

Physical activity is beneficial for child and adolescent development and can set good habits for adulthood, thereby influencing health outcomes later in life. WHO recommends that children do at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity daily, yet these recommendations are not met by most children and adolescents in all countries.

On average across EU countries, only around one in four 11-year-olds and only about one in seven 15-year-olds reported that they undertook moderate-to-vigorous exercise at least one hour daily in 2018 (Figure 4.13). In all countries, girls are less physically active than boys at both ages. Physical activity also falls sharply between ages 11 to 15 in most EU countries for both genders. The proportion of girls and boys doing sufficient physical activity each day is lowest in Italy, France, Portugal and Denmark. In Italy, France and Denmark, the shares were already low in 2014, while they decreased from 16% in 2014 to 11% in 2018 among the 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds in Portugal.

On average across EU countries, the proportion of children and adolescents doing moderate-to-vigorous physical activity each day has decreased slightly between 2006 and 2018 for both boys and girls, and in all age groups (Figure 4.14). For boys aged 11 years old and 13 years old, the rate decreased by 4 percentage points, narrowing the gap with the physical activity level of girls at the same age.

Some of the factors influencing the levels of physical activity undertaken by children include the availability of safe space and equipment, their school curricula and other competing pastimes, in particular screen activities. Heavy use of mobile devices and internet takes time away from other activities, including physical activity (OECD, 2019).

Physical activity can be encouraged by the promotion of physical education, such as active play or recreation as well as safe independent mobility (WHO, 2018). EU countries have taken a number of initiatives to change behaviours in children and adolescents, and more generally, in the whole population. For example, in Slovenia, the National Nutrition and Physical Activity Strategy 2015-25 aims to improve physical activity habits across all age groups to tackle growing obesity, including through school-based programmes such as the “SLOfit surveillance system” (OECD/European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2019). In Finland, The National Obesity Programme 2012-18 aimed at reducing obesity rates by encouraging healthy nutrition and physical activity. This programme included objectives for the whole population, specific age groups (such as school-age children), municipalities and schools. It also offered check-lists to support

implementation for schools, health professionals and municipalities. In addition, other initiatives intend to address the gender gap in physical activity, such as “This Girl Can” campaign in the United Kingdom (Owen et al. 2017; Guthold et al., 2020).

Definition and comparability

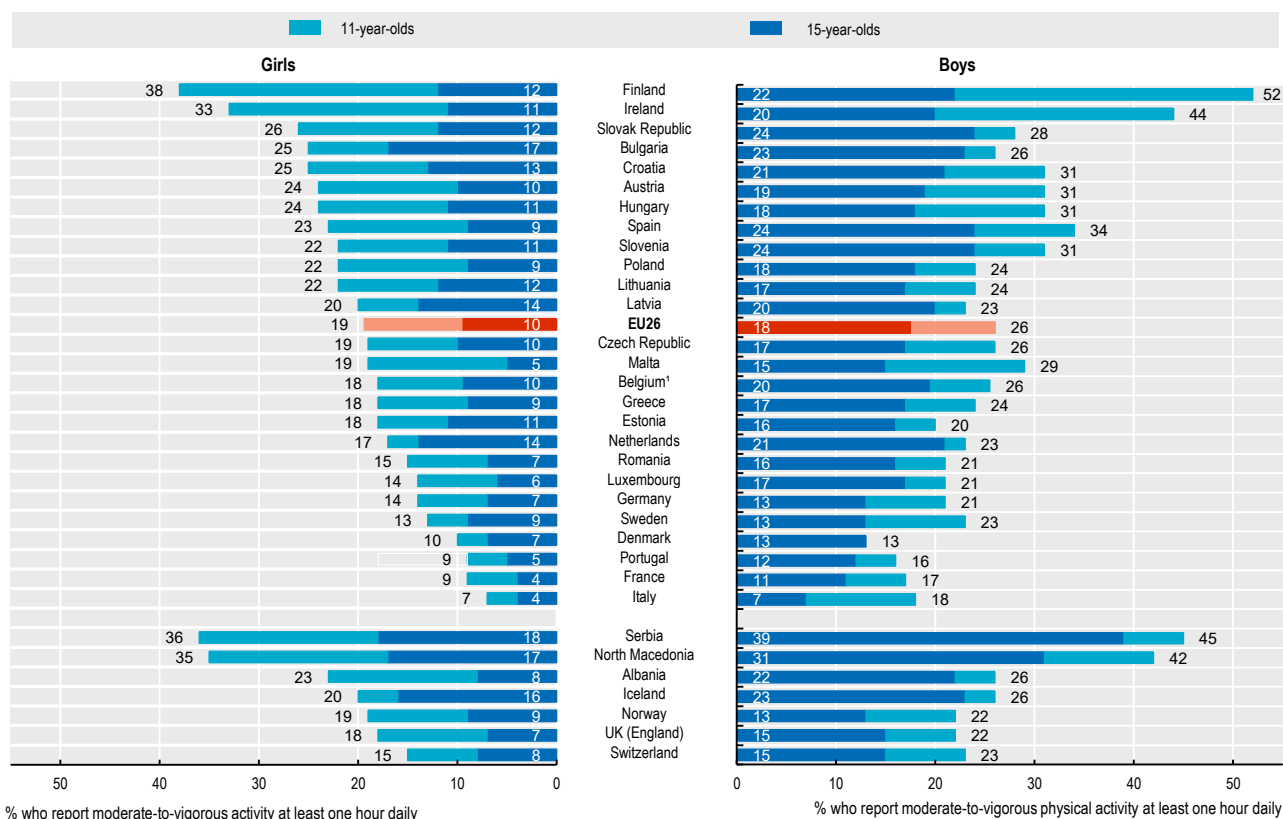
Moderate-to-vigorous physical activity refers to exercise undertaken for at least an hour each day that increases the heartbeat, and sometimes leaves the child out of breath.

Data come from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study. The HBSC surveys have been undertaken every four years since 1993-94 and now include all EU countries except Cyprus. Data are drawn from school-based samples of 1 500 children in three age groups (11-, 13- and 15-year-olds) in most countries, ensuring that the sample is representative of each age group.

References

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Figure 4.13. Share of 11- and 15-year-olds meeting WHO recommended daily physical activity, 2018

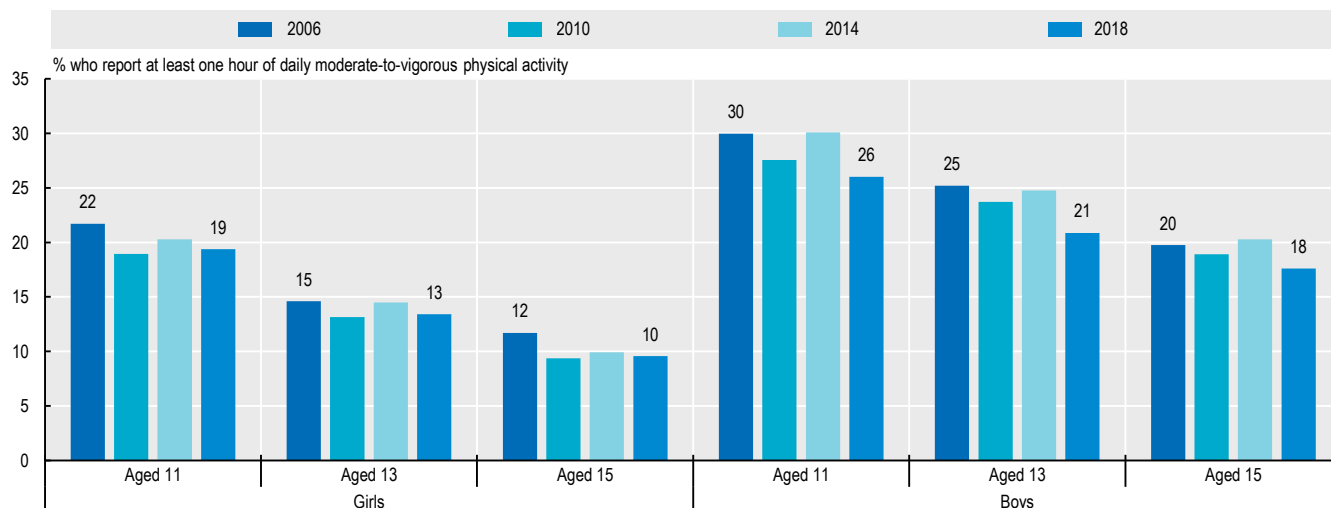


Note: The EU average is unweighted. 1. The value for Belgium is the unweighted average of the Flemish and French Communities.

Source: HBSC data from Inchley et al. (2020).

StatLink <https://stat.link/6ophr8>

Figure 4.14. Trends in physical activity among 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds, EU average, 2006-2018



Note: The EU average is unweighted EU.

Source: HBSC data from Inchley et al. (2020) and previous HBSC reports.

StatLink <https://stat.link/k3s1ae>



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