

Reclaiming

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Physical Space:

Co-producing Active Futures with
Digitally Isolated and
Marginalised Youth

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Executive Summary

Physical activity offers significant physical, social, emotional and psychological benefits for young people (Eime et al., 2013; Kemel, Porter & Coombs, 2022). Regular participation is associated with improved mental health, increased confidence and self-esteem, stronger social relationships, and improved long-term health outcomes (Bengtsson et al., 2025; Li et al., 2024; Sin et al., 2023). Research consistently demonstrates, however, that transgender and gender-diverse (TGD) young people participate in sport and physical activity at lower rates than their cisgender peers despite often reporting similar levels of motivation and interest in being active. This disparity reflects not a lack of desire to participate, but rather the existence of multiple barriers that make participation difficult or inaccessible.

Existing evidence highlights a range of structural, social and individual barriers affecting TGD young people's participation. Structural barriers include gender-segregated facilities, binary sport categories, gendered uniforms, and limited access to private changing spaces. Social barriers include bullying, exclusion, discrimination, harassment, and concerns about being judged by peers and adults. Individual experiences often include dysphoria, body dissatisfaction, anxiety, and fears about safety and belonging. Importantly, these barriers are not inherent to trans and gender-diverse young people but emerge from environments and systems that have historically been designed around cisheteronormative assumptions.

This toolkit was developed through the ESRC Impact Acceleration Award Project Reclaiming Physical Space: Co-Producing Active Futures with Trans and Gender-Diverse Young People at Coventry University. Across a series of workshops with trans and gender-diverse young people from youth organisations across the West Midlands, participants engaged in dance, basketball, yoga, mindfulness, fitness activities, talking circles, body-mapping exercises, creative reflection activities, and collaborative design tasks. Young people were invited to reflect on their experiences of movement and imagine what more inclusive physical activity environments might look like.

The project identified five interconnected themes that shaped participation:

1. Safety Before Participation

Participants consistently emphasised that safety extends beyond physical risk. Emotional safety, psychological safety and freedom from judgement were often described as prerequisites for participation. Young people highlighted concerns about being watched, judged, misgendered or exposed in activity spaces.

2. Choice and Autonomy

There was no single activity that appealed to all participants. Some young people preferred basketball and high-energy activities, while others preferred mindfulness, yoga or creative movement. The key factor was having meaningful choice and the ability to participate in ways that felt comfortable.

3. Community and Belonging

Physical activity was frequently discussed as a social experience rather than simply a health behaviour. Participants valued opportunities to connect with peers, share experiences and participate in affirming environments. Community was often identified as a facilitator of participation.

4. Accessibility and Predictability.

Young people wanted to know what would happen before arriving, what activities would be offered, how facilities would be organised, and whether privacy would be available. Accessibility included sensory, financial, emotional and informational dimensions in addition to physical access.

5. Joy as a Legitimate Outcome

Participants frequently described movement using terms such as freedom, energy, encouragement, engagement and inspiration. Rather than focusing solely on reducing barriers, organisations should also consider how physical activity environments can actively create opportunities for joy and flourishing.

This toolkit argues that increasing opportunities for trans and gender-diverse young people to participate in physical activity requires more than policy changes. Meaningful inclusion requires organisations to rethink the ways physical activity environments are designed, facilitated and experienced. The recommendations throughout this toolkit are intended to support schools, youth organisations, community groups, leisure providers and policymakers in creating physical activity spaces where trans and gender-diverse young people can not only participate but thrive.

Chapter 1: Introduction

What is the Problem?

Sport and physical activity have long been recognised as important contributors to young people's physical health, emotional wellbeing and social development (CITE). Participation in movement-based activities can promote confidence, resilience, social connection, stress reduction and positive mental health. For many young people, physical activity also offers opportunities for self-expression, community building and identity development. Yet access to these benefits remains unequal.

Research consistently demonstrates that trans and gender-diverse young people participate in sport and physical activity less frequently than their cisgender peers. Studies from both the United Kingdom and internationally have identified reduced levels of participation across organised sport, recreational physical activity and school physical education. Importantly, this lower participation should not be interpreted as evidence of reduced motivation or interest. Rather, it reflects the accumulation of barriers that make participation more difficult, less enjoyable, or less safe.

Debates concerning trans participation in sport have often focused on elite competition, eligibility criteria and policy regulation. While these discussions are important, they represent only a small part of young people's everyday experiences. Most trans and gender-diverse young people engage with movement in schools, youth clubs, leisure centres, parks, gyms, community organisations and informal recreational spaces. Yet these settings have received comparatively less attention.

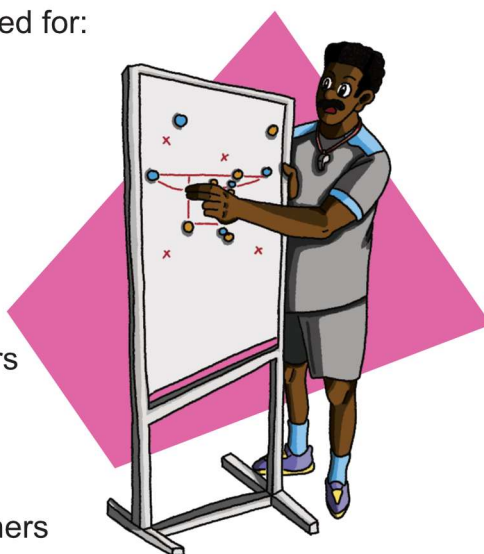
This toolkit seeks to address that gap.

Drawing on both academic literature and the experiences of trans and gender-diverse young people who participated in the Reclaiming Physical Space project, this toolkit explores how movement environments can become more inclusive, affirming and accessible.

Who Is This Toolkit For?

This toolkit has been developed for:

- Schools and colleges
- Youth organisations
- Community groups
- Sports clubs
- Leisure centres
- Physical activity providers
- Local authorities
- Policy makers
- Researchers and practitioners



Although the recommendations are grounded in the experiences of trans and gender-diverse young people, many of the principles identified—such as autonomy, accessibility, community and psychological safety—have wider relevance for creating better physical activity environments for all young people.

Understanding Barriers to Participation

To lay the groundwork for what is to come, this section examines what the academic literature has found as barriers to participation in physical activity and sport for transgender and gender-diverse young people. Research suggests that barriers to participation operate at multiple levels (Austin et al., 2024; Herrick & Duncan, 2018; Jones, et al., 2017; Lightner et al., 2024; Mathy & Mirreghabie, 2025; Muchicko et al., 2014; Storr et al., 2022)

Structural Barriers

Structural barriers are embedded within institutions, policies and physical environments. Common examples include:

Gender-segregated changing rooms (Devís-Devís, Pereira-García, López-Cañada, Pérez-Samaniego, & Fuentes-Miguel, 2018)

Gendered activity programmes (Storr et al., 2022)

Binary sport classifications (Riemer & Visio, 2003)

Gender-specific uniforms (Porter et al., 2025)

Limited privacy options (Browne & Browne, 2025; Lightner et al., 2024)

Lack of gender-neutral facilities (Holder, Morris & Spreckley, 2022; Jones, et al., 2017; Lightner et al., 2024)

Several studies have identified changing rooms and gender-segregated facilities as particularly significant sites of exclusion for trans and gender-diverse participants.

Social Barriers

Social barriers emerge through interactions with peers, staff, coaches and wider communities.

These often include:

Bullying and harassment (Bailey et al., 2025)

Misgendering (Bailey et al., 2025)

Social exclusion (Hargie, Mitchell & Somerville, 2017; Love, 2014)

Fear of discrimination (Oliveira et al., 2022)

Lack of staff knowledge and confidence (Braumüller et al., 2020; Hargie, Mitchell & Somerville, 2017)

When considering school-based physical education spaces in particular, Hargie and colleagues (2017) found that many transgender individuals described sport settings as spaces of surveillance, judgement and exclusion, particularly during school-based physical education experiences.
[eprints.bo...outh.ac.uk]

Similar concerns emerged throughout this project. Participants frequently discussed concerns about being judged, watched, or made to feel different from others. At the same time, they described positive experiences when activities felt welcoming, supportive and judgement-free. [jamanetwork.com], [jamanetwork.com]

Individual Experiences

Individual experiences are often shaped by broader structural and social contexts.

Research has identified:

Body dissatisfaction (Bailey et al., 2024)

Anxiety (Lightner et al., 2024; Mathy & Mirreghabie, 2025)

Dysphoria (Barras & Frith, 2024)

Fear of rejection (Hargie et al., 2017; Holder, Morris & Spreckley, 2022)

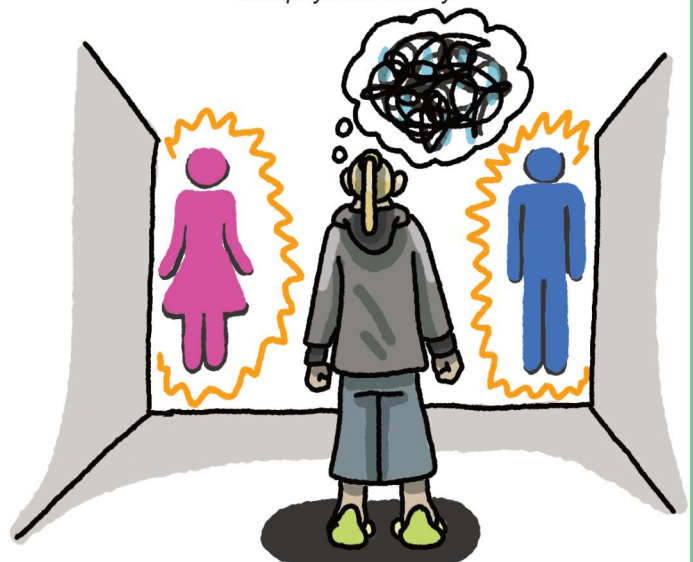
Lack of confidence (Braumüller et al., 2020)

Minority Stress (Braumüller et al., 2020; Hargie et al., 2017; Meyer, 2003)

As common barriers to participation among trans and gender-diverse populations. [kipdf.com], [researchgate.net]

The workshop data reflected these findings. During group discussions and reflection activities, participants spoke about shame, self-consciousness, body image concerns and worries about how their bodies might be perceived during movement. Others described becoming increasingly aware of particular body parts or previous experiences while participating in yoga and mindfulness activities.
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Importantly, these experiences should not be viewed as individual shortcomings. Rather, they reflect how social environments shape people's relationships with movement and physical activity.

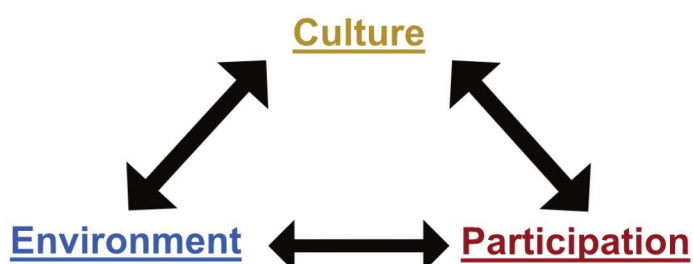


Key Framing: Reclaiming Physical Space Project

A central argument of this toolkit is that participation should not only be understood as a matter of encouraging transgender and gender-diverse young people to be more active. Instead, this toolkit argues that attention must be paid to the environments and structures in which participation in physical activity and sport occurs. This means creating environments where transgender and gender-diverse young people can move, play, exercise, learn and connect without needing to constantly negotiate their safety, legitimacy or belonging. If organisations simply encourage or push transgender and gender-diverse young people to engage more deeply in physical activity and sport in their current form, ignoring the structural, social and individual barriers, the results and impacts to transgender and gender-diverse youth's overall wellbeing could be detrimental and create further division and inhibition in the long-term for this group.

Consequently, **reclaiming physical space means more** than increasing participation rates.

It means **creating environments where trans and gender-diverse young people can move, play, exercise, learn and connect without needing to constantly negotiate their safety, legitimacy or belonging.**



Putting This into Practice

Before continuing through this toolkit, the research team invites readers, who may be youth group leaders, educators, parents, policymakers, or even transgender and gender-diverse youth themselves to consider the following questions:

Environment

Do our facilities include private and flexible changing options?
What about toilets?

Are activities unnecessarily organised around gender?

Is inclusion visible within our physical spaces?

Is there an online space associated with our physical space for encouraging participation, community building and access to support? If not, would this be possible to construct?

Culture

Do young people feel psychologically safe?

How do staff respond to trans and gender-diverse participants?

Are opportunities provided for feedback and co-production?

Do young people have a chance to get to know each other and practice their in-person social skills?

Is the online space, (if present) monitored similarly to the in-person space? Is there an ability to hybridise this further?

Participation

Are we measuring belonging and enjoyment as well as attendance?

Do young people have genuine choice in activities?

What barriers might prevent someone from attending for the first time?

What barriers might prevent someone from sustained participation?

Do we know what type(s) of physical activity or movement young people are currently participating in? If not, why not?

How could we tap into this participation for within our organisation?

The following chapters explore these questions in greater depth by examining the relationships between digital lives, community, belonging, embodiment and movement, before presenting the findings and recommendations developed through the project.

Chapter 2: Intersection of Media and Physical Activity

Young people today are growing up in a progressively digital world (Chayko, 2020). Social media platforms, online communities, digital communication technologies and virtual networks have become critical facets of everyday life (Chayko, 2020; Hannan, 2024; Rhodes, 2026). Even though public policy discussions tend to focus on concerns about screen time or sedentary behaviour (House of Commons Education Committee, 2024), research increasingly demonstrates that digital engagement plays a complex role in young people's identity development, wellbeing and social relationships (Livingstone & Third, 2017; Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

For trans and gender-diverse young people, digital environments can be especially significant. Online communities often provide access to information, representation, peer support and identity validation that may be difficult to access within local communities (Craig et al., 2021; McInroy et al., 2022). In fact, many transgender and gender-diverse young people report that online spaces were among the first places where they encountered information about gender diversity, connected with other trans people, or explored aspects of their identities in affirming environments (Eisenberg et al., 2025).

At the same time, several questions remain about how physical activity, movement and embodied experiences fit within young people's increasingly digital lives. While online communities may offer connection and belonging, especially in locations where it may be hard for marginalised youth to find each other, they cannot entirely replace the social and embodied experiences associated with physical spaces. Understanding this relationship is particularly important when considering how trans and gender-diverse young people engage with movement, physical activity and community participation.



This section explores the relationship between digital life, physical activity and community belonging, arguing that inclusive physical activity spaces remain an important, yet often overlooked, component of trans and gender-diverse young people's wellbeing.

Digital Spaces as Sites of Identity and Community

Historically, LGBTQ+ young people have often experienced isolation within schools, communities and families (Garcia et al., 2020; Schumacher, 2025). Digital technologies have transformed this landscape by providing opportunities for connection beyond geographic boundaries (Carr & Hanbury, 2022). According to research, these online spaces can support young people's:

Identity exploration

(Bates, Hobman & Bell, 2020; Craig et al., 2021)

Community building

(Carr & Hanbury, 2022; McInroy et al., 2019)

Access to information

(Craig et al., 2021; McInroy et al., 2019)

Peer support

(Carr & Hanbury, 2022; Fish et al., 2022; McInroy et al., 2019)

Mental health and wellbeing

(Craig et al., 2021)

Political engagement and advocacy

(Carr & Hanbury, 2022; Craig et al., 2021; Lucero, 2017).

For trans and gender-diverse young people specifically, digital spaces are often important sites of affirmation (Austin, 2020), not to mention, that online communities may provide access to language, narratives and experiences that help young people understand themselves and feel less alone (Hanckel & Morris, 2014). Existing research proposes that online engagement can reduce feelings of isolation and increase feelings of social support among LGBTQ+ youth (McInroy et al., 2022). In contexts where local services or community groups are limited, digital spaces may function as critical protective factors providing vital resources not present offline. However, digital environments are not entirely positive with numerous research citing these spaces as rampant with online harassment, transphobic abuse, misinformation, social comparison, body image pressures, and exposure to hostile media narratives (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Simms, 2025; Ybarra et al., 2015). As a result, for many transgender and gender-diverse young people, digital spaces represent both opportunity and risk, making them both protective factors and risk factors impacting their wellbeing.

Online harassment

Transphobic abuse

Misinformation

Social comparison

Exposure to hostile media narratives

Body image pressures

For many trans young people, digital spaces therefore represent both opportunity and risk.

Physical Activity in an Increasingly Digital World

Popular narratives often suggest that increasing digital engagement has displaced physical activity among young people (Oh et al., 2022; George et al., 2023). While there is some evidence that screen-based activities can contribute to sedentary behaviour (Oh et al., 2022; George et al., 2023), current research suggests a far more nuanced picture (McKeever, 2024; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Physical and digital lives are not necessarily competing domains, and actually, they frequently overlap.



Discover new activities
(Rustad et al., 2024)

Learn movement skills
(Goodyear et al., 2021; Hematabadi et al., 2025)

Access fitness content
(Dadgostar et al., 2025; Flaherty & Mangan, 2025)

Connect with sports communities
(Kim et al., 2024; Song, 2025)

Find local groups and events
(Song 2025)

Share experiences of participation

(Hematabadi et al., 2025; Song, 2025; Yeo et al., 2025)



For transgender and gender-diverse young people especially, social media has also contributed to the emergence of alternative representations of movement and physical activity. The number of online creators challenging traditional assumptions regarding gender, fitness, sport and body norms by sharing more diverse experiences of movement has been increasing, helping to provide representation and confidence for trans and gender-diverse young people to participate in physical activity (Caldeira, De Ridder, & Van Bauwel, 2018; Factora, 2025; Harrison, Green, Rooksby, 2025). This is notable given that mainstream sport has often been organised around rigid understandings of gender, competition and bodily norms (Travers, 2018), so any breakdown of these strict constructs is impactful. But, all of this also goes without saying, that although digital communities may facilitate connection, they cannot fully replace physical opportunities for participation and belonging.

Putting this into Practice: Questions for Reflection

How does your organisation create opportunities for young people to access physical activity information and community alongside the physical activity itself?

Do young people have spaces to connect before and after participation in physical activities, whether online or in-person?

Are physical activity programmes designed around belonging as well as participation?

How might digital tools support engagement while maintaining the importance of physical community?

What steps can be taken to ensure that young people feel welcomed before they arrive?

What steps can be taken to ensure that young people feel empowered or accomplished when they leave?

Immediate Actions

- ☐ Create opportunities for socialising alongside activities.
- ☐ Develop online spaces and communication channels for participants.
- ☐ Include community-building objectives within programmes.
- ☐ Involve young people in shaping the physical activities.
- ☐ Promote physical activity as a space for belonging not solely fitness.



Chapter 3: Why does Community Matter?

Discussions around physical activity often position participation in it as an individual endeavour one should do to improve their health, fitness or wellbeing. What this positioning fails to recognise is that physical activity and movement, especially for young people, is not something that is purely individual and happens in isolation. As Chapter 1 articulated, even if a young person is participating in a physical activity by themselves (i.e. walking, running, cycling, dancing, swimming etc...), this movement and activity is still taking place within particular structural, social and physical environments shaping who feels welcome, who feels safe, who participates, and whether that participation is viewed as sustainable to that young person.

This chapter explores the connection between physical activity, community and belonging. To do so, it draws on existing research to determine why social connection is an integral part of participation and why creating physical activity and movement environments require more than opportunities to exercise.

For many LGBT+ youth physical activity can provide chances for interacting with others socially, building friendships, building confidence and aiding in identity development (Ceatha et al., 2019; Clark & Kosciw, 2022). A substantial amount of research has demonstrated that sport participation is linked to a wide array of psychosocial and social benefits such as improved self-esteem, social interaction and opportunities for developing relationships (Eime et al., 2013). When examining the research specifically on adolescent physical activity, the findings indicate a similar social pattern in that social support from friends, family and other significant people, is a crucial factor associated with participation (Mendonça et al., 2014). This is all to say, that, especially for LGBT+ youth (and transgender and gender-diverse youth especially), the social context around physical activity and sport can matter just as much as the activity or sport itself and cannot necessarily be separated. For example, a young person may enjoy playing football because they like the sport of football, or they may also enjoy football because their friends are there, the coach makes them feel supported, they have somewhere to go afterschool or because being a part of a team gives them a sense of connection. But alternatively, a young person may be invited to participate but avoid those same physical activity and sport spaces that they may otherwise enjoy (like football), due to the anticipation of judgement, exclusion or discomfort within that environment, making it far less about football and more about the social and community factors surrounding football. Therefore, if organisations want to tap into community connection as a facilitator for young people to participate in physical activity, they should examine how that community is created and supported because these elements are symbiotically reinforced.



Community as a Facilitator of Participation

As discussed in the previous page, community can act as an important facilitator toward increased physical activity participation (Mendonça et al., 2014). When young people feel connected to others within an activity setting, participation can become about more than exercise and transform into opportunities to develop friendships, spend time with peers, build confidence and feel part of something larger than themselves. This is particularly relevant when considering transgender and gender-diverse young people, and their on average increased experiences of discrimination, exclusion and minority stress which make social environments difficult to navigate (Hargie et al., 2017). If organisations, schools, youth groups, teams, or communities can flip this script for transgender and gender-diverse young people and instead facilitate environments where there are supportive peers, affirming adults and their identities are respected, transgender and gender-diverse youth may start to experience holistic participation in physical activity as more possible. However, this does not mean that every transgender and gender-diverse young person will want to participate in group physical activities or that every community should be understood as inherently positive. Young people have different preferences for social interaction, and an inclusive environment should allow for both social and independent participation. The important consideration is whether young people have opportunities for connection if they want them, without being required to participate socially in order to belong.



Community seen in this way could be perceived as something that is built around physical activity versus something that happens automatically because people are physically present in the same space. Ways to build community within a certain provision could be quite simple. They might involve opportunities to talk before or after activities, having mentors or peer support, social events, shared recreational spaces, group introductory activities or informal opportunities for young people to get to know one another. It might also involve ensuring that new participants are welcomed and introduced to others rather than being expected to navigate an unfamiliar environment alone. These seemingly small aspects of provision can influence whether an activity or group feels like somewhere a young person is simply attending or somewhere they feel they are becoming part of a community, which can increase a young person's feelings of belonging.

Belonging

Belonging extends the concept of inclusion past the present moment when someone is welcomed in and encompasses the longer-term feelings of being accepted, valued, recognised and connected within a particular social environment. This distinction between inclusion and belonging for transgender and gender-diverse young people around physical activity illuminates why only measuring attendance levels in physical activity opportunities misses out on the multitude of facets that could be influencing why that young person is choosing to attend, which could provide deeper insights into your practice as an organisation. To illustrate this, consider two young people from your organisation or group that are offered to attend the same physical activity opportunity (e.g. running club). Despite being the same circumstance externally, these two young people experience the physical activity opportunity very differently. One young person may feel comfortable, supported and connected, while the other may feel anxious, isolated or scrutinised. From an organisational or group perspective, if you were to only record their attendance at the physical activity opportunity (e.g. running club), you could say they both “participated”, but from the young person’s perspective, their experiences were completely different. Keeping this in mind, when working with transgender and gender-diverse youth, measuring more than outright attendance is essential. Only through keying in on aspects of belonging can you get to why a young person participates which can monumentally move you toward cultivating a space where transgender and gender-diverse young people can participate without repeatedly having to explain, defend or justify who they are. In short, inclusion is about being able to enter the space, whereas belonging is about feeling that you are a part of it.

Community does not Mean the Same Thing to Everyone

Although community and belonging are important, there is no single model of what a supportive physical activity community should look like. Some young people may enjoy team sports and highly social activities while others may prefer individual activities like walking, running, swimming, yoga or gym-based exercises. Some young people may want chances to socialise before and after an activity, while others may value being able to participate without having to interact extensively with others. Inclusive provision that supports community building and belonging requires choice and flexibility allowing young people have different ways of connecting and participating. Offering choice in this way recognises that belonging does not require everyone to participate in the same way and the diversity in the community can be a strength.



Putting this Into Practice

As was indicated within this chapter, the academic literature suggests that creating inclusive physical activity opportunities requires attention to more than the activity itself. Organisations should consider how community, relationships, belonging, autonomy and physical space are experienced by transgender and gender-diverse young people. By answering the questions below, organisations and groups can reflect on how their provision creates community and belonging for transgender and gender-diverse youth around physical activity.

Building Community

What opportunities do young people have to get to know one another outside of the physical activity itself?

Are there chances for informal conversation before or after sessions? Virtually? In-person?

How are new young people introduced to the existing community?

Do young people have chances to develop friendships gradually and at their own pace?

Are there opportunities for peer support, mentoring or shared experiences?

What might make someone feel like they are joining a community rather than only attending a physical activity session?

Belonging

What tells a young person that they are genuinely part of your community?

How might a new participant know that they are valued versus accommodated?

Are there opportunities for young people to contribute to the culture and identity of the group?

Do young people have a sense of ownership over the community they participate in?

How do you recognise and celebrate the contributions young people make to the group?

Are there particular groups of young people who may find it harder to become part of the community?

Sustaining Connection

What occasions exist for young people to stay connected between sessions?

Could activities, outings or events create opportunities for relationships to develop past a single session?

Are there appropriate online spaces that complement the physical community?

How might digital communication help young people maintain relationships without replacing opportunities for face-to-face connection?

What happens to the sense of community when a young person cannot attend a session?

Choice and Diverse Connection Methods

Does your approach to community assume that everyone wants to socialise in the same way?

Are there opportunities for both highly social and quieter forms of participation?

Can young people choose how much they want to interact with others?

Are there opportunities for young people to connect through shared interests rather than only through the physical activity itself?

How might you create opportunities for connection without making social interaction feel compulsory?

Thinking Past Attendance

Do you know whether young people are returning because they enjoy the activity, because they value the relationships they have developed, or both?

How might you measure belonging alongside attendance?

Could you ask young people whether they feel connected, welcomed and valued?

What might sustained participation look like beyond simply attending regularly?

What would tell you that your organisation has developed a genuine community rather than simply a programme that young people attend?

Immediate Actions

Building community does not necessarily require a major new programme or significant financial investment. Small changes to how activities are organised can create more opportunities for young people to connect.

- **Build in social time.** Allow time before or after activities for young people to talk, get to know one another and develop relationships.
- **Welcome people intentionally.** Think about how a new participant is introduced to the group and who helps them navigate their first session.
- **Create opportunities for peer connection.** Encourage appropriate peer mentoring, buddy systems or shared activities that allow relationships to develop naturally.
- **Create community beyond the activity.** Consider occasional social events, walks, outings, shared meals or other opportunities to connect around, but not necessarily through, the physical activity itself.
- **Offer different ways to connect.** Provide physical activity opportunities for young people who enjoy social interaction alongside options for those who prefer quieter or more independent participation.
- **Support connection between sessions.** Where appropriate and safe, use online communication or community spaces to help young people maintain relationships between physical activities.
- **Give young people ownership.** Involve participants in deciding what activities, events and social opportunities the community should offer.
- **Celebrate the community, not just achievement.** Recognise friendship, encouragement, participation, creativity, support and contribution versus performance only.
- **Ask about belonging.** Regularly give young people opportunities to describe whether they feel connected, valued and part of the group.
- **Pay attention to who is missing.** Think about whose experiences or needs may not be reflected in the existing community and what could make participation more accessible to them.

Listening to Young People

How do you know whether young people feel connected to the community?

Do you ask young people what helps them feel that they belong?

Do you ask what makes it difficult for them to connect with others?

Are young people involved in deciding what social activities or opportunities the group provides?

What happens when young people suggest changes to the community?

How do you communicate back to young people about how their ideas have influenced the group?

Chapter 4: Methodology and Approach

Reclaiming Physical Space Project: Co-production

This toolkit draws on findings from the Reclaiming Physical Space project, funded through the lead researcher's university's Economic Social Research Council Impact Acceleration Account. The project adopted a co-productive and participatory approach that sought to design physical activities and spaces WITH transgender and gender-diverse young people rather than FOR transgender and gender-diverse young people. In effect, the young people who participated were positioned as experts in their own experiences and were invited to actively shape the activities, discussions, and recommendations.

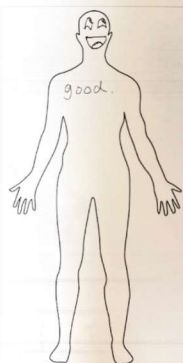
Ethics

The lead researcher gained ethical approval from a thorough ethics application to their university ethics team. Included in the ethical approval process were considerations of safeguarding and DBS clearance, the participant's, youth group leader's, and parent/carer's consent, along with a detailed information sheet and debrief form. Moreover, the lead researcher completed several risk assessment procedures with youth group leaders when determining where the physical activity day for their group of young people would take place and what activities the youth wanted to trial. A significant ethical component to the project also included the collection of and retention of data from the young people and how this was to be collected and stored, all of which were factored in prioritising the mitigation of risk to the young people.

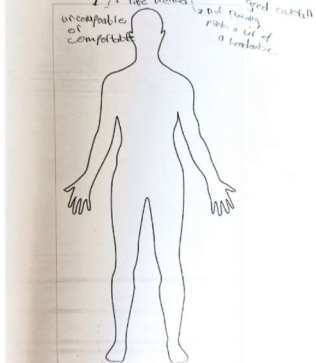
Workshop Structure

A series of small-group workshops were delivered across the United Kingdom in partnership with established LGBTQ+ (or transgender and gender-diverse specific) youth organisations. Sessions were intentionally varied and included several activities participants could trial safely ranging from dance to basketball. Activities were delivered in different community settings depending on the needs and preferences of participating groups and were facilitated by the lead researcher with support from the various youth group leaders.

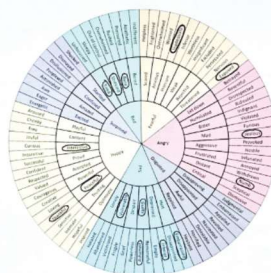
MOVEMENT ACTIVITY 1: Basketball Individual Reflection
- How did my body feel as I moved?
- Where was I comfortable or uncomfortable?



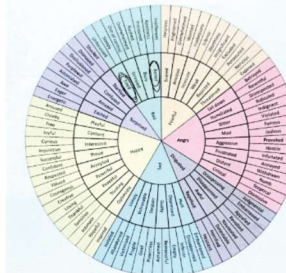
MOVEMENT ACTIVITY 1: Basketball Individual Reflection
- How did my body feel as I moved?
- Where was I comfortable or uncomfortable?



MOVEMENT ACTIVITY 2: Yoga Individual Reflection
- What emotions did I notice? (Circle on the feelings wheel & feel free to elaborate)



MOVEMENT ACTIVITY 2: Yoga Individual Reflection
- What emotions did I notice? (Circle on the feelings wheel & feel free to elaborate)



Chapter 4: Methodology and Approach

Reflection and Data Collection

Following activities, young people participated in structured reflection exercises facilitated by the lead researcher and are expanded on in Chapter 6: Reflection Tools. The Reflection tools used included:

Individual reflection sheets: with open ended and Likert scale questions

Feelings wheels: where participants could circle which emotions were happening during the activity for them

Body-mapping exercises: where participants could indicate where on their body, they may have been feeling what emotions

Confidence and comfort scales: where participants could rate how confident or comfortable they felt prior to, during, and/or after the physical activity

Talking circles: group reflective conversation (discussed in more depth below)

Creative design tasks: drawing and/or writing about their ideal physical activity space

LEGO-based future environment building: using LEGO to construct a model of their ideal physical activity space.

Mentimeter questions and word associations: a small quiz with spatial mapping and word association questions.

These methods allowed participants to express their experiences in multiple ways which was particularly important because it fostered a more inclusive approach in accommodating the diversity of young people's needs but also because not all young people felt comfortable communicating solely through discussion. Not every reflection tool and strategy was used at every physical activity day, the young people had the option to choose which methods they wanted to use for everything except for the first three tools, which is something all participants had the option to complete.



Chapter 4: Methodology and Approach

Learning Through Participation

The goal of the Reclaiming Physical Space project was not designed to identify the "best" physical activity to then recommend that all transgender and gender-diverse young people, schools, youth groups and other stakeholders adopt this activity in practice, rather the goal was to explore participation in physical activity and sport for transgender and gender-diverse young people on a far broader scale. Examples of the questions and learning intended in the co-production process during these physical activity days were:

What makes participation feel safe?

What facilitates enjoyment?

What creates belonging?

What barriers remain?



What would ideal activity environments look like?

By framing the learning in this way, the emphasis during the physical activity day sessions shifted from simple activity evaluations toward understanding these young people's multifaceted experiences while engaging in these activities and how they compared to other physical activity and sport experiences they have had.

Project Limitations

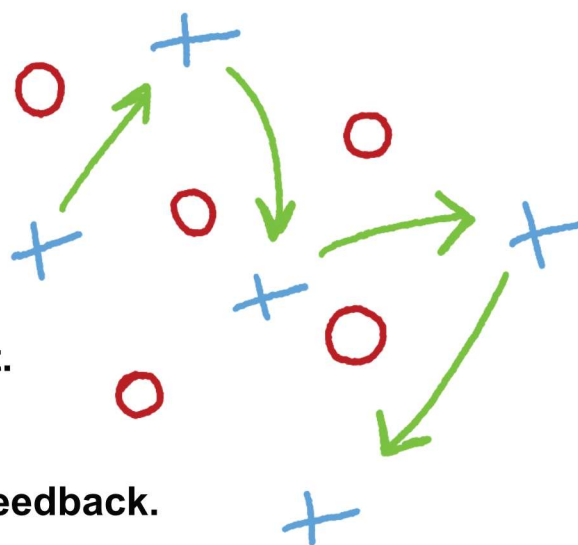
The project involved a relatively small number of participants recruited through LGBTQ+ youth organisations and was predominately concentrated with the West Midlands in the United Kingdom. Consequently, findings should not be interpreted as representing all transgender and gender-diverse young people. However, the project provides valuable insights into how young people understand movement, participation and belonging, and offers practical recommendations that may support more inclusive practice. The researcher aims to keep building on this work and expand it to more contexts with a wider diversity of participant demographics and lived experiences.

Chapter 4: Methodology and Approach

Putting This into Practice

When designing programmes:

- ❑ **Involve young people from the outset.**
- ❑ **Use multiple methods for gathering feedback.**
- ❑ **Treat participants as experts in their own experiences.**
- ❑ **Focus on experiences, not simply attendance figures.**
- ❑ **Build opportunities for ongoing co-production.**



Chapter 5: Activities Tried

Exploring Different Ways to Move

A central component to the principles within this project was recognising that there is no single form of physical activity that appeals to all young people. For this reason, researchers provided a range of movement experiences for participants to engage in which would explore different forms of participation, challenge assumptions about physical activity, and encourage reflection on comfort, confidence and enjoyment.

Dance

Dance was included as a creative movement activity designed to encourage participation and enjoyment. Unlike many traditional sporting activities, dance placed less emphasis on competition and performance and instead encouraged participants to engage with movement in ways which felt comfortable and personally meaningful to them.

In Practice

The Dance activity involved participants voting on a shared song to create a dance to from a playlist of songs the facilitator built prior to the workshop which are LGBT+ associated or written/sang by LGBT+ artists. Once the song was selected, each member of the group had a chance to contribute a move to the choreography of the dance we were going to build together.

In addition to the participant designed dance choreography, the lead researcher projected a YouTube video of a highly subscribed fitness dance influencer who some of the young people already knew of called @thefitnessmarshall. The participants selected a video and song they wanted to try from the influencer's page with the most popular video and song chosen being Golden by HUNTR/X (found at this [link](#)).



Reflections

The participants' reflections from the dance activity across the workshops indicated that dance was something transgender and gender-diverse young people experienced as emotional versus technical. In other words, young people described engaging in the dance activity as helping them feel "energised" and they enjoyed the chance to move freely within a supportive space. One participant who completed the reflective form associated with the dance activity, noted that dance made them feel "freedom", "encouragement", and "inspired". For other participants in the dance activity, it was indicated on their reflective forms that they liked feeling "the positive energy" from participating alongside others and to music they felt empowering. Furthermore, some participants indicated that they felt this activity was sustainable for them and that they could dance alone at home or with their friends, either following social media instructors or creating their own dances to their favourite songs.

Importantly, not all participants found the activity equally accessible with some young people describing difficulties following the pace of the session (especially when trying to follow the YouTube video dance instruction), with some others remaining neutral about the experience. Nevertheless, even where participants felt the activity was challenging, their reflections generally focused on the experience of moving and not about ability or performance. The findings from the dance activity suggest that creative movement activities may offer unique opportunities for participation that prioritise enjoyment, expression and connection over competition, something many transgender and gender-diverse young people are deliberately seeking. These insights also indicate that finding activities that are easily accessible, no cost, and potentially have a digital element seem to be the most appealing to transgender and gender-diverse youth to be physically active.

What we learned

Some transgender and gender-diverse young people valued opportunities for creative self-expression

Enjoyment was often linked to the atmosphere of the activity versus the activity itself.

Feeling free from judgement appeared more important than technical competence.

Being able to access something to follow easily on a digital platform for free in participant's own time seemed to portray the activity as more sustainable.

Loving-Kindness Meditation and Body-Breathing Yoga

The mindfulness activities were included to explore how participants experienced slower, reflective forms of movement and embodied awareness. While not typically considered physical activity, participants engaged in either a guided loving-kindness meditation or a guided body-breathing yoga session as part of a broader exploration of wellbeing. Both mindfulness activities were intended to explore notions of embodiment, grounding, and reflection.

In Practice

Loving-Kindness meditation

The guided Loving-Kindness meditation was facilitated by the lead researcher and was accomplished by having participants find a comfortable position either sitting or lying down in the shared space where the session was being held. The lead researcher tried to ensure any other distractions or interruptions were accounted for and then read out the Loving-Kindness meditation script (The Wellness Society, n.d.).

Body-Breathing Yoga

The body-breathing yoga activity was done through the instruction of one of the research team members who is a certified yoga instructor, however, to engage in this activity, a certified instructor is not necessarily needed. Participants were provided with a yoga mat, the lights were dimmed and there was relaxing background music that the research team coordinated. Participants first sat down on their yoga mat with their legs crossed, their knees bent out to the sides, and feet tucked in close under or in front of the opposite legs. They were instructed to close their eyes if they felt comfortable or divert their gaze. From this position the instructor guided participants to engage in various stretches and positions, but the principal factor among the movements was the breathing. Participants were instructed to inhale slowly through their nose and exhale softly through their mouth throughout the movements. One position that helped participants pause and engage in this breathing practice, and which provided them with the most personalised feedback on their breathing was when participants were told to lay on their back with their knees bent but keeping their feet on the floor. From here they put one hand on their stomach and one hand on their chest and were told to engage their stomach in their breathing making their stomach rise and fall in around 3-6 second intervals for each inhale and corresponding exhale.

The last element of the body-breathing yoga included a few guided prompts for participants to reflect on while lying flat on their backs. This series of prompts at the end of the body-breathing yoga was a simple body scan technique commonly used to help with releasing stress by bringing awareness to feelings in one's body without necessarily trying to change them. The body scan prompts went through each section of the participants' bodies triggering specific reflective cues where participants could adjust and concentrate their awareness accordingly. For example, the instructor started at the head and face and had participants bring their focus to the top of their head, noticing their forehead, eyes, and jaw. They were told to let their teeth un-clench and let their face grow soft. These cues were followed by some pause in instruction until the leader moved down to the next part of the body. The audio cues for the body scan continued until participants made it through to becoming aware of and relaxing their feet meaning they went from top to bottom of their body and sought to release tension and stress from each area. This activity was intended to encourage reflection, bodily awareness and self-compassion. Slowing breathing through simple stretching and a body scan was an activity the research team felt could help participants become more present and challenge where they might hold their stress and tension from navigating their everyday lives. Finding small techniques to become aware of this tension and be able to release it was thought to be a strategy participants could engage in on their own in the future. Therefore, there was a consideration of physical literacy in the selection of this activity (Edwards et al., 2017).

Reflections

Responses to these mindfulness activities were surprisingly mixed. Many transgender and gender-diverse young people viewed these activities as positive, sharing they felt their minds were calm, free from thoughts, and connected. On the reflective form the research team invited participants to complete after the mindfulness activities, numerous participants reflected that the activities helped them feel grounded and gave them permission to slow down and relax. Interestingly, one participant also indicated that they enjoyed doing the activity with their youth group friends because it made the group feel more inclusive and supportive because they were all coming together as a group.

While there were the positive responses to the mindfulness activities, others did not consider these activities with the same fondness. For many participants, especially those who revealed they were on the Autism spectrum, they described the mindfulness activities as “stressful” because they felt their brains were in a state of “chaos” or that they were “distracted” or “disconnected from the experience.” This was a somewhat surprising finding from the mindfulness activities for the research team, but not something completely unexpected. Nevertheless, this finding highlights an important lesson that even if activities have recognised wellbeing benefits, they may not be experienced uniformly by all participants, so organisations should consistently check-in and gain feedback from their young people when designing and deciding to include activities like mindfulness and yoga.

What we learned

Mindfulness activities can promote relaxation, grounding and self-awareness

Not all participants experienced embodiment activities in the same way

Choice, flexibility and optional participation remained essential

There is no single activity that works for everyone



Basketball

The basketball activity was included in the physical activity options with transgender and gender-diverse youth as an opportunity to engage in a common team sport associated activity and potentially rewrite previous scripts young people might have experienced.

In Practice

The basketball activity was done by playing two games that the lead researcher participated in when they were growing up and competing in basketball, Lightning and Knock Out. The researcher explained the rules and premise of each game and participants went through practice rounds prior to playing “for real.” After each round of each game, the lead researcher checked in with participants to see if they wanted to play another round or move on and/or if they wanted to change anything or had any questions. This ensured the activity could be accommodated to participants’ skill and comfort levels while also prioritising the focus on co-production within the Reclaiming Physical Space project.

Lightning

- Players form a line at free throw line, with the first two players starting with a ball.
- The first player will shoot – as soon as the ball is released from his hand, the 2nd player can shoot.
- After a make, the player returns to the back of the line (Figure B) The goal of the game is to score before the player in front of you hits their shot, eliminating them from the game.
- Players can also ‘bump’ their opponents ball with their own ball, forcing their opponent to chase it, the game continues until one player is left standing.

Knock-out

Knock-out is a fast-paced dribbling basketball game where players control their own basketball within a set decided boundary while trying to knock other players' basketballs away using their free/non-dribbling hand. The game is commonly used in basketball training to build ball-handling, body shielding, and defensive awareness. To play Knock-out the participants, youth group leaders and researchers decided on a larger boundary (i.e. within the baseline and three-point line), based on the number and skill levels of participants. Every player starts with a basketball. The goal of the game is for participants to dribble continuously while using their non-dribbling hand to slap or tap the other players' basketballs out of the set boundary. Because the other players are trying to knock each other's basketballs away, every player also needs to be on the defensive and protect their basketball from being knocked out. To do this they can use their non-dribbling arm and body as a shield to keep the other players away from their bouncing basketball they are actively dribbling. Players are required to keep a legal dribble (i.e. only with one hand at a time and no palming the ball). If a player double-dribbles (i.e. two hands on the basketball at the same time to dribble), travels (i.e. running without dribbling the ball), or stops dribbling altogether, they are out. Once one person was knocked out, the lead researcher asked if the group wanted to make the boundaries of play smaller, making it more difficult. The group agreed and the boundary kept getting smaller as the number of players “knocked out” increased. Eventually, in the last round, there were the two final players in the small arc between the free throw line and the three point line.

Reflections

Participants generally responded positively to the basketball activities, particularly the opportunity to play familiar games in a supportive environment. However, there was also some uncertainty around basketball because of its gendered associations in the UK, where basketball can be perceived as a sport more commonly associated with boys, while sports such as netball are more strongly associated with girls. For some participants, these previous associations resurfaced during the activity, creating some discomfort around gendered expectations attached to the sport. This meant that while participants could enjoy playing basketball itself, they were also negotiating some of the meanings and assumptions they had previously attached to it.

What we learned

Basketball can be an enjoyable and engaging activity for transgender and gender-diverse young people.

Gendered associations attached to particular sports can influence how young people experience participation

Young people may enjoy an activity while still feeling uncomfortable with the gendered meanings attached to it

Giving participants choice and flexibility can help them navigate experiences of uncertainty

Creating supportive environments can provide space to challenge or rewrite previous experiences of gendered sport.



Trans Joy HIIT

(High Intensity Interval Training)

The Trans Joy High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) fitness circuit was designed by the lead researcher who is an American College of Sports Medicine certified personal trainer and transmasculine himself. This activity was included to open participants' eyes to diverse styles of physical activity beyond organised sport and challenge assumptions about who can participate in higher-intensity exercise (i.e. only appropriate for highly athletic or experienced participants) (Jung, Santos, Ginis, 2024).

In Practice

Participants engaged in the Trans Joy HIIT fitness circuit by separating themselves out to each start on a different letter of the circuit and cycling through each letter until they reached where they began. To decide the duration for each activity/letter, the group took a vote between 1 minute per activity or 30 seconds per activity. The group also voted on if they wanted to go through the circuit once or if they were up for more. Once duration and cycle number were decided, the lead researcher went through and demonstrated each activity offering in adaptations as needed for group members. As there were eight stations of exercises, the lead researcher was there to keep and indicate time between them as well as remind participants which exercise they would be moving to in the circuit throughout the cycle.

T: Toe Touches

R: Run

A: Alternating Lunges

N: Nordic Skaters

S: Squats

J: Jumping Jacks

O: One-Legged Hops

Y: Y-Superman Raises

Reflections

Throughout the Trans Joy HIIT activity, the research team felt it was important to focus on enjoyment, adaptation and encouragement versus physical fitness performance. Participants were regularly reminded that there was no expectation to complete every exercise in the same way, at the same pace, or even to complete every exercise at all. The intent was on trying something new, moving in ways that felt manageable, and supporting one another through the experience. As a facilitator, one of the most interesting aspects of this activity was observing how differently participants responded to the challenge. On paper, a high-intensity interval training circuit may appear to be one of the more intimidating activities included in the project. Discussions about trans and gender-diverse young people and physical activity often focus on barriers, avoidance or lack of participation, but in practice, this was not always reflected.

Many participants engaged enthusiastically with the circuit despite it being physically demanding. Reflection sheets frequently included words such as “respected”, “powerful”, “courageous”, “energetic”, and “inspired”. At the same time, participants were equally honest about the physical challenge involved. Several described feeling tired or out of breath, with one participant joking that they were “a lot out of breath” by the end of the session. What stood out to the research team and the youth group leaders was that physical challenge was not something that deterred the young people and did not translate into a negative experience. Being tired, sweaty or breathless was rarely discussed as a problem in itself and participants appeared willing to embrace physical discomfort when it occurred within an environment that felt supportive, adaptable and free from judgement. This observation stimulated a line of inquiry throughout the project around if transgender and gender-diverse young people are avoiding physical activity or if they are avoiding the environments in which physical activity often takes place. Much of the existing literature understandably focuses on the barriers trans and gender-diverse young people face when participating in sport and physical activity, but the Trans Joy HIIT circuit suggested a far more nuanced picture with participants often willing to challenge themselves physically, with the barrier being whether they felt safe enough to do so.

In many ways, the activity highlighted the difference between physical vulnerability and social vulnerability. Participants appeared comfortable experiencing fatigue, increased heart rates and physical exertion. What they seemed far less willing to tolerate was the possibility of judgement, exclusion or embarrassment. In an affirming environment, challenge became something to engage with rather than something to avoid. Reflecting on the session afterwards, it became difficult to sustain deficit-based assumptions that position trans and gender-diverse young people as uninterested in movement or reluctant to be active. Specifically, this activity within the project reinforced a theme that would emerge repeatedly, and that the research team hopes to continue examining, participation is often shaped less by the activity itself and more by the environment in which that activity occurs.

What we learned

Transgender and gender-diverse young people were willing to participate in physically demanding activities

Challenge was often experienced positively when accompanied by support and encouragement

Confidence emerged through participation instead of through prior competence

Safe environments appeared more important than intensity

Chapter 6: Reflection Tools

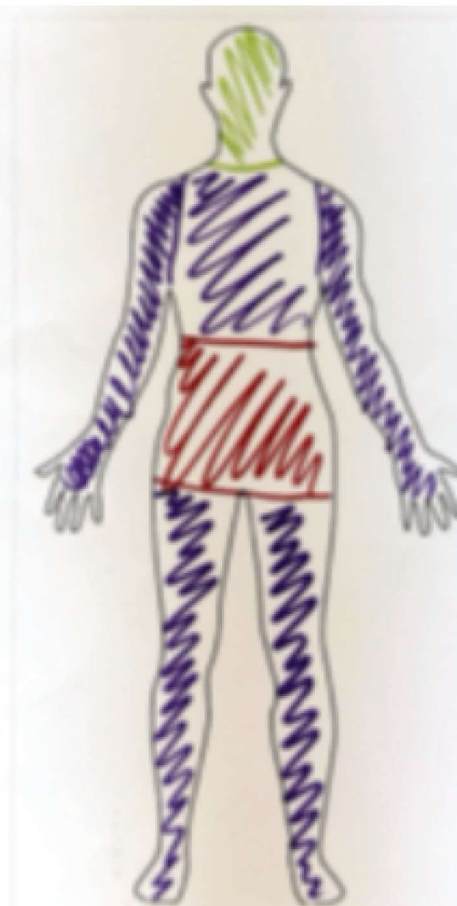
How did we listen to participants?

Prompting a diversity of reflective practice from participants, the research team decided to utilise a wide range of reflection tool options that participants could complete. This section shares each of these tools and discusses how they were included with the Reclaiming Physical Space physical activity day events with transgender and gender-diverse youth. Ideally, organisations could examine these reflection tools and potentially adopt them for within their practice with transgender and gender-diverse youth, especially around physical activity provision.

Activity 1 Reflection Tool

The first tool that the research team created was a small form on A4 paper that was printed out for participants to complete following the first activity. The questions were directed toward hearing about how participants' bodies felt, their levels of (un)comfortability, and where certain feelings came up for them. There is a generic blank body outline, and participants were encouraged to articulate how they felt through drawing or writing however they saw fit on the form. They were provided with colouring supplies (e.g. colouring pencils, crayons, markers, pens, post it notes) and could use these how they pleased to reflect when completing the form.

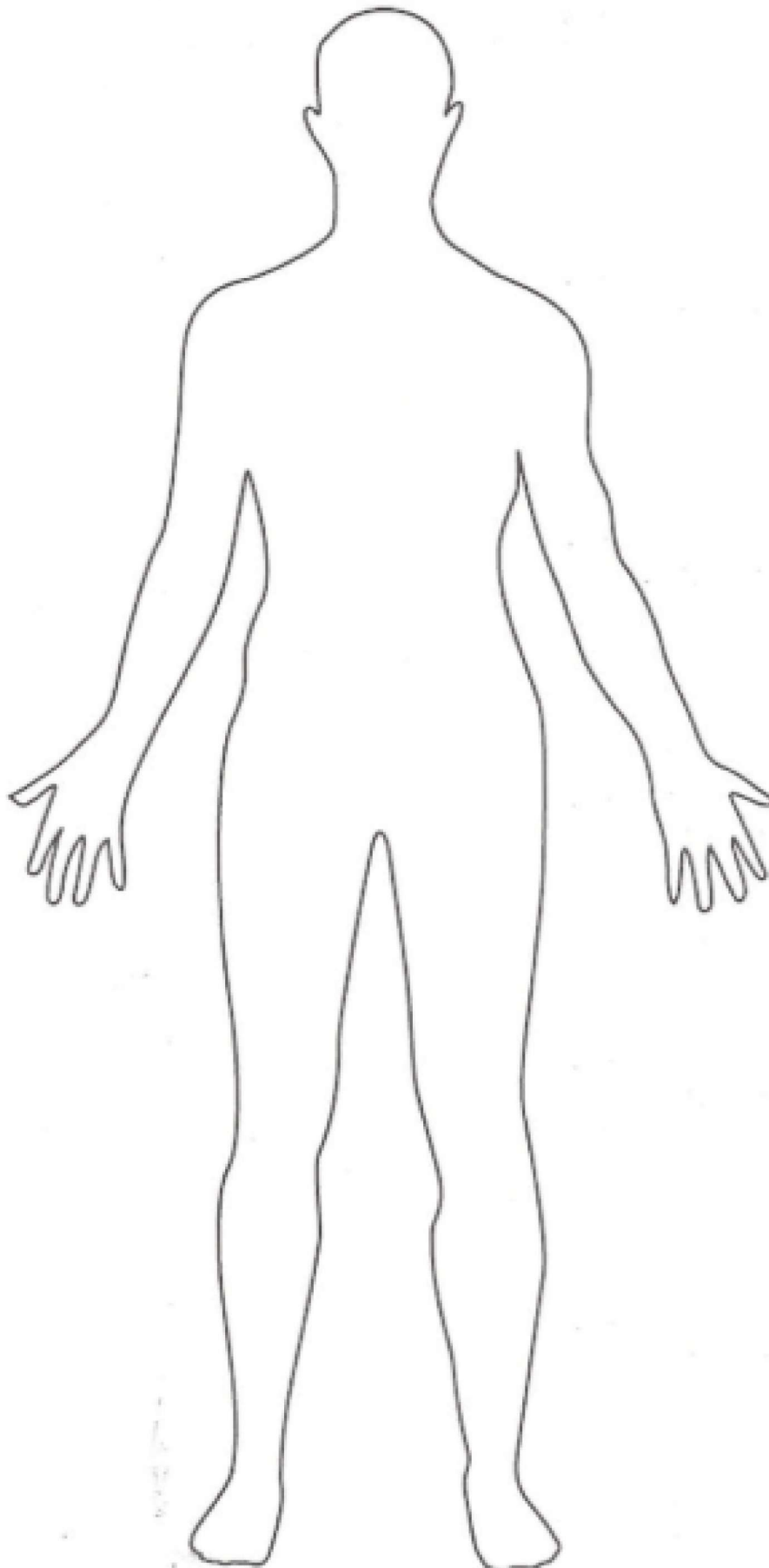
here are some examples below:



MOVEMENT ACTIVITY 1: Individual Reflection

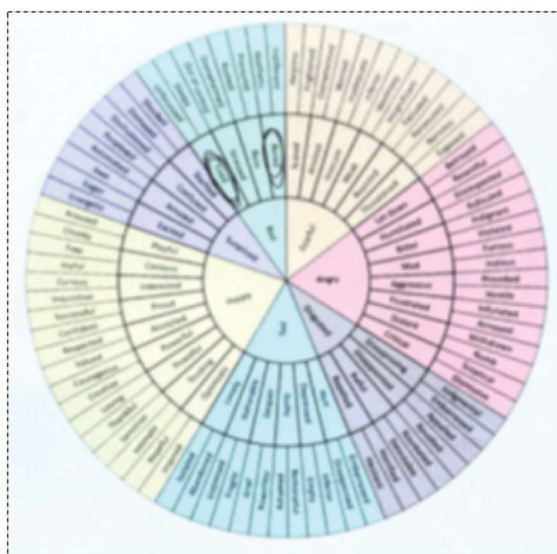
How did my body feel as I moved?

Where was I comfortable or uncomfortable?



Activity 2 Reflection Tool

The second tool that the research team created was again a small form on A4 paper printed out for participants to complete after the second activity they tried. The questions were directed toward gaining insight on participants' emotions using a feelings wheel where they could circle and/or elaborate on what came up for them before, during, or after the second activity. The form also asks if participants felt grounded during the activity and what their mind felt like. These questions were included to reach a more holistic view (i.e. incorporating mind, body and emotions) into examining the effects and influences of physical activity for transgender and gender-diverse youth. The last question was intended to trigger any preconceived or previous rhetoric that transgender and gender-diverse youth might hold about themselves in relation to physical activity. This was important to include as was discussed earlier in the toolkit, as often transgender and gender-diverse people face increased levels of discrimination, minority stress, and social exclusion. Again, as with the first activity's reflection form, participants were encouraged to articulate how they felt through drawing or writing however they saw fit on the form. They were provided with colouring supplies (e.g. colouring pencils, crayons, markers, pens, post it notes) and could use these how they pleased to reflect when completing the form. There are some examples from the data below.



- What did my mind feel like?

free from Thoughts



- Did I feel grounded during this activity?

yes

- What did my mind feel like?

Calm

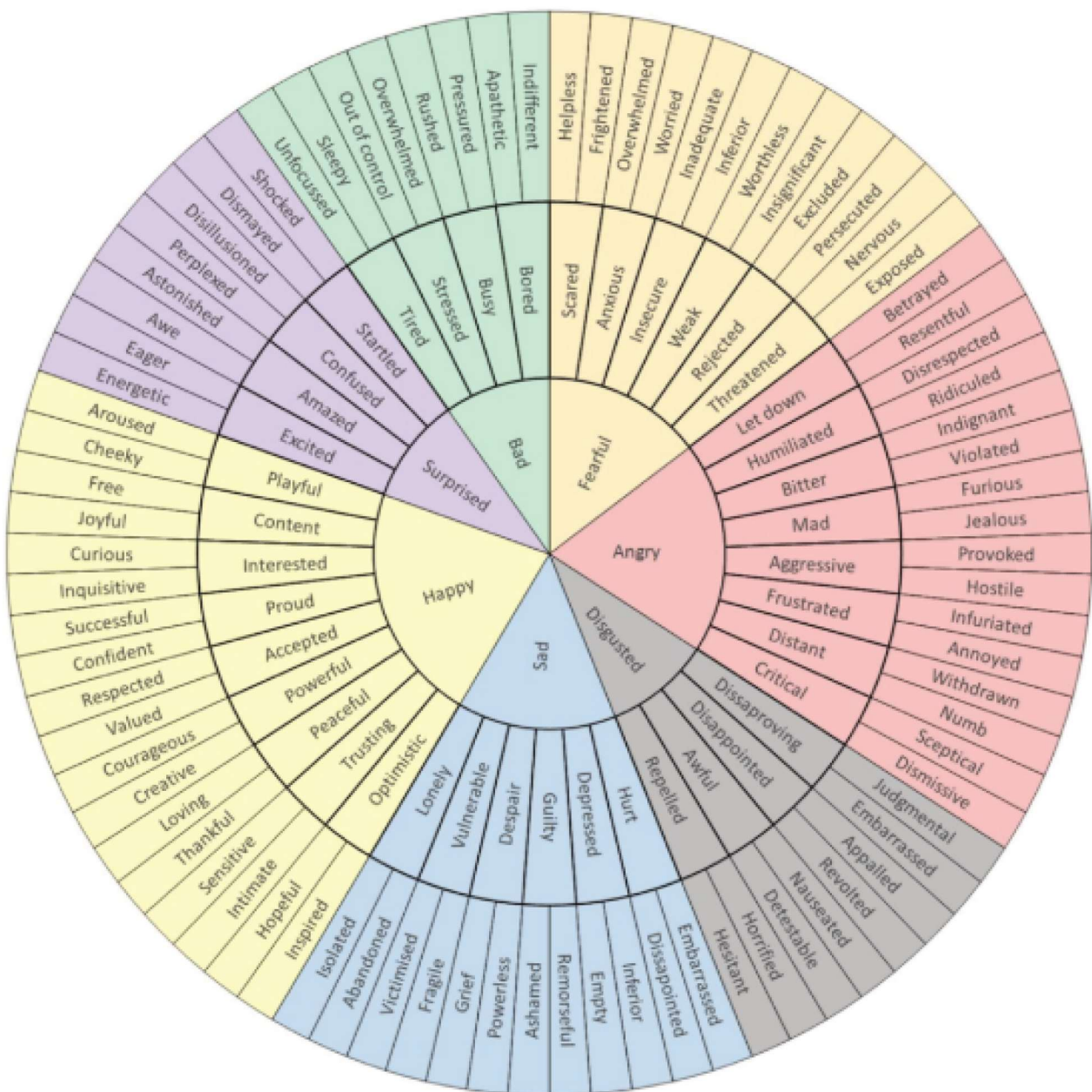
MOVEMENT ACTIVITY 2: Individual Reflection

What emotions did I notice? (Circle on the feelings wheel & feel free to elaborate.

Did I feel grounded during this activity?

What did my mind feel like?

What was the story I might have been telling myself during that experience? Was it true?



Activity 3 Reflection Tool

The third reflection tool that the research team created was the last small form on A4 paper printed out for participants to complete after the last activity they tried. The questions on this last reflection form were done in a Likert scale format to help participants do more of a rating of their emotions and bodily sensations during the third activity. The research team felt this would allow those participants who may need a bit more of a scaffold to frame their reflection on various emotions and perceptions. The questions ask about level of confidence, hesitation, self-consciousness and grounding as each of these prompts connect to how these transgender and gender-diverse young people were perceiving the physical activity environment they were in while engaging in the activity. Like described in the previous chapters of the toolkit, a barrier to physical activity for transgender and gender-diverse youth may not be the activity itself, but the environment, culture or community the activity is taking place within. Like the second reflection tool, this tool also included the feelings wheel where participants could circle and/or elaborate how they saw fit what emotions were happening for them before, during and after the activity. They were provided with colouring supplies (e.g. colouring pencils, crayons, markers, pens, post it notes) and could use these how they pleased to reflect when completing the form. There are some examples from the data shown below.

How confident did you feel? (1 = not at all confident, 7 = extremely confident)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How hesitant did you feel? (1 = not at all hesitant, 7 = extremely hesitant)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How self-conscious did you feel? (1 = not at all self-conscious, 7 = extremely self-conscious)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How grounded (connected to your body) did you feel? (1 = not at all grounded, 7 = extremely grounded)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How confident did you feel? (1 = not at all confident, 7 = extremely confident)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How hesitant did you feel? (1 = not at all hesitant, 7 = extremely hesitant)

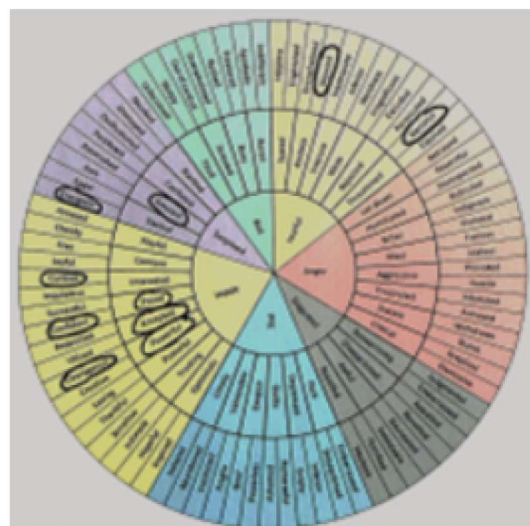
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How self-conscious did you feel? (1 = not at all self-conscious, 7 = extremely self-conscious)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How grounded (connected to your body) did you feel? (1 = not at all grounded, 7 = extremely grounded)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7



MOVEMENT ACTIVITY 3 Reflection form

How confident did you feel? (1 = not at all confident, 7 = extremely confident)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How hesitant did you feel? (1 = not at all hesitant, 7 = extremely hesitant)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

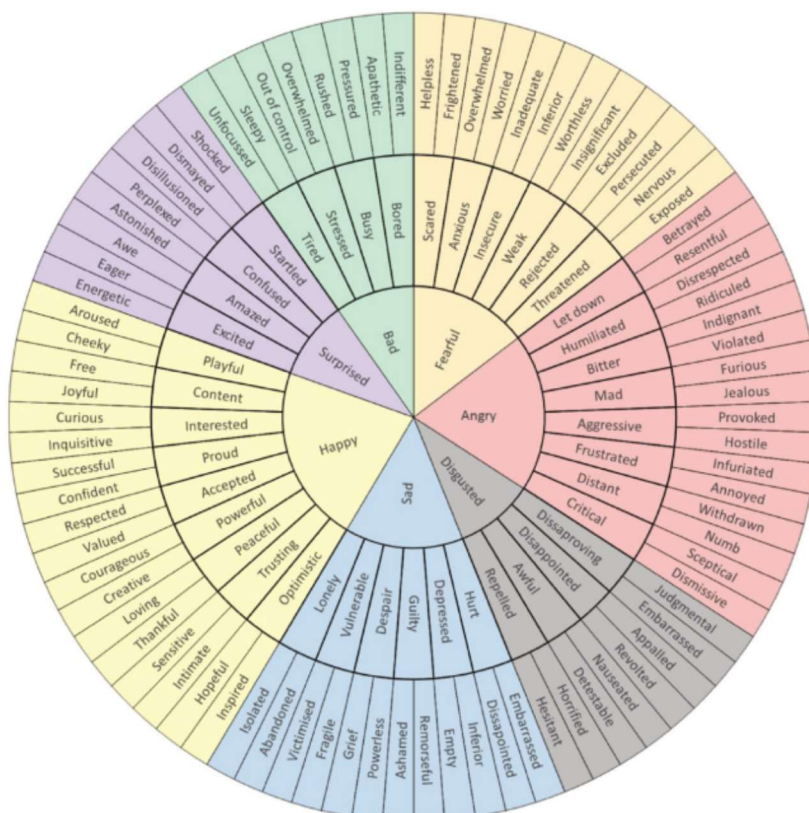
How self-conscious did you feel? (1 = not at all self-conscious, 7 = extremely self-conscious)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

How grounded (connected to your body) did you feel? (1 = not at all grounded, 7 = extremely grounded)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

What other emotions (if any) were you experiencing?



Talking Circles

To gain insights and reflections from participants in a group setting like in the Reclaiming Physical Space physical activity days, the researcher utilised restorative practices talking circles. Originating in Indigenous traditions across Turtle Island (North America), talking circles prioritise non-hierarchical communication, story-sharing, and listening as ethical acts (Pranis, 2005). Today, other sectors like criminal justice and education have begun to use talking circles as a small element of a much larger combination of techniques and interventions within what is called “restorative justice” or “restorative practices” (Castello, Wachtel & Wachtel, 2019).

The research team felt that incorporating talking circles was an especially important element to include within the data collection and methodology of the Reclaiming Physical Space project with transgender and gender-diverse youth, because this population has been shown to lack social support and often faces isolation (Aparicio-García et al., 2018; Apostolidou, 2020; Caudwell, 2014; Devis-Devis et al., 2018; Greene, Britton & Fitts, 2014; Horton, 2020, 2022; Horton & Carlile, 2022; McBride, 2021; Neary & McBride, 2021; Rickett et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2016). By using talking circles, the research team felt this method could aid in fostering connection between the participants involved in a Reclaiming Physical Space physical activity day underpinning this toolkit.

In addition to building community and connection, the research team was eager to use talking circles because they have an embedded structure and purpose but are adaptable to participant voice (Castello, Wachtel & Wachtel, 2019). Therefore, to most accurately and equitably hear participant’s perspectives, the utilisation of talking circles seemed most appropriate.

In Practice

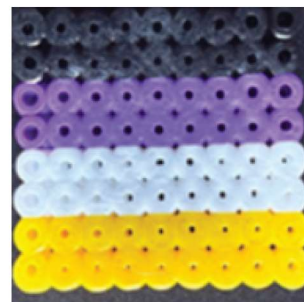
Being involved in a circle is sharing in an experience of hearing about individual’s “heart, mind, body, and spirit – and permission is given to the facilitator to report on the discussions” (Nabigon, Hagey, Webster, & McKay, 1999; found in Lavallée, 2009). Circles are similar to focus groups typically used in qualitative research whereby the researcher collects information on a specific area by means of group discussion (Berg, 1995). Despite this similarity, as circles were derived from Indigenous cultures, they should really only be used in research aimed at transforming and galvanising participants to unearth their collective oppression, create community, and inspire growth. While this research does not explicitly involve Indigenous individuals or groups, it is based on sharing subjugated knowledge and collaborating with a community who is marginalised.

When individuals, especially from marginalised populations, like the transgender and gender-diverse youth who participated in a Reclaiming Physical Spaces physical activity day, are a part of a circle, there is a feeling of connection created through their involvement. This connection may stem from circles being a rare space of non-judgement, support and respect through listening to others. Depending on how closely the circle is associating to traditional Indigenous practices, the process of the circle can vary. In the circles done in this toolkit, the lead researcher facilitated the circle with an object they brought along and was created by another transgender young person and given to the lead researcher earlier in their career (see Figure 1). The lead researcher asked if this was an appropriate talking piece for the group to use or if they wanted to use a different object of importance to them. The group decided together to use the small flag created by the other young person to serve as the talking piece to use in the circle.

After the lead researcher ensured that the group members were arranged and comfortable in a circle, the lead researcher went through common guidelines used when facilitating a restorative practices talking circle, but that the lead researcher has adapted slightly in their work (Costello, Wachtel & Watchel, 2019).

Talking Circle Guidelines

- What's said here stays here, but what is learned here can leave here.
- Speak from your perspective
- Consider the amount of space you are taking up
- Listen for understanding not to simply respond
- If you have the talking piece, you have the opportunity to speak
- If you do not have the talking piece, you have the opportunity to listen
- You have the right to pass – your voice is your choice



Example of a
Talking Piece

Following the discussion of guidelines, the participants went through one round of the circle sharing their name and pronouns. After this introductory round, participants responded to some of the prewritten yet flexible questions the lead researcher came to the circle with followed by some open communication moving the talking piece clockwise around the circle.



Lego Model of Ideal Physical Activity Space

The Lego models pictured to the left (Figures 3 & 4), show what two participants constructed when prompted with the task of designing their ideal activity space. They had the option to choose from a shared pile of Lego pieces and had around 20 minutes to construct their model. Following their construction, the research team and youth group leaders gathered to hear what each element of the model was, what it represented within their ideal physical activity space and why it was included.

Hearing participants share about their Lego models was extremely enlightening and provided a bit more nuance to what can be considered a physical activity space and why. The research team felt that using Lego encouraged a playful side of participants to come out and allowed them to think outside the box which only furthered the discussion and reflection that occurred about their relationship to physical activity and physical activity spaces.

Figure 3: Participant 1 Lego Model Ideal Physical Activity Space



Figure 3: Participant 2 Lego Model Ideal Physical Activity Space



Drawing/Writing Ideal Physical Activity Space

A similar approach to the Lego model creation of participant's ideal physical activity space was used for this reflection method as well. Instead of Legos as the material used to model an ideal physical activity space, participants were given a large sheet of blank paper and the option to choose from a selection of art materials (i.e. coloured pencils, crayons, markers, post it notes, pens, pencils, erasers), to draw or write their ideal physical activity space. They were prompted with various questions like, "what is included or not included in this space?" "Is it indoor or outdoor?" "Who accesses this space?" "What activities are done here?"

Figure 4: Drawing of Ideal Physical Activity Space

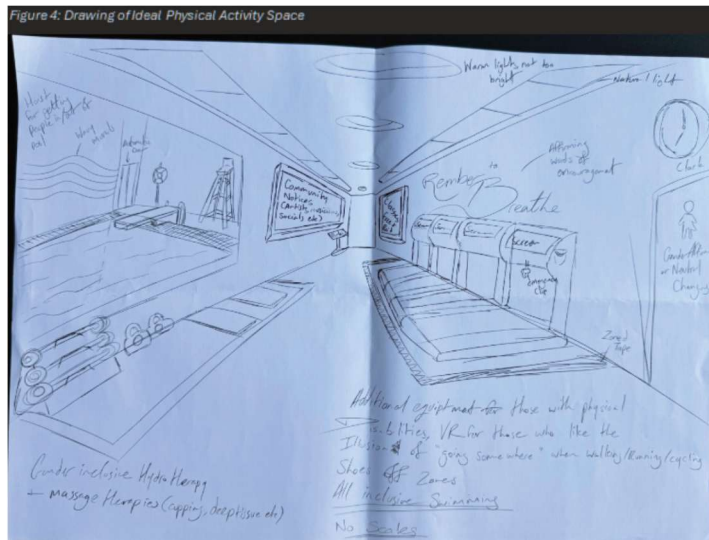
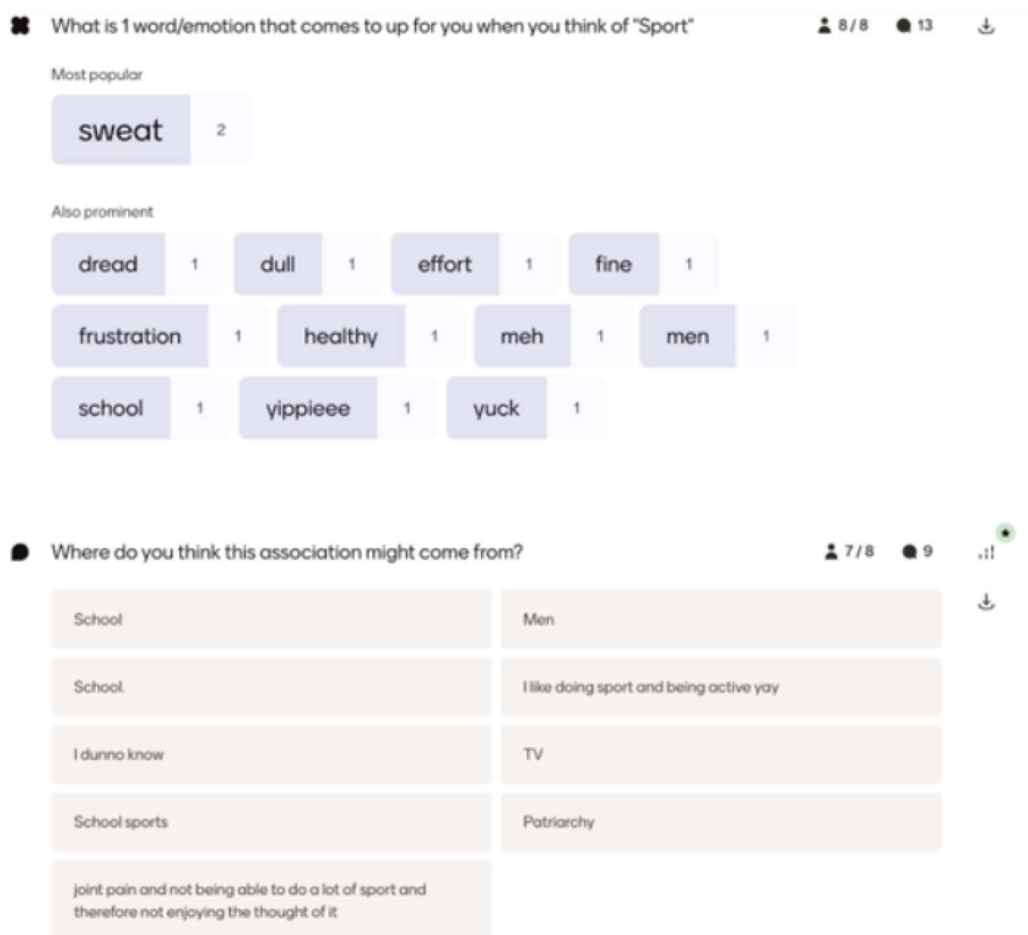


Figure 4 (left) shows one example of what a participant drew for their ideal physical activity space. It includes things like gender neutral changing facilities, no scales, additional equipment for people with disabilities, virtual reality equipment for people who like the illusion of "going somewhere" when they walk/jog/run. All-inclusive swimming options, areas where shoes can be off, warm lights, social engagement boards and notices for various community and club activities as well as other elements.

Mentimeter Quiz

As part of the reflections during some of the Reclaiming Physical Space physical activity events, participants completed a series of anonymous Mentimeter questions on their devices designed to explore their perceptions of sport, physical activity and what an inclusive movement space might look like. The activity enabled young people to contribute ideas anonymously, thereby reducing the pressure to speak in front of others and creating chances for a wider range of perspectives to be shared. To accomplish this, participants were invited to respond to questions about the design of an ideal gym space and identify features they felt were missing from existing physical activity environments along with the words, emotions and associations they connected with different sports and forms of physical activity. The research team tried to encourage participants to reflect on where certain associations they hold around particular terms or sports may come from and how they might shape their experiences of participation. The Mentimeter activity was a reflection exercise, but also a co-design tool because it allowed the transgender and gender-diverse young people to collaboratively imagine spaces that felt more accessible, welcoming and affirming.



The use of a digital reflection tool was also used to extend some of the earlier theorising around digital and virtual spaces for transgender and gender-diverse young people as opposed to physical and embodied spaces for reflection. Participants appeared to respond more openly and actively to the digital reflection questions than the physical, which is something that the research team would like to explore further in future work. This could be an important implication for organisations to consider in practice. Two example questions with some participant responses from the Mentimeter quiz are depicted in Figure 6 above.

Chapter 7: Discussion

What did we learn from all of this?

5 Key Findings:

Safety Before Participation

Choice and Autonomy

Community and Belonging

Accessibility and Predictability

Joy as a legitimate outcome

Finding 1: Safety Before Participation

A significant finding across the project was that participation in physical activity and sport was often dependent on safety. Safety, for the transgender and gender-diverse young people who participated in the physical activity days encompassed far more than just physical protection and included aspects like fear of being judged, fear of being watched, concerns about dysphoria, concerns about misgendering, anxiety about unfamiliar spaces, and worries about discriminatory behaviour. This finding is significant because it demonstrates how underlying some of the barriers to participation may go and how calculating transgender and gender-diverse youth may be in assessing these risks prior to engaging in a physical activity at all. An important implication of this finding is that organisations should study and consider the emotional risks to participation in physical activity not only the physical risks. By doing so, organisations can do some of the analysing and safety planning so transgender and gender-diverse youth do not have to. This opens up possibilities for rapport building, equitable access and holistic engagement.

This finding also supports existing research identifying discrimination, minority stress, social exclusion and fear of judgement as barriers to physical activity for transgender and gender-diverse people (Braumüller et al., 2020, Hargie et al., 2017; Lightner et al., 2024). However, the experiences within this project suggest that these barriers may also occur before participation even begins. A young person does not necessarily need to experience discrimination within a particular activity to decide that activity is not for them. The anticipation that discrimination, embarrassment, misgendering or scrutiny might occur is enough to influence whether they attend.

Such a distinction is vital to highlight as participation is often measured retrospectively by organisations (e.g. did the young person attend, how long did they participate, or did they return?). But these measures cannot capture the internal decision-making that may happen beforehand for that young person. A transgender and gender-diverse young person may look at a sports centre, gym, swimming pool, school sports hall, club, field or park and immediately begin asking themselves questions about changing rooms, toilets, clothing, other participations, staff, and how their gender might be perceived. These considerations may occur long before they enter the physical activity space at all.

Finding 1: Safety Before Participation

The findings from the physical activity days with transgender and gender-diverse youth also suggest that physical challenge itself was not necessarily the primary source of discomfort for the young people. During the Trans Joy HIIT activity for example, participants described feelings of courage, confidence, acceptance, and empowerment. This indicates that physical discomfort and social or emotional discomfort should not be treated equally. Participants appeared willing to experience temporary physical discomfort associated with exercise when they felt supported and safe within the wider environment. A notable finding like this, provides an important challenge to deficit-based understandings of transgender and gender-diverse participation. The issue may not be that young people are unwilling to take risks, experience challenge or engage in demanding activities, but may be looking out for their safety and making decisions about whether the social risks surrounding those activities are worth taking.

Safety in this way should be considered as a condition that enables participation and not just an organisational responsibility relating to physical injury. Creating safer environments may mean addressing the questions a young person has before they arrive, reducing uncertainty around facilities and expectations, establishing clear responses to discriminatory behaviour, and creating cultures where young people do not need to repeatedly defend or explain their identities.



Finding 2: Choice and Autonomy

A second significant finding was the importance of choice and autonomy. Across the physical activity days, there was not a single activity that was universally preferred by participants. Some of the transgender and gender-diverse youth responded most positively to high-energy activities like basketball and HIIT, while others preferred slower more reflective activities like mindfulness and yoga. Dance was an activity that was a mixed bag as well on what participants preferred and offered another form of participation which allowed for creativity and self-expression. The variation of activities offered and preferred is a noteworthy finding because it challenges the assumption that there is a particular type of physical activity that transgender and gender-diverse youth prefer, or even, require. Participants demonstrated different interests, capabilities, comfort levels and relationships with movement. What seemed to be more consistent was the importance of having some control over how their participation occurred.

This finding connects with wider research that emphasises autonomy as a key component to motivation and engagement in physical activity (Teixeira et al., 2012). Self-determination perspectives, for example, identify autonomy, competence and relatedness as vital psychological needs which can support motivation and wellbeing (Teixeira et al., 2012). Within the Reclaiming Physical Space project, autonomy surfaced as particularly important because it allowed transgender and gender-diverse youth to negotiate participation based on to their own bodies, identities, preferences and comfort. Choice was illustrated in seemingly minute decisions throughout the activities. Participants could choose whether to participate, how intensely to participate, which activities, within reason, they wanted to try, which song to dance to, how long an activity should last, and whether to continue with another round. These decisions might seem minor from an organisational perspective, but collectively they transferred some control from the facilitator and research team towards the young people participating in it. This was particularly evident during the Trans Joy HIIT activity. Participants voted on whether they wanted to complete each exercise for 30 seconds or one minute and whether they wanted to complete one or more circuits. The activity was not something delivered by the researchers FOR or TO the participants, it was WITH the participants. This conception of WITH versus TO, FOR or even NOT is a simple model used within restorative practices as well called the social discipline window (see Figure 5 below) (Wachtel, 2000).

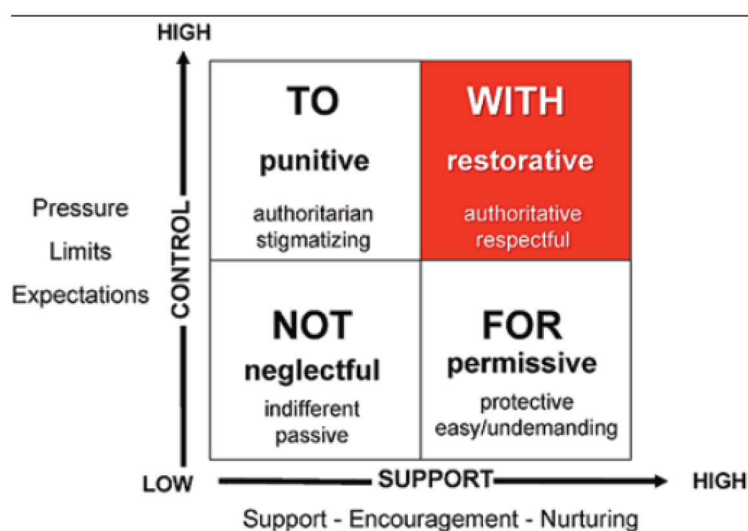


Figure 5: The social discipline window (Wachtel, 2000)

Finding 2: Choice and Autonomy

By working WITH participants throughout the various activities, they had opportunities to shape the intensity and duration of their participation which gave them choice and autonomy but also an appropriate level of support, nurturing and encouragement. While the social discipline window is not theoretically the same as theoretical elements of co-production (Bammer, 2019; Wachtel, 2000), the two convey many corollary components in practice, especially when working with marginalised groups.

Going back to the findings from the various activities tried during the physical activity days, the same significance of choice and autonomy appeared during the dance activity. Participants were given the choice to collectively select the music, and each participant was given the chance to contribute a movement to the choreography. In this instance, choice was connected with creativity and ownership because participants were able to contribute to the creation of the activity itself. This finding from the dance activity is significant because offering choice may have played a role in disrupting some of the performance expectations participants may have initially associated with sport and physical activity. They may have had some of these expectations or connotations because traditional sporting environments often emphasise competence, achievement, competition and bodily performance. Breaking this down and rewriting these scripts around physical activity was important because especially when it comes to transgender and gender-diverse youth who have previously experienced their bodies as sites of scrutiny or judgement, these expectations may create additional barriers.

The project findings suggest that creating opportunities for autonomy can allow participants to approach movement on their own terms and give young people greater agency over how they encounter challenges. The importance of autonomy also reinforces the argument made throughout this toolkit that there is no single “trans-inclusive activity.” Instead, an activity becomes trans inclusive by adapting the conditions surrounding participation, including whether young people have meaningful choices within the activity.



Finding 3: Community and Belonging

The third finding from the project was the importance of community and belonging. Within every session, physical activity was rarely experienced as an exclusively individual behaviour. Even when participants were moving by themselves, their experiences were moulded by the people around them, their relationships with other participants, and the atmosphere of the activity. There is extensive literature supporting this finding identifying the social benefits of physical activity and sport, including opportunities for friendship, social interaction, confidence and relationship development (Eime et al., 2013; Li & Zhang, 2025). It is particularly significant for transgender and gender-diverse youth because this population experiences higher levels of isolation, discrimination and minority stress (Hargie et al., 2017).

The physical activity days showed that community can influence how an activity is experienced. Participants sometimes expressed that they enjoyed activities because they were doing them alongside friends or because the group atmosphere was supportive and encouraging. In this sense, the activity itself became one part of a social experience. This was particularly evident in activities like dance and basketball, where participants worked together and shared the experience of trying something new. The simple act of being together, encouraging one another, laughing, talking or sharing an unfamiliar experience contributed to a sense of connection. The use of talking circles within the project further established the value of creating opportunities for young people to communicate about their experiences. The circles created space for participants to articulate what participation meant to them and to hear from others.

While inviting people in and encouraging participation is a great way to begin to foster community, an organisation really should go further if they want to cultivate a sense of belonging within the group. A young person can be allowed to participate without feeling that they are wanted, valued or recognised as part of the community. Belonging is a deeper level of participation that asks whether that young person feels that physical activity spaces is theirs.

At the same time, the project findings caution against assuming that all young people want the same degree of social interaction. Some participants may find they connect best through conversation and group activities, while others may experience belonging through quieter forms of participation or simply knowing that supportive people are present. The implication is therefore not that physical activity should always become more social, but that there should be a blend of pathways into community and belonging. Young people should be able to connect with others without being required to socialise in a particular way. When practiced as such, building community and a sense of belonging for all participants is intentional and not something assumed to happen because young people are in the same physical space.

Finding 4: Accessibility and Predictability

The fourth finding concerned accessibility and predictability. Participants' experiences demonstrated that accessibility extends considerably beyond whether a physical space is technically accessible. For transgender and gender-diverse young people, accessibility can involve knowing what will happen, who will be there, what they will be expected to do, what facilities are available, how the activity will be structured and what will happen if something feels uncomfortable. This finding connects closely with the earlier discussion of safety. When a young person does not know what to expect, uncertainty can become an additional barrier to participation. Entering an unfamiliar sports centre, gym, swimming pool or community facility can require young people to make assumptions about everything from clothing and changing facilities to social expectations and how staff might respond to them.

Predictability in relation to the Reclaiming Physical Space project and the physical activity days functioned as a form of accessibility for transgender and gender-diverse youth. This finding was illustrated through the multitude of activities undertaken during the project. Participants were given explanations of each activity and provided opportunities to ask questions, gain further demonstrations and, where appropriate, adaptations. These approaches allowed young people to develop a clearer understanding of what participation would involve before being expected to perform. The finding of accessibility and predictability for these transgender and gender-diverse youth around physical activity is particularly interesting because connotations and practices around accessibility are frequently only viewed in physical terms and predominantly only around people with disabilities (Nikolajsen et al., 2021). For instance, organisations might ask if a building has wheelchair access, whether equipment is available, or whether transport is possible for participants. While these concerns remain imperative, they denote only one dimension of accessibility.

Meanwhile, for transgender and gender-diverse young people, accessibility was multidimensional invoking aspects of social, emotional, sensory and financial accessibility. While an activity may be classed by an organisation as physically accessible, it may remain socially inaccessible. To these transgender and gender-diverse young people the activity would then be perceived as inaccessible. Similarly, a programme may be free to attend but remain difficult to access because a young person does not know what will happen when they arrive, this uncertainty and unpredictability was a form of inaccessibility overall. It is important to note that an activity possessing predictability does not mean that every single aspect of it needs to be rigidly controlled, as this would potentially weaken some of the autonomy identified as important in the second finding. But, according to the findings from the transgender and gender-diverse young people, there should be a balance between predictability and flexibility with some basic parameters of participation while still retaining the opportunity to make choices within those parameters.

Finding 5: Joy as a legitimate outcome

The final finding was possibly the most distinctive. It is the importance of understanding joy as a legitimate outcome of physical activity. A large amount of the literature and policy surrounding physical activity justifiably focuses on health outcomes, such as cardiovascular health, physical fitness, weight management and mental health (Mahindru, Patil & Agrawal, 2023; Rhodes et al., 2017). Even though these outcomes are very important and have significant implications for public health, they neglect to consider how physical activity can also be valuable because it is enjoyable, exciting, freeing, creative, social or empowering. Participants used words such as “freedom”, “encouragement”, “inspired”, “energised”, “confidence”, “courage”, “acceptance, and “empowerment” to describe aspects of their experiences during the physical activities they participated in. These descriptions illustrate that movement can have value beyond measurable physical or psychological outcomes. This is particularly significant when considering the broader context in which transgender and gender-diverse young people encounter physical activity. If participation is consistently framed around correcting perceived deficits, being more active, becoming fitter, improving health, managing weight or reducing sedentary behaviour, young people may receive the message that their bodies are problems to be fixed.

This project suggests that physical activity can offer opportunities for transgender and gender-diverse youth to experience their bodies differently than what may be portrayed in messaging they come across in mainstream and social media and shift it to convey that they are capable, expressive, energetic, playful and connected. A shift in messaging around physical activity for transgender and gender-diverse youth was exemplified particularly well in the Trans Joy HIIT activity. During this activity, participants experienced physical challenge and fatigue, but these sensations did not undermine their enjoyment of the activity. This goes to show that physical challenge can coexist with feelings of accomplishment and empowerment, even for transgender and gender-diverse youth. The crucial difference was the context where the challenge occurred, it was in the activity, not the environment.

This finding also helps connect the five themes together. Joy is difficult to experience when a young person does not feel safe. Choice can create opportunities for activities to become enjoyable. Community can make participation more meaningful. Predictability can reduce the anxiety associated with entering unfamiliar spaces. In effect, joy can emerge when the conditions for meaningful participation exist. But not every activity will be enjoyable, and not every young person will experience movement positively every time. The mindfulness activities in this project demonstrate precisely this point. While some participants found the mindfulness activities calming and grounding, others felt distracted, stressed and disconnected.

Therefore, recognising joy as a legitimate outcome is an argument for moving past a narrow understanding of participation in which the primary question is about whether a young person attended or completed the activity. Instead, organisations can ask a question like, “did this activity give young people an opportunity to experience their bodies, relationships and movement in ways that felt meaningful to them?” A question like that allows enjoyment, accomplishment, connection, creativity and joy to become legitimate dimensions of physical activity provision alongside physical health and fitness.

From Participation to Possibility

When reflected overall, the five findings from the Reclaiming Physical Space physical activity days advocate for creating inclusive physical activity opportunities for transgender and gender-diverse youth that are varied, meaningful, and feel possible. And not to try once, but to engage in sustainably. There was no perfect activity that every young person enjoyed, so having a range of opportunities is ideal. Participants wanted to feel like they belonged and were a part of a community, so the activities and support around the activities selected should be meaningful to foster connection and holistic wellbeing. The findings also indicated that to make any physical activity for transgender and gender-diverse youth seem possible, participants wanted to choose for themselves, be able to safety and accessibility plan prior to the activity and determine if they would enjoy participating in the physical activity.

The findings also demonstrate that there are limitations in how organisations may currently understand transgender and gender-diverse youth physical activity participation. While often considered in binary terms of participation versus no participation, this research illustrated that the situation is far more nuanced than this binary and is really made up of a complex underlying set of circumstances and experiences. For instance, a young person might attend but feel unsafe, or they might participate but feel isolated. Additionally, they might enjoy an activity but feel uncomfortable in the changing facilities. They might dislike one activity but become enthusiastic about another. Or they might even initially feel anxious, but they develop confidence after being welcomed by peers. These distinctions matter because standard measures of participation may make these experiences invisible and in effect portray transgender and gender-diverse youth as unwilling or unlikely to want to participate in physical activity.

The project findings recommend that organisations consider participation as a process, and one that can (and should) be co-produced WITH transgender and gender-diverse young people themselves. It goes without saying, that transgender and gender-diverse young people should not need to become experts in navigating unsafe changing rooms, anticipating misgendering, assessing whether coaches are supportive, determining whether an activity will be gendered (or even let them play as themselves), or deciding whether they will be accepted by their peers before they arrive. Organisations have a vital role in anticipating these barriers and designing environments that reduce the amount of negotiation required from young people.

Reclaiming physical space is not just about increasing the number of transgender and gender-diverse youth participating in physical activity, but about changing what that participation looks, sounds and feels like. The eventual goal for physical activity for transgender and gender-diverse youth is that participation is safe enough to enter, flexible enough to accommodate difference, social enough to create connection, accessible enough to sustain engagement, and enjoyable enough to be worth coming back to.

Chapter 8: So What?

Conclusion & Implications

Physical activity does matter for young people's physical health. But it also, and perhaps just as importantly, matters for their confidence, social connection, wellbeing, identity and enjoyment. As this toolkit has demonstrated, these benefits cannot be easily segregated from the environments where physical activity occurs. For transgender and gender-diverse youth specifically, participating in sport and physical activity can involve navigating questions about safety, visibility, identity, belonging, embodiment and whether they will be accepted by the people around them.

This project started from a space of inquiry about what would make physical activity spaces feel more possible for transgender and gender-diverse youth. What the research found was that the answer is not as straightforward as finding a particular sport to participate in, providing more opportunities, or encouraging young people to be more active. Across the physical activity days, young people demonstrated that they were interested in movement and were willing to try a range of activities including dance, basketball, mindfulness, yoga, and high-intensity interval training. The actual activity was not really the aspect that mattered most in these meetings, instead it was the environment where the activity occurred. By acknowledging this distinction, the research team challenged the tendency to associate the lower levels of physical activity and sport participation among the transgender and gender-diverse population within the young people themselves and start to question what environmental factors within these spaces might be contributing to a lack of engagement. If an activity is technically available but feels unsafe, judgemental, inaccessible, or socially isolating, then availability does not translate into meaningful access.

While the five findings identified across the Reclaiming Physical Space physical activity day sessions: (1) safety before participation; 2) choice and autonomy; 3) community and belonging; 4) accessibility and predictability; 5) joy as a legitimate outcome) are separated based on a common theme within the data, they realistically are incredibly intertwined. As such, a young person may need to feel safe prior to engaging in their choice of physical activity or exercise. Emphasising that through this choice, they may see the activity as more accessible thereby facilitating community building. Building this community in turn fosters a sense of safety and belonging which altogether contributes to making the physical activity and/or exercise more enjoyable, essentially flipping the script on possible previously held connotations to physical activity or exercise for transgender and gender-diverse youth. If transgender and gender-diverse youth feel they can claim these spaces for themselves as well and see themselves in sport and physical activity, ideally the other benefits to participation, especially, joy can finally begin to flourish! That is why it is important to reclaim physical space!

The next components of this toolkit will discuss the implications for practice, policy and organisations, future research and end with a final reflection.

Implications for Practice

Take on an affirmative model

A significant implication coming out of this project for practice is the need for an affirmative approach versus a deficit approach when working with transgender and gender-diverse young people. This means that organisations, schools, youth groups and others stop seeing transgender and gender-diverse youth as just another group that needs to be encouraged to participate in physical activity but instead works to connect with this group to examine what structural, social or individual barriers may be preventing transgender and gender-diverse youth from participating with the overall intent to remove these barriers.

Treat safety as a condition for participation

Risk assessments, equipment checks, and safeguarding procedures are essential when doing anything with young people. However, the findings from this project revealed that in addition to the risk assessments, equipment checks and safeguarding procedures, emotional and psychological safety need to be considered. The transgender and gender-diverse participants within this project expressed that safety to them (encompassing emotional and psychological safety), influences whether participation feels possible. If they are ruminating on or worrying about questions like, “will I be misgendered?” “Will people stare at me?” “Will I be expected to change in front of others?” Or “will someone question my identity?” then participation does not feel safe for them and they will not engage.

For organisations, schools or youth groups to begin treating safety as a condition for participation they should consider these diverse forms of safety and think about staff confidence, language, privacy, group dynamics, responses to discrimination and how concerns can be raised. Even though there is no way to promise a complete removal of discomfort or risk, organisations can create environments where young people can trust that their concerns will be taken seriously and addressed when they arise.



Implications for Practice

Provide meaningful choice

This Reclaiming Physical Space project found that there was no single physical activity that every transgender and gender-diverse young person enjoyed the same. Some participants liked the higher-intensity activities while others preferred some of the slower or more creative forms of movement. Even within individual activities participants experienced the activity differently. This finding supports the implication for practice that choice should be prioritised wherever able. Where possible, young people should be able to choose what activities they participate in, how intensely they participate, whether they participate individually or with others, whether they modify the activity, whether they take a break, whether they observe before joining and whether they participate at all.

Having these options of choice are essential as they link to feelings of autonomy which contribute to feelings of safety. When choice is respected around physical activity, for transgender and gender-diverse youth especially, young people feel they can have some control over their bodies and experiences, which can be exceptionally empowering.

Intentionally build community

Another implication for practice coming out of the project is that physical activity can be a route into community if it is properly cultivated. The transgender and gender-diverse youth who participated in the project valued the opportunities to spend time with peers, develop friendships, encourage one another and participate in environments where they felt accepted. Many spoke about how they also enjoyed having some social and communal elements to the physical activity day session versus only focusing on the exercise.

Organisations can work to build community by intentionally offering chances for young people to meet one another, talk, build relationships and develop a sense of ownership over the group. This could be simply allowing time before or after the activity to socialise, introducing new members to existing ones, or creating activities outside the main physical activity (e.g. have a cup of tea after the physical activity session). Providing these chances for community building can be very beneficial, but community building should not be a required expectation. Going back to the importance of choice, participants may not want to socialise in the same way, so offering chances to build community that are catered to both the highly social and the quieter participants is necessary.

Make participation predictable and accessible

Similar to the previous point about treating safety as a condition for participation, an implication for practice from this project was to make participation predictable and accessible. For the transgender and gender-diverse youth involved in the project, accessibility involved issues like: where the activity will take place, who will be there, what will happen during the session, what they should wear, whether changing facilities are available, what toilets are available, whether they can take breaks, what happens if they decide they do not want to participate and what they can expect from staff and other participants. If organisations, schools or youth groups were to provide this information in advance, it could offer some predictability and reduce their uncertainty making the decisions about whether and how they want to participate in physical activity easier.



Implications for Policy and Organisations

At a broader level, the findings also raise issues into how physical activity is conceptualised within education, youth work, sport and public health. Many of the current approaches to physical activity emphasise increasing participation, reducing inactivity and improving health outcomes, and while these are important, they can become overly focused on individual behaviour. The Reclaiming Physical Space project demonstrated that to fully analyse participation, it is necessary to consider the social and environmental conditions that make participation possible.

For policymakers and organisations, this means that inclusion needs to be embedded within the design of physical activity provision not an add on accomplished afterwards. Examples of this could include funding for accessible and flexible facilities, staff training, youth-led programme development, inclusive evaluation practices, and opportunities for community organisations to develop provision specifically around the needs identified by young people. It also means recognising that inclusive practice is not designing separate provision for transgender and gender-diverse young people. While there may be circumstances where dedicated affinity spaces are valued and necessary, the larger target should be to make mainstream physical activity environments spaces where transgender and gender-diverse young people can participate safely and meaningfully.

Finally, the responsibility for inclusion should not rest solely with specialist LGBTQ+ organisations. Schools, sports clubs, leisure centres, youth organisations, universities, local authorities and other physical activity providers all have a role to play.

Implications for Future Research

The project also demonstrated that there is a clear need for further research. This project was intentionally exploratory and participatory and the relatively small sample, means that the findings should not be treated as representative of all transgender and gender-diverse young people. Future research could build upon this work by exploring experiences across different geographical contexts, age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, racialised experiences, disability and neurodivergence, and different relationships to gender identity. Additionally, it would be valuable to explore how these experiences differ between school-based physical education, organised sport, commercial gyms, community recreation and informal movement. There is also scope to examine what happens after organisations implement changes, because it is one thing to identify what young people say would make physical activity spaces better, but it is another to determine whether changes to facilities, staff practice, programme design and community-building actually influence participation and wellbeing over time. Therefore, future work should continue to prioritise participatory and co-productive approaches where young people have meaningful opportunities to shape the questions being asked, the methods being used and the changes that emerge from the research.

Final Reflection: Reclaiming Physical Space

The title of this toolkit was chosen deliberately. For transgender and gender-diverse young people, physical spaces can sometimes feel like places they have to negotiate. They may have to consider which changing room to use, whether they will be recognised by their name, whether their body will be scrutinised, whether an activity will be organised around gender, whether they will be accepted by their peers, or whether they will have to explain themselves to the adults facilitating the activity. This should not be the expectation.

Physical activity should provide young people with opportunities to move, play, explore, connect, challenge themselves, rest, laugh and experience their bodies in ways that feel meaningful to them and not require them to continually defend their right to be there. Reclaiming physical space is about changing who gets to feel that a space belongs to them. The young people involved in this project showed that they are interested in movement, willing to try new things, challenge themselves and engage with different forms of physical activity. They showed that participation becomes more possible when the environment around them communicates safety, choice, belonging, accessibility and joy.

The challenge now is for organisations, schools, youth groups, and others to listen and to ask the right questions. They should ask if transgender and gender-diverse young people feel welcome when they arrive, enjoyed the experience, engaged in the community surrounding it, and want to be involved in imagining what physical activity spaces could become.

Physical activity should be a space where transgender and gender-diverse young people can participate holistically without their identity ever becoming a barrier and where they can feel empowered.

**That is what it means to Reclaim
Physical Space!**

Final Checklist

Checklist of things trans and gender diverse youth felt need to be in these spaces:

Beginner friendly with instructions and support on how to use all the equipment

Financially accessible (ideally free)

Inclusive toilets and changing rooms (gender free single stall & own shower)

Safety as a priority

Opportunity to prebook equipment

Focuses on games as well as routines

Ability to be in separate closed off private space

Activities like fencing and self-defence

Gender-free/non-gendered activities

Trial times to try new activities and sports

All-inclusive swimming

Events/outings organised by gym – hikes, cycling, runs, walks

Well-advertised across the community

Range of Equipment – especially for those with disabilities

Judgement free

Community notice boards for organisations to share events, groups, etc...

VR on cardio equipment (makes you feel like you are “going somewhere”)

Consideration of where mirrors are (fewer mirrors)



Example of one location where the physical activity day was held.

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Annex

Mentimeter Reflection Quiz:

<https://www.mentimeter.com/app/presentation/al33c9we1tjhbcp0s2awuvwoqdyj3a6c/edit?source=share-modal>

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