

The connections between young people's mental health and sport participation: Scoping the evidence

SUMMARY

Background

Although there is promising evidence that sport and organised physical activities promote good mental health for adults, it is less clear what the messages are for young people. In this scoping review we look at studies on whether sport is useful for preventing problems arising in the first place, promoting positive youth development, and treating young people's mental health problems once they exist.

Main findings

- There are positive associations between sport and organised activity and mental health outcomes for young people at all levels of intervention
- The relationship is strongest for the use of sport to treat symptoms of clinical depression
- Methodological shortfalls in the existing research mean we have limited understanding about the exact positive benefits that sport might offer. However, there are suggestions that the benefits may operate in various ways, including through pharmacological, social or behavioural effects
- Benefits may vary by gender and for young people from particularly vulnerable or excluded groups
- There is no 'one size fits all' recommendation. There are many ways in which participation in sport can vary, and the effects may be different for different groups of young people

Conclusions

Most of the data point to a positive relationship between sport or organised activity and positive mental health outcomes for young people, although untangling the direction of cause and effect remains a challenge. There is little evidence that sport will have a negative effect. Overall, our review of the literature led us to conclude that the use of sport and organised activity to promote better mental health for young people is recommended. This review forms part of a larger programme of research being undertaken by Sport England.

For more information:

Download the full report from <http://www.youngpeopleshealth.org.uk/research-and-evaluations>, and visit StreetGames at www.streetgames.org, and the Association for Young People's Health at www.youngpeopleshealth.org.uk