

SPORTS CLUBS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN MORE DIVERSE AND SUSTAINABLE ACTIVITIES

In Finland, more than half of children and young people are involved in sports clubs, and only one in ten has not participated in any club activities. The consequences of insufficient physical activity among children and adolescents are visible also in club activities, for example, in the form of low physical fitness or poor motor skills. Clubs do not need to resolve the problem of insufficient physical activity alone, but they have the opportunity to develop their own activities to promote the increase in and diversity of physical activity. This will also support the clubs' sport-related objectives.

Participation in sports clubs is now much more common than in the past. At the same time, children join sports club activities at a much earlier age. They also start focussing on one sport and drop out of sports club activities earlier than before. These changes create both opportunities and challenges for the clubs.

The opportunities lie in reaching more participants, and getting children involved in organised physical activity and physical education at a younger age than before. At the same time, the children who join club activities early, have less experiences, both in years and in the variety of physical activity and sports. Club activities, especially for children under the age of 10, should therefore be approached from the viewpoint of physical education and how to create a foundation for physical activity – both in quantity and quality. Once a strong physical foundation has been built, the activities can focus more on sport-specific training for the over-10s.

The clubs are not alone responsible for solving the problem of insufficient physical activity among Finnish children and adolescents. However, the clubs should recognise that insufficient physical activity also affects their core business, i.e. sports performance and athlete development. All settings and the adults involved have a role and responsibility in promoting physical activity of children and adolescents. A joint responsibility or collaboration in physical education can be argued for. The focus is on the overall physical activity of children and adolescents, and two questions can be raised:

- How much physical activity do children and adolescents gain from different settings, such as at home, at school, during hobbies and other leisure activities?
- What could be done to increase the physical activity in each of these settings?

Massive change will probably not happen in any single setting, however, small changes in various settings can cause a significant increase in the overall physical activity.

We recognise the independent role of sports clubs as part of civic activity, and their diversity in terms of the types of sports as well as their local conditions. The following recommendations are, therefore, intended to stimulate critical reflection on the current club activities, and to offer clubs ways to contribute to building a more active Finland.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SPORTS CLUBS



Make physical education a common responsibility

Develop the capacity of clubs to promote the overall activity of children and young people



In the club activities for children under the age of 10, focus on the foundations of physical activity



Keep children over the age of 10 involved in club activities

Strengthen children's ownership of their leisure activities



Increase equal opportunities for participation in club activities



Combine active mobility and sustainability with club activities

1. MAKE PHYSICAL EDUCATION A COMMON RESPONSIBILITY

The aim of physical education is to teach children and young people to be physically active by developing their knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Using physical education, we can create environments and situations that promote the motivation of children and young people to move.

The home, school, and hobbies are the main everyday environments for children and young people. When it comes to hobbies, sports clubs have the greatest reach. None of these environments is solely responsible for and cannot alone solve the problem of insufficient physical activity. Therefore, the roles of the different actors and the opportunities for cooperation in physical education and in increasing physical activity should be identified and clarified. The potential of sports clubs and coaches in terms of physical education is enhanced when children and young people participate in the activities voluntarily and out of their own interest. In addition, the coaches are often important role models for them.

2. DEVELOP THE CAPACITY OF CLUBS TO PROMOTE THE OVERALL ACTIVITY OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Although participation in sports club activities increases the likelihood of meeting the weekly physical activity recommendations, the club activities alone are rarely enough to do so. Around a third of those who participate in club activities do not achieve the recommended levels of physical activity. It should, therefore, be recognised that, in addition

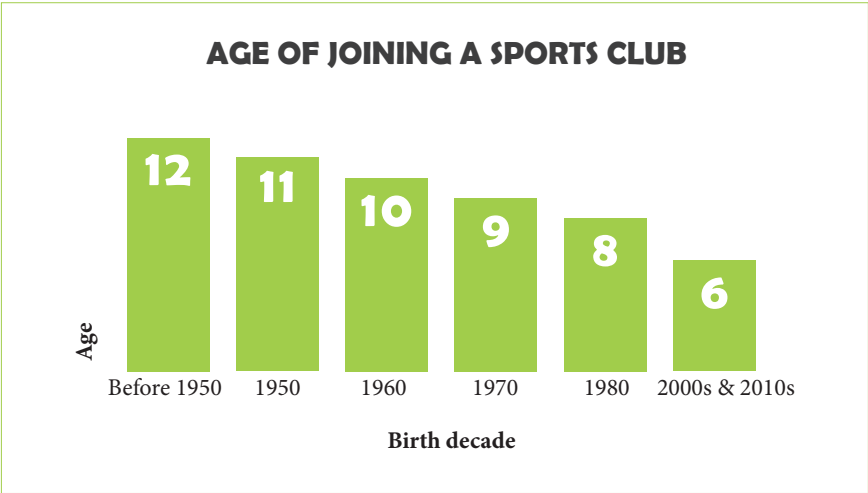
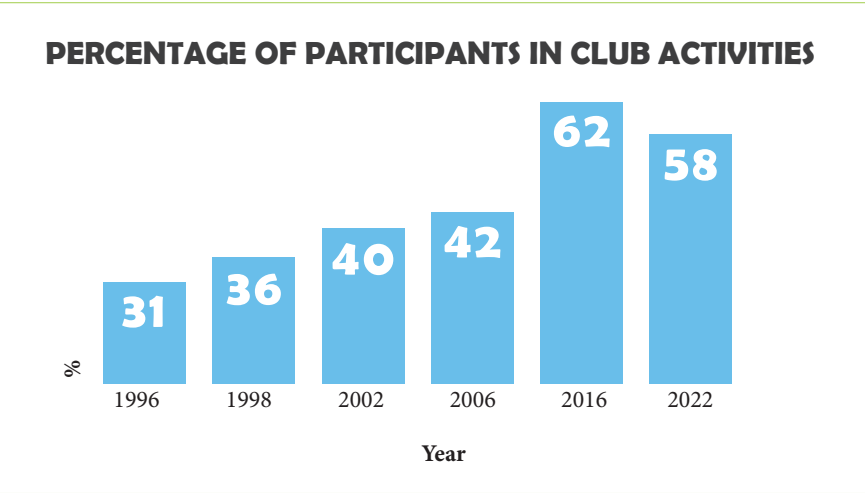
to the physical activity during club sports practice, other forms of physical activity are needed, as well, and should be encouraged by the clubs.

In addition to coach-led sessions, the overall activity of children and young people participating in club activities includes independent practice, possibly training in other sports, active travel to school and practice, recreational games and play, and other everyday activities. From the viewpoint of adequate and varied physical activity, promoting overall activity is often a better solution than increasing the amount of exercise for a particular sport.

3. IN THE CLUB ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF 10, FOCUS ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Children are joining sports clubs at a younger age, on average at the age of 6, resulting in more limited physical activity experience and skills as well as in significant differences between children. The differences in the foundations of physical activity and sports underline the importance of more individualised training. Specialising too early, at an average age of 8 years, does not sufficiently support the development of basic movement and motor skills, and increases the risk of early dropout from club activities.

With children joining at a yet younger age, the clubs should be mindful what the activities for the under-10s focus on, in order to create a foundation for physical activity that is sufficient both in terms of quantity and variety. This includes, among other things, training the whole body and developing motor skills. Diversifying the training also reduces the risk of stress injuries resulting from sports.



Compiled from: Koski, 2009; Koski & Mäenpää, 2018; Kokko & Mehtälä, 2016; Kokko & Martin, 2023.

4. KEEP CHILDREN OVER THE AGE OF 10 INVOLVED IN CLUB ACTIVITIES

A large number of children join the clubs, but too many also drop out, too early. The average age at which children stop participating is 11. Thus, the average years spent in club activities are currently between the ages of 6 and 11. There are many reasons for dropping out, but in recent years, boredom with the sport has become more prominent. Even from the viewpoint of the clubs themselves, motivating children to participate for longer, i.e. preventing dropout, is an important objective. At the same time, it is a key measure in promoting physical activity.

The key is to increase the range of interesting and easily accessible leisure activities. Clubs should also reflect on their approach to sport specialisation and develop solutions to enable multisport activities and moving to another sport. In this way, children would not quit the club activities altogether, even if their interest in a particular sport wanes.

5. STRENGTHEN CHILDREN'S OWNERSHIP OF THEIR LEISURE ACTIVITIES

The most important group of actors in children's and young people's sports club activities are the children and young people themselves. However, the planning and implementation of activities is often quite adult-oriented. To what extent are the needs and motivations of children and young people identified? Are their voices genuinely heard? Is their ownership of their own hobbies being strengthened?

The clubs should listen more to the wishes of children and young people, and involve them in the planning of the activities. This would increase their ownership. This means empowering children and young people in their choice of sport, type of activity, training group, and frequency of practices. In addition, children and young people can also be empowered within the training and the exercises.

6. INCREASE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTICIPATION IN CLUB ACTIVITIES

Barriers to equal participation in sports club activities include the high cost of participation and the challenges of starting young, such as the difficulty of joining a club at a later age or changing sports. The increasingly multicultural background of the participants also challenges the traditional forms of club activity. Clubs can help promote equal participation by developing ways to remove these barriers.

With regard to cost, it is necessary to consider the possibilities for clubs to influence the cost of participation fees. Municipalities can also use subsidies such as "hobby vouchers" to offset the impact of family income on participation in hobbies as well as to encourage sports sampling. In addition, the clubs can develop measures to enable people to join or change to a different sport at a later age, or to return to an old sport, and to take into account the specific characteristics of multiculturalism. For example, beginners' groups can

CLUB ACTIVITIES SHOULD BE UPDATED TO MEET THE CHALLENGES OF OUR TIMES



Supervised training often focuses on the specific characteristics of one sport too early.



Starting sport-specific training early makes it more difficult to try out other sports or join them later.



Increasing the amount of training too quickly heightens the risk of both dropouts and repetitive stress injuries.



Therefore, preventing dropouts, i.e. inspiring continued participation, is the most important thing clubs can do to promote physical activity.

be set up also for older cohorts, or the requirements of the sport can be tailored to individual skill levels. A person's first experience of a sport and a club is particularly significant for their continuation, so it is important to consider and encourage each beginner as an individual.

7. COMBINE ACTIVE MOBILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY WITH CLUB ACTIVITIES

In addition to the physical activity during recreational and competitive events themselves, the participants can also be active as they travel to them. Walking, cycling and using public transport to go to practice can significantly increase the daily physical activity of children and young people, as well as increase the environmental sustainability of the club activities. Clubs can, for example, encourage and instruct children and young people to cycle, run, or walk to their activities together, as a warm up and cool down.

In collaboration with the municipalities, the clubs can develop local and regional walking and cycling routes and a network of sports facilities, making it more pleasant and safe to combine physical activity and sustainable everyday life. Better active use of local spaces, such as schools, community centres, or the local nature, also supports the autonomy and active travel habits of children and young people. It would be necessary to assess the benefits of domestic and international trips to sports in relation to their economic and environmental costs. There needs to be more planning of measures to promote the sustainability of club activities, in collaboration with the children, young people, and key local actors from different backgrounds.

CHANGES IN CLUB ACTIVITIES CREATE CHALLENGES

An increasing number of children are taking part in supervised club activities, starting at a younger age. They also start focusing on one sport at a younger age, and the dropping out of club activities starts already at the age of 11.

These changes are challenging the current club activities. There has been a large increase in participation in club activities. In the 1990s, just over 30% of children and young people in Finland practiced sports in a club, while today, the participation rate has risen to 60%. The age at which children start participating in club activities has decreased by an average of one year per decade. Those born before the 1950s typically started participating in clubs at the age of 12, compared with an average age of six today.

This change means that children specialise in one sport and then drop out of club activities too early. As a result, the hobby does not continue as far into adolescence as it should. This increases the likelihood of inactivity in adolescence and further on in adulthood.

The clubs do not need to fix the insufficient physical activity of the population alone, but they have the potential to develop their own activities in promoting physical activity and physical education, as well as their cooperation with other actors.

READ MORE ABOUT THE THEME

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AUTHORS

Sami Kokko, Associate Professor, Director, Research Centre for Health Promotion (RCHP), University of Jyväskylä

Ira Ahokas, Research Manager, Finland Futures Research Centre, University of Turku

Henna Leino, Postdoctoral Researcher, Turku School of Economics, University of Turku

Jari Lyytimäki, Leading Researcher, Finnish Environment Institute (Syke)

Iina Raudasoja, PhD Researcher, Research Centre for Health Promotion (RCHP), University of Jyväskylä

Mikko Simula, Senior Lecturer, University of Jyväskylä

Petri Tapio, Professor, Finland Futures Research Centre, University of Turku

Tommi Vasankari, Professor, MD, PhD, Director, UKK Institute

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CONTACT

Sami Kokko, Associate Professor, Director, Research Centre for Health Promotion (RCHP), University of Jyväskylä

sami.p.kokko@jyu.fi, tel. +358 40 805 3561