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THE GENDER ACTIVITY GAP IN SCHOOLS

Understanding the landscape of
Physical Education to engage the
least active girls

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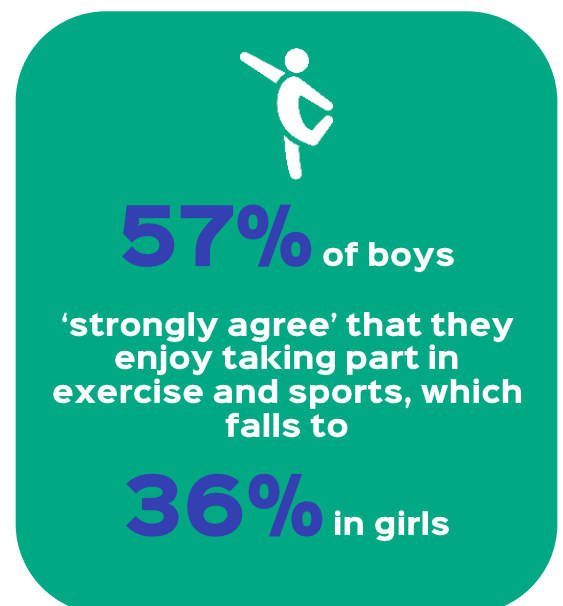
THE GENDER ACTIVITY GAP

Being active and doing sport when we're young helps our bodies develop properly, boosts mental health, and can set us up for a lifetime of physical activity and all the benefits it brings.¹ Research has shown that **between girls and boys there is a notable gap in physical activity** that emerges in infant school and continues to widen through childhood and teenage years into adulthood.²

According to the latest data, while 51% of boys are meeting the Chief Medical Officers' guidelines of being active (taking part in sports and physical activity for an average of 60 minute or more every day), among girls the figure is just 44%.³ But this isn't surprising when we look at the **difference in enjoyment levels** between girls and boys: while 59% of secondary age boys 'strongly agree' that they enjoy taking part in exercise and sports, this falls to 40% among girls.³

We know that **positive experiences at an early age** help build the foundations for an active life. If children and young people have experiences that feel fun, positive and meaningful, they're more likely to want to be active in the future.⁴ However, this has not played out effectively in the past: statistics show that **2.7m fewer women** than men strongly agree that they **enjoy sport and physical activity**,⁵ so there is huge value in addressing the issue among young people and embedding positive experiences of sport and physical activity.

This 'gender activity gap' has been evidenced for several years, and efforts have been made to close it by Sport England and other bodies. A key pillar of this work has been the 'Uniting the Movement' strategy. Conceived in 2019 and launched in 2022 as a 10-year mission, it brings together a broad coalition of organisations and individuals with the **bold ambition to ensure every child and young person experiences the enjoyment and benefits that being physically active can bring.**



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TARGETING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN SCHOOLS

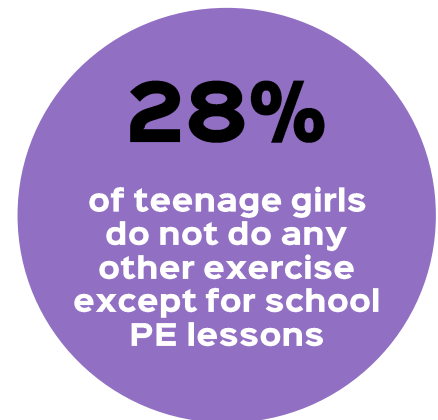
Getting **more girls active is a huge undertaking**, involving the efforts of multiple stakeholders in a wide range of settings. **Schools have a key role to play** in addressing the gender gap, and are the main focus of this report.

Research from Women in Sport (2019) found that 28% of teenage girls did not do any other exercise except school PE and only 23% overall really enjoyed it.⁶ Additionally, a Studio You survey of adults found that 37% of women reported having negative experiences of PE at school,⁷ a figure that aligns with This Girl Can research where **41% of women said they had a negative experience of PE.**⁸ This highlights how schools have traditionally found it difficult to engage some teenage girls in sport and physical activity, presenting an opportunity to change PE in schools to motivate and inspire more girls.

With many girls only being active during PE, and many not enjoying their time in PE lessons, Sport England, working in partnership with the social impact specialists, Hopscotch, sought to **create an initiative or educational tool that would help schools to maximise participation in, and enjoyment of, PE.** The key objective of the tool, which eventually became Studio You, was to support schools to improve girls' experiences of PE, giving them more enjoyment, a greater ability to choose and shape how they are active in PE lessons, all while increasing teachers' understanding about the needs of less active girls.

The purpose of this report is to share everything we have learned throughout the development of Studio You to help contribute to the sector's understanding of how to reach this less active group.

It has perhaps never been so important to focus on the issue of boosting girls' participation and enjoyment of physical activity. Recent research from Girlguiding (2023) found that record levels of children are struggling with mental health, and **89% of girls felt generally worried or anxious, while only 17% reported being 'very happy'.**⁹ Given the well documented link between physical activity and better mental health,¹⁰ the Chief Executive of the Youth Sport Trust stated: "at a time of unprecedented low levels of social and emotional wellbeing, we know getting things right for girls in PE can be life changing."¹¹



STUDIO YOU TIMELINE



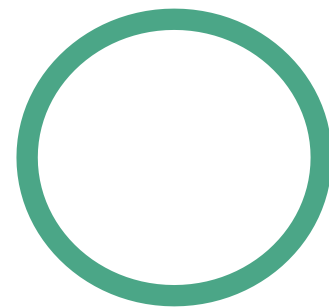
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UNDERSTANDING PE THROUGH THE LENS OF THE LEAST ACTIVE GIRLS AND THEIR PE TEACHERS

Taking a girl- and teacher-centred approach was key to shaping this educational tool, bringing in the views of girls, particularly those who are less active, and their PE teachers, to work on shaping something that would work for them.

Clear learnings emerged from conversations with teachers and girls, that Studio You would need to consider and address in order to fulfil the key objective. These key learnings are outlined below.



Key learnings from the co-creation

1.

Girls find PE boring and repetitive

They wanted something that had the core purpose of enjoyment, but provided a variety of non-competitive activities, in short bursts and with a wide range of options available.

2.

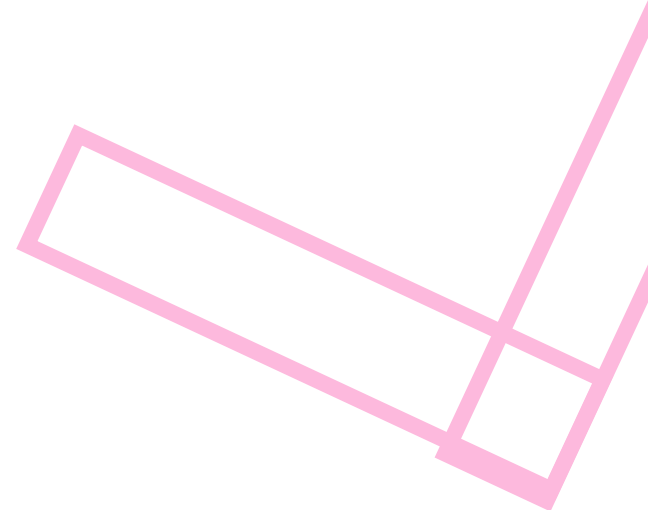
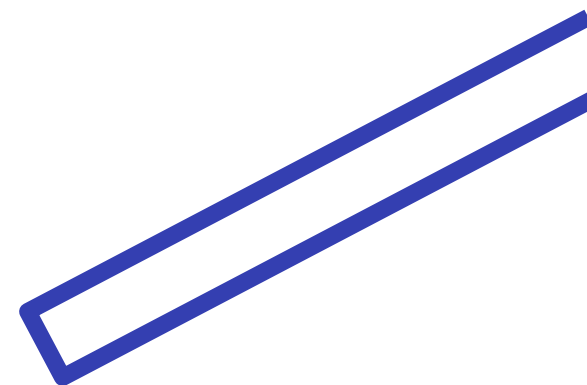
Teachers found it hard to 'get inventive'

When it came to lesson planning, teachers needed support in coming up with more interesting and creative lessons, steering away from the usual.

3.

Representation and inclusion is critical

Spanning a range of factors including activity levels, diversity of ethnicity and body shape, and inclusive of SEN. It needed to feel authentic, knowledgeable, and relatable. Girls needed to feel totally comfortable and free from judgement.



Key learnings from the co-creation (continued)

4.

Teacher support is key

Girls wanted their PE teachers to be actively involved in lessons, and teachers needed the right tools to deliver engaging PE content. They need to facilitate and affirm, but also be knowledgeable about the sessions they are delivering. It was very important for girls to feel their teachers valued and supported them.

5.

A strong educational element is needed

Beyond delivering fun activities to support engagement, there needed to be an educational element. Teachers wanted the tool to deliver additional information about the value of being active, learning new skills and the social and psychological benefits.

6.

Alignment with the national curriculum is crucial

There needed to be identifiable milestones based on the curriculum and help teachers to plan blocks of lessons. Teachers reported having an hour allotted for PE, so the tool needed to offer c.40-minute lessons and be able to build into a long-term plan.

7.

Avoid reliance on lots of space and equipment

Studio You needed to be flexible and be easy to access in circumstances where space and equipment are limited.

8.

Embed progression and achievement

Girls wanted to feel confident and empowered.

9.

Trustworthiness and safety is paramount

Teachers needed to know that lessons they were delivering could be trusted and they were appropriate for the class – unlike other video platforms sometimes used in PE like YouTube. It would save them time if they didn't need to check beforehand!



INTRODUCING STUDIO YOU

After speaking to girls and teachers about their needs and expectations, **Studio You was created**. A video-based digital library of PE lessons, each led by on-screen experts in a range of disciplines, it offers girls **choice and ownership** in PE and gives teachers **flexibility**, whilst enabling them to tailor PE to different abilities and interests. Studio You was designed with the ethos of This Girl Can, **empowering girls to get involved in physical activity** to feel good.

Feedback from girls was clear that Studio You instructors needed to do **more than lead a fitness class**, providing non-judgemental and supportive commentary to encourage and motivate participation. To achieve this, **instructors were chosen to be relatable and reflect young girls today**, from body shapes to regional accents to ethnicity, and this needed to be reflected throughout all campaign assets.

Whilst the development of Studio You took a girl-centered approach, it also considered teachers' needs and the vital role they have in inspiring their students and providing expert education. Care was taken to ensure Studio You was developed as **a tool to help teachers**, rather than replace their expertise. It also aimed to address some of the challenges PE teachers experience, such as curriculum pressure, time constraints and mixed ability groups.

With input from girls, Studio You developed content in a range of disciplines from dance to yoga, combat, fitness, and more, putting the **emphasis on fun and flexibility**. Lessons varied in length, intensity, and focus on progression, so girls and teachers could move forward at their desired pace. From the start, it included **a comprehensive hub** to help teachers modify their approach to suit a range of students, particularly those who are the most disengaged. This hub includes teaching materials that help teachers understand new disciplines and offer inclusion guidance, providing tools to engage any and every girl in getting active.



GIRLS

Girls wanted Studio You instructors to:

- Offer more encouragement (“It’s okay not to be confident”)
- Be energetic and energising
- Be friendly and relaxed (not too strict)

TEACHERS

Studio You needed to address challenges that PE teachers experience, including:

- Curriculum pressure
- Time constraints
- Mixed ability groups

PILOTING STUDIO YOU: KEY LEARNINGS

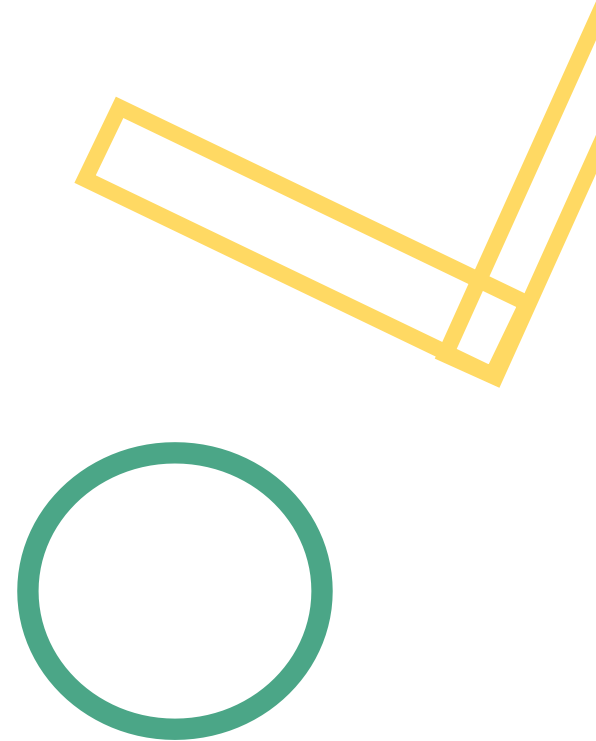
Things will never be perfect straight away. It was important for Studio You to undergo a **3-month piloting test phase and evaluation** to understand if it was hitting its objectives or missing the mark. After speaking to girls and PE teachers who had tested Studio You, the initial response was positive, but it was clear that there were a number of gaps to fill.¹²

Early signs were encouraging, but it was too soon to measure the true impact

Less active girls responded positively to Studio You overall, with initial evidence showing **some increases in how girls can choose and shape PE lessons** and **small improvements in feelings of inclusion**. This was aided by having different activity disciplines available that girls could choose from, promoting **a sense of autonomy** in lessons.

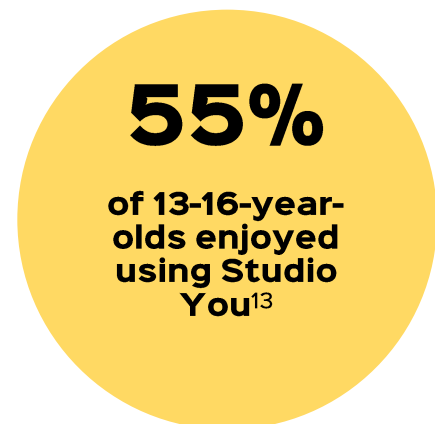
There was evidence that **teachers were engaging positively** with Studio You resources and reported observing benefits for their students. For example, engaging girls who are less active or previously resistant to PE lessons.

This feedback provided clear initial evidence for a positive response to Studio You, a new and novel tool which piqued the interest of less active girls through providing choice and a range of engaging activities.



Early signs of a positive impact of Studio You:

Less active girls reported a greater ability to choose and shape how they were physically active in PE



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Where were the gaps and what else did we need to understand?

NON-TRADITIONAL DISCIPLINES

What was the gap?

The inclusion of non-traditional activities was important to engage girls who don't enjoy PE lessons where traditional activities are typically delivered.



So what?

Studio You needed to provide more support and training in non-traditional disciplines to increase teachers' confidence in delivering these lessons.

PROGRESSION AND LESSON BLOCKS

What was the gap?

There was an interest in using Studio You more regularly, but there was a lack of understanding about the progression and how it can be built into blocks of activities that align with typical provision.



So what?

Studio You needed to support teachers in creating structured and clear lesson plans, with clear educational value that aligns with the national curriculum.

AUTHENTIC, RELATABLE INSTRUCTORS

What was the gap?

While the instructors in the videos were diverse, they didn't feel authentic enough for girls. For example, they weren't tiring or sweating during the activity, so girls were still struggling to relate to them.



So what?

Instructors needed to be truly relatable and show the realities of exercise for girls to connect to them.

DIFFERING ABILITY LEVELS

What was the gap?

The alternate moves for different ability levels were a key element of the platform to promote inclusion – but girls weren't noticing these without prompting.

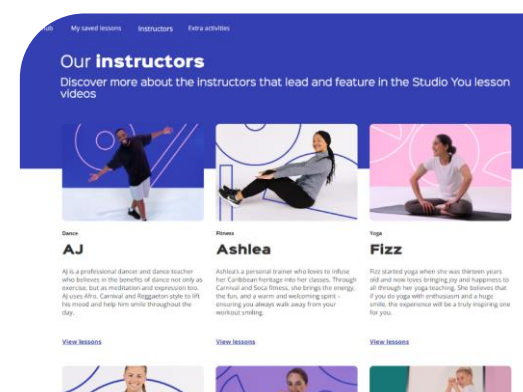


So what?

Signposting to different ability levels needed to be clear and visible.

Based on learnings, the production of Studio You changed into **longer blocks of content**, with **live audio** rather than a voice-over to create a feeling of being in the room with the instructors. New instructors were brought on to **increase diversity of the cast**, and **different moves** within the disciplines were introduced for **greater variety and inclusivity**.

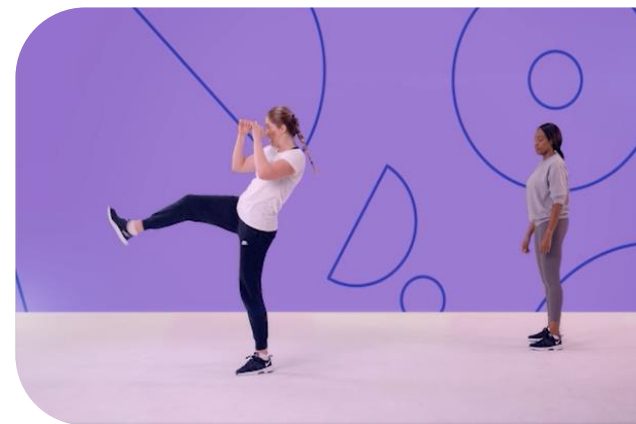
Studio You was then **rolled out nationally** to be used in secondary schools across England. So, what impact did this have?



EVALUATING THE IMPACT ON INACTIVE GIRLS AND THEIR EXPERIENCE OF PE

In the three years that Studio You has been used in schools across the nation, the team has **measured the overall impact** of the initiative. The key aims were to achieve **greater enjoyment** for secondary school girls, giving them a **greater ability to choose and shape** how they are active in PE lessons, while **increasing teachers' understanding about the needs of less active girls**.

Research with PE teachers and girls who have used the platform has highlighted the impact of the tool and has provided learnings around what promotes enjoyment and inclusion for the least active girls.¹³



Impact on teachers

Teachers report using Studio You in a range of ways: with the whole class, with smaller groups, or with those most interested in the activities it offers. It is used across the age range of secondary school from year 7 to 11.

96%

are satisfied with Studio You (61% 'very satisfied')

94%

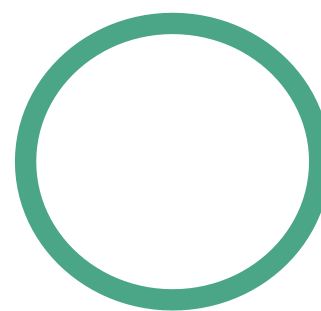
agree that Studio You helps them provide a good PE lesson to a class with differing levels of ability

88%

agree that Studio You has helped them to engage less active students

87%

agree that Studio You enhances their students' choice of activities in their PE lessons

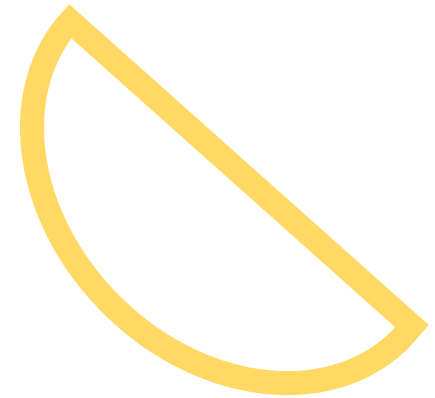


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13. Studio You 2023-24 Academic Year Evaluation, Walnut Unlimited, 2024.

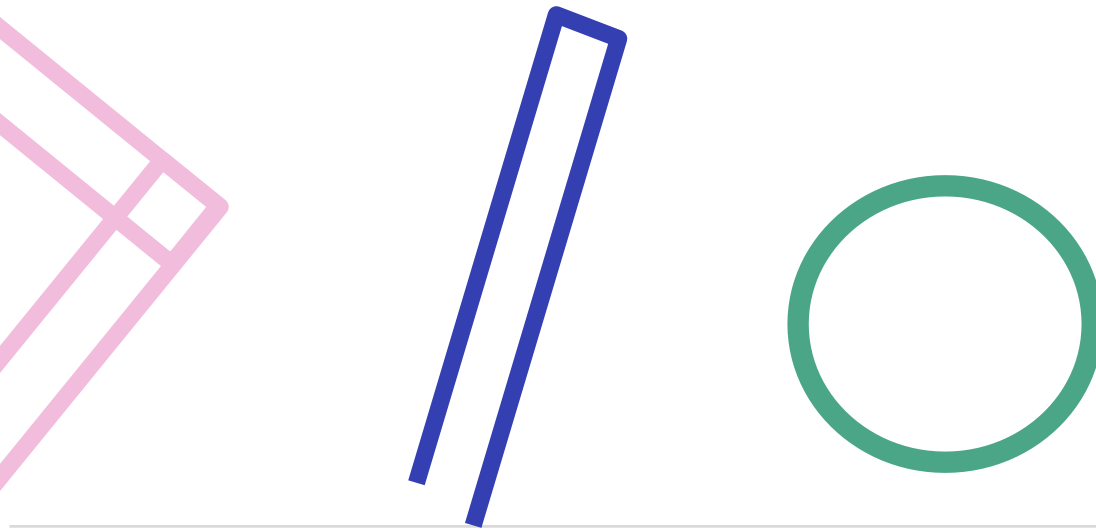
Impact on girls

Girls' views on Studio You were equally positive as those of their teachers.¹³



Crucially, **Studio You is liked by those who feel self-conscious about their ability when taking part in PE.** Girls who feel self-conscious about their ability in PE are significantly less likely to enjoy PE compared to those who feel confident in their ability. 33% said they do not look forward to PE lessons (versus 5%).

The gap closes when Studio You is used in PE lessons, with 82% of self-conscious girls saying they look forward to PE lessons when Studio You is used (versus 92% of those who feel confident in their ability). **Studio You improves their perceptions of PE lessons**, so that they are more similar to girls who feel confident in their ability.



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13. Studio You 2023-24 Academic Year Evaluation, Walnut Unlimited, 2024.

WHAT IS THERE STILL TO DO?

The research behind Studio You identified that schools and PE lessons play a vital role in promoting sport and exercise among teenage girls. Evidence gained through evaluating Studio You indicates that it is an effective tool in supporting schools and PE teachers to enhance PE lessons and offer a choice of engaging activities to girls.

But, naturally, there is still room to go further, getting more girls engaged in sport and physical activity to reduce the gender gap. This is something that the whole sector needs to keep working on, with Studio You only being one part of the solution.



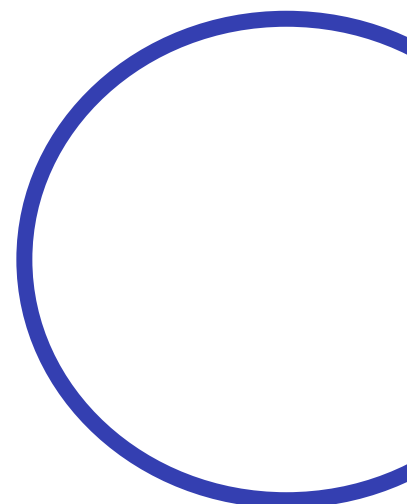
Balancing the demands of students alongside the needs and expectations of teachers

Further developments of Studio You could focus more on **learning and education**, with a greater range of activities or **transferrable skills** (e.g., to team sports). Teachers have suggested it could focus even more on building girls' knowledge of and skills in PE, as well as the positive benefits of being active. Girls would like a wider range of disciplines to offer more choice.



Translating the ethos of Studio You into other areas of PE and activity

One of the persisting challenges is translating the ethos of Studio You into other areas of PE and activity outside of school. Studio You in its current form is mainly delivered in an indoor school gym or hall, but its ethos of inclusivity, choice, diversity, and enjoyment can also be applied to outdoor PE activities. Teachers require further support with **translating the lessons to an outdoor setting**, while embodying Studio You's core values, to teach girls that there are more opportunities to be active beyond PE lessons.





Encouraging girls to build positive relationships with physical activity

While there is lots of evidence to suggest girls enjoy using Studio You, and that it encourages less active girls to engage in PE, evidence is only just emerging that is translating into more active lives for girls outside of PE. An ambition for Studio You is to use school PE to set positive attitudes and behaviours towards physical activity that girls can take forward to adulthood. Future evaluations will continue to track this and measure the extent to which girls are getting more involved in sport and physical activity outside of school.

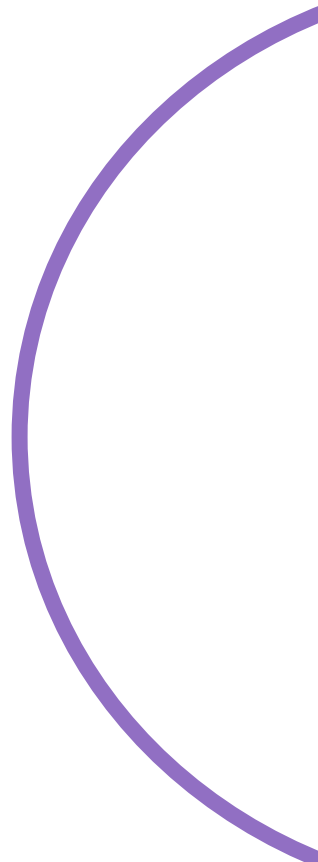
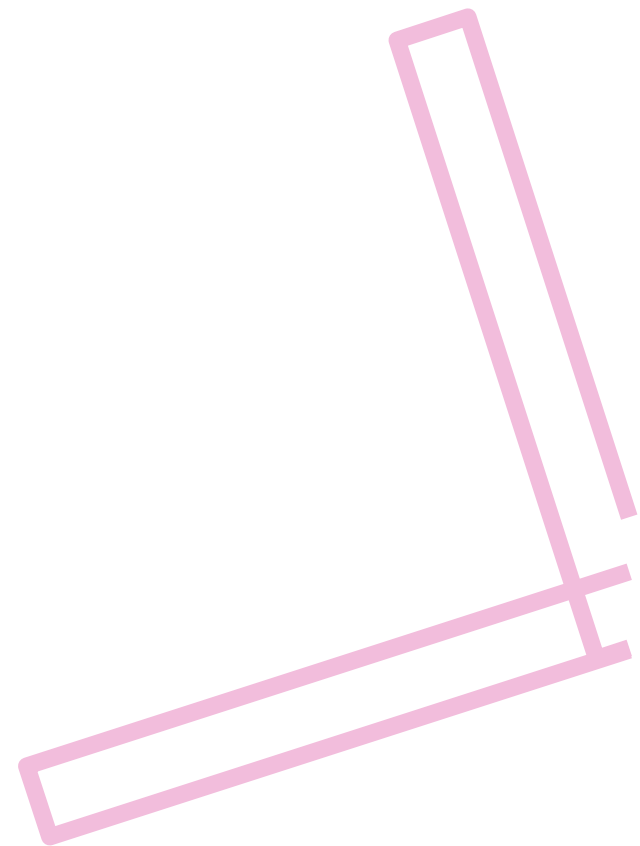
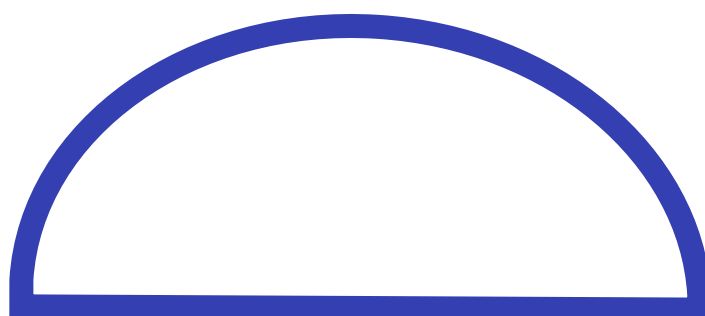
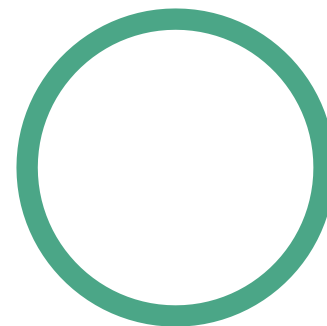


Providing a multifaceted educational tool to support teachers in promoting inclusion

Girls' lives are complex and there are different barriers to engaging in physical activity and sport other than simple enjoyment. These can range from physical matters (for example girls starting their period) to psychological issues (such as mental health and wellbeing). Studio You has an opportunity to help raise these issues and promote dialogue on the ways forward.

Work has already started in some areas. In 2023 Studio You formed a partnership with Bodyform aimed at raising awareness and promoting conversations around periods and physical activity. In May 2024, Studio You coordinated a live broadcast event bringing together girls, teachers, and an array of experts to create a safe space to discuss the potential barriers that may be holding girls back – viewed by more than 1,000 schools with over 40,000 viewers. In addition, teachers have access to top tips on getting the most out of Studio You via the platform, including a technical toolkit and discipline cards that outline specific movement modifications for each of the disciplines on Studio You.

Schools are increasingly being asked to cover topics around girls' health and physiology,¹⁴ and Studio You is well placed to support this and evolve its offer to be as useful as possible.



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14. Health barriers for girls and women in sport, Women and Equalities Committee, 2024. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5804/cmselect/cmwomeq/130/report.html#heading-1>

FINAL THOUGHTS

1.

Enabling and encouraging girls to become more active and **develop positive behaviours that will support them through adulthood is an ongoing journey**. It is one that has involved the great work of a huge variety of organisations and individuals tackling the issue from a wide range of angles.

2.

Girls need the right support, opportunities, and encouragement to feel confident in engaging in physical activity and sport. **Teachers need the confidence, skills, and knowledge** to help girls overcome barriers which have become ever more complex and inter-related.

3.

Choice and enjoyment are key elements which can unlock sport and physical activity for girls. At the same time, they need to be supported in **overcoming barriers around self-perception**, and allow them to overcome worries about periods and physical activity.

4.

Studio You is only part of the solution, working hard to evolve its offering through actively listening to teachers and girls. There is also a huge opportunity for the sector to develop stronger partnerships and bonds to ensure girls are getting the right access to physical activity and sport.

5.

The teams behind Studio You at This Girl Can and Hopscotch Consulting **welcome collaborations and are always looking to establish partnerships** with organisations with the same mission.



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