

## Schools should offer more choice over PE uniform to increase girls' engagement in PE

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### About the research

Only 45% of secondary school-aged girls meet the recommended physical activity guidelines of 60 minutes per day ([Sport England, 2024](#)). Girls face many barriers to being physically active, even in school, where Physical Education (PE) is a mandatory part of the curriculum.

PE uniform is a common barrier to taking part in school sport and physical activity, with [one in four girls](#) feeling uncomfortable and lacking confidence when wearing their PE uniform. The 2024 [Youth Sports Trust report](#) showed that 58% of girls would like to have more PE uniform options to choose from.

A recent Women and Equalities Committee Report on the [health barriers for girls and women in sport](#) writes: 'The evidence on girls' anxieties around PE kit is overwhelming. We recommend the Department for Education and National Physical Activity Taskforce review guidance for schools on school PE kit, with the aim of ensuring all schools permit the widest possible choice for girls.' (Para 35)

Our [newly published qualitative study](#), funded by the [NIHR Bristol Biomedical Research Centre](#), involved 12-13 year old girls and PE teachers in English secondary schools. The study explored how PE uniform impacts girls' body image and PE engagement. 44 girls took part in interactive focus groups and 6 PE teachers took part in interviews.

The current changes to the School Uniform Guidance in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, could go further in improving inclusivity and equality for pupils.

### Policy implications

- Modify the [Non-Statutory School Uniform Guidance](#), under the subtitle 'Actions to develop your school uniform policy', to add: 'ensure PE uniform is inclusive and flexible for the purposes of supporting engagement, for example, supporting choice and sports bra use.'
- Section 2.17 of the [Equality Act 2010: advice for schools](#) linked in the [School uniforms: guidance for schools](#) should be removed or amended to reflect the need for a range of non-gendered PE uniform items in different styles and sizes, rather than gendered items being the "standard".
- Schools should work with their pupils to review their PE uniform policies, and use evidence-based guidance to improve the comfort and inclusivity to promote participation. This guidance is hosted on the [Inclusive Sportswear](#) platform, and offers schools a simple process to improve their PE uniform policies.

Within the School Uniform Guidance in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill:

- Limit school-branded items at secondary level to four, and remove the exemption for ties. It should be stated that this limit applies across main items and PE uniform inclusive. Clearer guidance is required on the definition of 'school-branded' items, to ensure quality, durability and equity for all students.
- State that schools can offer more than four school-branded items to pupils to ensure choice, but that each pupil can have a maximum of four school-branded items. This [ensures choice, inclusivity and equality](#) for different body types and preferences.

## Key findings

- Giving girls choice over what they can wear in PE lessons can promote comfort, self-confidence and participation, however rules are required to ensure PE uniforms are appropriate for physical activity and suitable for school.

**Recommendation:** Allow choice over PE uniform items, especially bottoms, alongside guidance or restrictions on length, branding and material.

- Unisex PE uniforms do not fit female bodies and are not inclusive of girls.

**Recommendation:** Offer a range of non-gendered styles and sizes rather than a single unisex PE uniform.

- Girls with lower self-confidence are more likely to feel self-conscious in their PE uniform, especially if items are too tight or reveal too much skin, making them less willing to participate in PE lessons.

**Recommendation:** Allow girls to wear their own bottoms and additional layers.

- Changing for PE exacerbates body image issues and reduces time for physical activity.

**Recommendation:** Implement active uniform policies, such as allowing pupils to wear their PE uniform all day on days they have PE lessons.

## Further information

Sport England (2024) [Active Lives Children and Young People Survey](#). Academic year 2023-24.

Youth Sports Trust (2024) [PE and School Sport](#). The Annual Report 2024.

Porter, A., et al., (2025). [A qualitative study in UK secondary schools exploring how PE uniform policies influence body image attitudes, and PE engagement among adolescent girls](#). BMJ Open.

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*Quote from Year 8 girl: "I'm just like really insecure about my body, like my body hair. So in the summer when it's boiling hot I don't really wanna wear a really short skirt because I'm not really secure with that."*

*Quote from Year 8 girl: "the shorts sometimes like go up and it like distracts you into making sure your shorts don't go up all the time. Because we have to like pull them down if they're like getting really short."*

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