



CLIMBING ACTIVATES TWEEN GIRLS

How to increase tween girls' physical activity



Study with 150 girls
Aged 9-12 years



Studying movement and
physical activity at school
playgrounds



5 consecutive school days



200 million data points

Climbing activates tween girls – the scientific view

By Thea Toft Amholt, PhD

Globally, 85% of tween girls are not physically active for the recommended 60 minutes every day (Guthold et al., 2019). But in our study, where we observed the movements of 150 girls in their school playgrounds for five consecutive school days, we showed (based on 200 million data points) that they are very physically active when engaging in their favourite play activities.

Tween girls are less active

Children are not as physically active as the World Health Organization recommends, and girls, especially, are alarmingly inactive. Previous studies of children's physical activity concluded that it is much harder to activate girls than boys. Both researchers and general practitioners call for better knowledge on how to facilitate more activity for girls. Previous studies have found playgrounds to be one of the favourite areas for physical activity. But how do we build playgrounds that attract and activate girls?

200 million data points

In this study, we measured the physical activity of 150 girls in four different school playgrounds. The girls wore activity trackers and GPS devices for one school week, collecting 200 million data points for analysis. We analysed the data looking for areas and types of equipment with significantly higher physical activity. Furthermore, we observed the behaviour of the girls in the playground using structured observations. And finally, we conducted ten focus group interviews with 56 girls to uncover girls' motivations for playground use.

Climbing activates tween girls

Surprisingly, we found that girls were very active in school playgrounds. These results contradict the assumption that it is difficult to activate girls. In our study, the girls obtained 54-60 minutes of daily physical activity, which is 90-100% of the daily amount of physical activity recommended by the World Health Organization.

Across all four school playgrounds, areas with climbing equipment facilitated high physical activity in girls. These areas included Spacenets, classic play structures and GALAXY structures. Here, girls liked climbing up to hang out with their friends – the girls stated that when they sit at the top of a piece of climbing equipment, they have the advantage of being able to see what others are doing as well as being visible to others.

'I just like to climb up there and sit with my friends. We always sit here in recess. That is just our spot.'

(Girl, 12 years old)

Furthermore, they describe climbing equipment as the perfect challenge. They refer to climbing equipment as an opportunity to look cool in front of peers. They like to be challenged and improve their skills when they play.



'I would like it to be challenging to get up there. Yes, because I think it is like... a little challenging to be able to get high up. That's exciting!'

(Girl, 11 years old)



'Yes, well, Sofie and I at one time... We became best friends. We spun around so much together and then we became friends. Best friends actually. And then this girl called Anna joined us and we became best friends and now we are all best friends and have been for a long time' (Girl, 11 years old).

Playing is not only important to increase girls' physical activity but should also facilitate and support development of their social skills. We must therefore also consider how to make room for social spots in playgrounds where girls can hang out and strengthen their social connections.

MAIN FINDINGS

- When they have access to well-equipped playgrounds, tween girls can accumulate 90-100% of the daily recommendation for physical activity
- Climbing equipment such as KOM-PAN Spacenet, PCM structures and GALAXY structures activates tween girls
- Tween girls like to be challenged
- Tween girls like heights, to see and be seen
- Tween girls strengthen their social connections in playgrounds

Social hang-out spots

Based on our observations, we found that girls used 22% of their time on talkative play and 58% on physical play. Besides their great interest in physically active play, e.g. on climbing equipment, we found that they liked to hang out and talk with their friends in the playground to a greater extent than boys. They used the playground as an arena for making and strengthening social connections. The girls said that the way they can socialise with each other outside in the playground is different than inside in the classroom. They found it much easier to make new friends when playing. One girl described how she used the Supernova to find new friends:

4 THINGS TO CONSIDER

regarding activating tween girls in playgrounds:

1. Consider tween girls as a special target group when designing playgrounds
2. Consider climbing equipment: Spacenets, PCM structures and GALAXY structures
3. Challenge the tween girls with tall play equipment
4. Consider hang-out areas such as platforms



Read more:

- *Motivating Playgrounds*, PhD thesis, Thea Toft Amholt, Odense 2022
- *Where are tweens active in school playgrounds? A hot-spot analysis using GPS, accelerometers and GIS data*, Thea Toft Amholt et al., *Landscape and Urban Planning* 227 (2022)
- *Investigating the use of playgrounds by tweens: a systematic observation study*, Thea Toft Amholt et al., *International Journal of Play*, October 2022
- *Motivating playgrounds: understanding how school playgrounds support autonomy, competence and relatedness of tweens*, Thea Toft Amholt et al., *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being*, July 2022
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