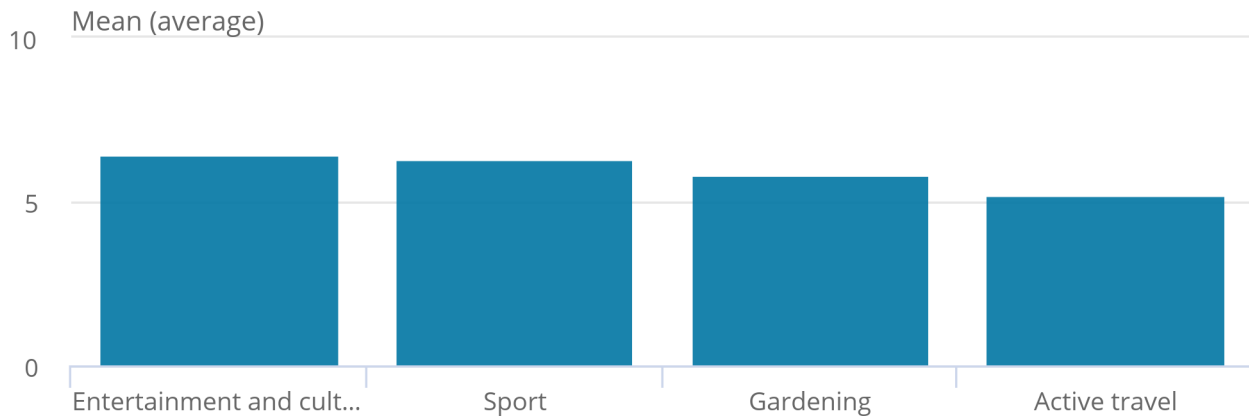
Children also reported greater enjoyment when spending time outdoors compared with time spent indoors. The average enjoyment rating of time spent in parks, the countryside, at the beach, seaside or in coastal locations was 6.5. In contrast, average enjoyment levels in indoor locations were much lower, such as school (5.1), home (5.7) and shops (5.6).

**Figure 3: Average enjoyment levels of participating children by activity type, 2014 to 2015**

UK

Figure 3: Average enjoyment levels of participating children by activity type, 2014 to 2015

UK



Source: UK Harmonised European Time Use Survey (Gershuny and Sullivan, 2017)

**Notes:**

1. Children are defined as aged 8 to 15 years old.
2. Children were asked on a scale of 1 to 7 where 1 = not at all and 7 = very much, how much did you enjoy this time?
3. Sports and outdoor activities (physical or productive exercise) includes outdoor sports activities such as walking, jogging, biking, ball games, swimming, water sports, hunting and fishing, picking berries etc and other unspecified sports related activities as well as indoor activities such as gymnastics, dance and fitness.
4. Entertainment and culture includes visiting historical, wildlife and botanical sites, leisure parks urban park playgrounds or designated play areas.
5. Gardening includes gardening, tending domestic animals, caring for pets, walking the dog, and other specified gardening and pet care and gardening/pet care to help other households.
6. Active travel includes travelling on foot and travelling by bicycle.

**Notes for: Children enjoy entertainment and culture-related activities the most**

1. Enjoyment data only relates to children who reported taking part in the activity of interest.

## 9 . Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Killian Mullan of Oxford University for his support with this analysis.

## 10 . Related links

Gershuny, J., Sullivan, O. (2017). [United Kingdom Time Use Survey, 2014-2015](#). [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 8128.

[Children's well-being measures - dataset for the 31 measures of children's well-being, within seven domains, complementing the national measures of well-being.](#)

[Leisure time in the UK: 2015](#) - an article looking at how much leisure time people in the UK take and how that differs according to various aspects such as age or sex, an insight into the nation's work-life balance and also how much people enjoy their leisure time.

Natural England (2017) [Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment: Exploring the Relationship between visit frequency and attitudes towards the natural environment](#)

Sport England (2016) [Sport England: Towards an Active Nation, Strategy 2016-2021](#)

Cabinet Office (2015) [Sporting Future: A New Strategy for an Active Nation](#)

[Women in Sport \(2016\) Women in Sport Girls Strategy. Feb 2016 – 19. Our Ambition.](#)