



ParalympicsGB



Understanding Attitudes, Lived Experience and Impact



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Foreword

Sport has long been a powerful force for connection, inclusion, and empowerment. Yet for many disabled people, access to community and school sport remains limited by systemic barriers and entrenched social attitudes.

At ParalympicsGB, our vision is clear: to inspire a better world for disabled people through the power of sport. By harnessing the influence of the Paralympic Games and amplifying the voices of Paralympians, we aim to challenge perceptions and drive lasting change - ensuring fair, equitable access to sport, physical activity, and education for all. Over the past 12 months we've focused on Equal Play – a campaign ensuring no disabled child is excluded from physical education and school sport by the LA Games in 2028.

Our commitment to social change is grounded in evidence and shaped by lived experience. To inform our strategic priorities, we sought to understand the barriers disabled people face and elevate their perspectives. Equally important was exploring the attitudes of non-disabled individuals, revealing that disability inclusion often remains more aspirational than realised.

In late 2023 and around the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games, we commissioned national research to explore these dynamics. This included capturing disabled people's lived experiences, assessing public perceptions, and engaging 12–15-year-olds - an essential audience for our Equal Play campaign.

The findings were striking. Disabled people are significantly less likely to engage in physical activity in public spaces, and their confidence in sport settings is notably lower than other

everyday settings such as the workplace and public transport. Many feel their needs are overlooked by staff, peers, and infrastructure. They called for less judgement, greater personal confidence, better-trained staff, and adapted classes or groups.

Our research also revealed low public awareness of the societal barriers disabled people face. While many non-disabled people claim to view disabled people as equals, a gap persists between intention and behaviour. Using a behavioural change model, we found that engagement with the Paralympic Games positively influenced attitudes and moved individuals toward action.

This report is a call to listen, act, and collaborate. It urges us to build environments where everyone feels seen, valued, and empowered to participate - and to move beyond identifying barriers to becoming agents of progress.

We're proud to share these insights and invite you to join us in advancing true equity in sport and physical activity.




David Clarke OBE PLY
Chief Executive ParalympicsGB

Introduction

ParalympicsGB commissioned this research to assess the activity levels, perceptions, and experiences of disabled and nondisabled individuals within sport, physical activity, and physical education settings. The study aimed to evaluate the impact of the Paralympic Games and ParalympicsGB's campaigns, while gaining deeper insight into the structural and social factors that influence participation and inclusion. Behavioural change models were applied to explore two key areas: the confidence of disabled people in physical activity environments, and how non-disabled individuals refer to and engage with disabled people.

Conducted in three waves between November 2023 and September 2024, the research enabled longitudinal analysis and measurement of the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games' impact. Each wave included a nationally representative sample of UK residents aged 16 and over, alongside an additional 250 respondents aged 12–15. Full methodological details are provided in the Appendix.

Unless otherwise stated, data presented in this report reflects the average across all three waves. In selected cases, comparisons between waves are used to illustrate shifts in attitudes and behaviours, particularly in relation to the Games and behavioural change indicators.

While the overall research was broad in scope, this report focuses on three core areas:

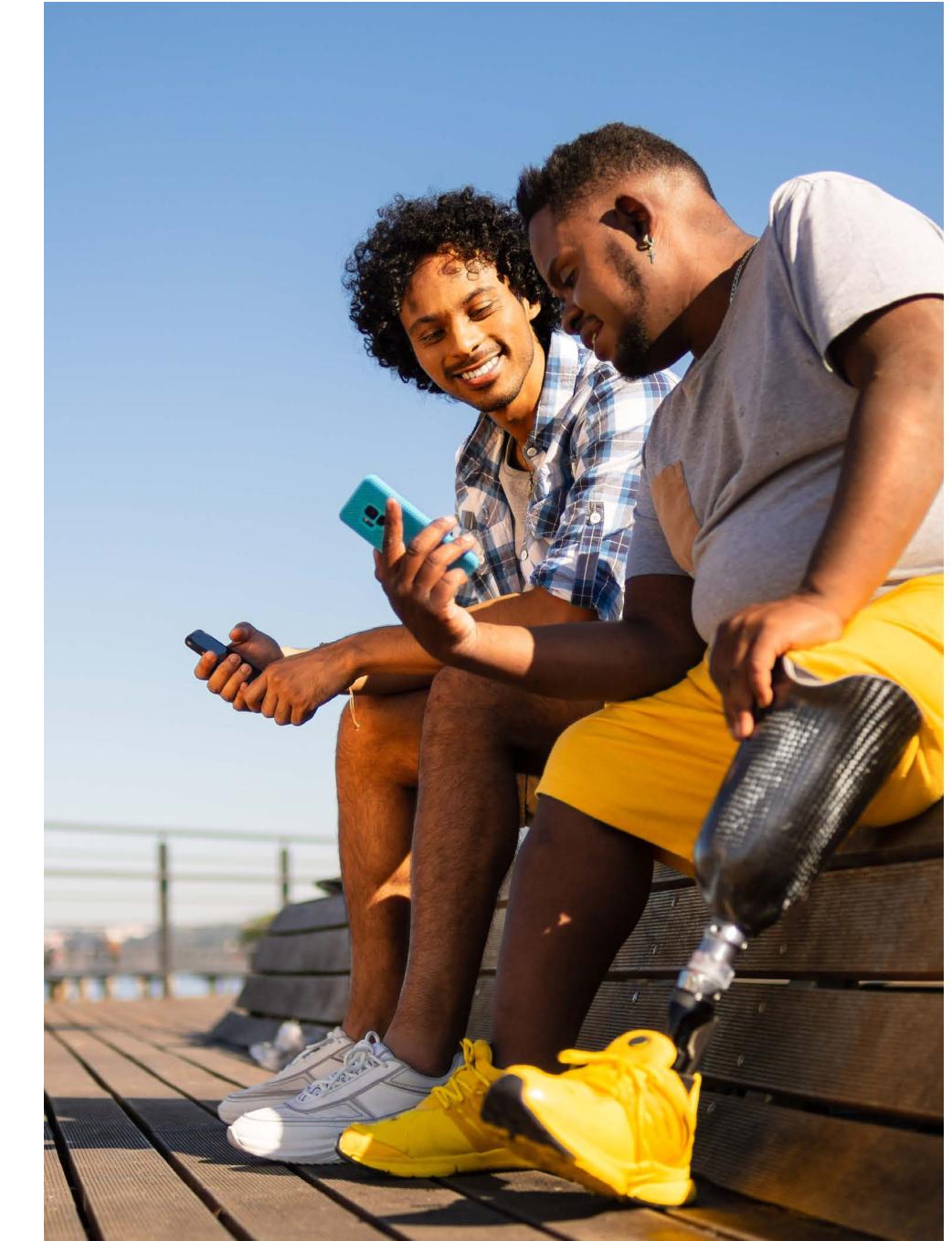
- The lived experiences of disabled people in sport and physical activity
- Public perceptions and attitudes toward disability and disabled individuals
- The experiences and views of children, with emphasis on inclusion in school and community sport

Across the complete report, these themes combine to offer a comprehensive view of the current landscape. Findings show that disabled people are significantly less likely to participate in physical activity in public spaces and report lower confidence in sport settings compared to other environments such as schools, workplaces, and public transport. Confidence levels varied across different types of sport and activity settings, with contributing factors including environmental design and the attitudes of organisers and participants.

In exploring public perceptions, the research identified a gap between intention and behaviour among non-disabled individuals. While most claim to view disabled people as equals, two distinct behavioural patterns emerged. The first, found in nearly three-quarters of the adult population, reflects seemingly well-meaning views that nonetheless reinforce negative stereotypes. The second, more prevalent among younger people aged 16–34 and children aged 12–15, involves more openly negative attitudes – such as perceiving disabled people as objects of pity, discomfort, or ridicule.

The research also examined the experiences of disabled and non-disabled children, with a focus on participation in school and community sport. Positive results show disabled children are more active than disabled adults, but a disability gap remains. Findings highlight how attitudes, confidence, and practical barriers shape opportunities and inclusion for young people. Prejudice and exclusion are more acute for disabled children compared to disabled adults.

Insights from this research directly inform the practical actions outlined in the 'What is ParalympicsGB doing?' sections at the end of each chapter. By centring lived experience and public perception, this report provides a robust foundation for evidence-based policy, targeted advocacy, and sector-wide collaboration – ensuring inclusive sport and physical activity is accessible to all.



1.0

Lived experiences of disabled people

The following section explores the everyday realities facing disabled people in sport and physical activity. It examines the barriers to participation, the impact of confidence and social attitudes, and the practical steps needed to create more inclusive environments.



1.1

State of play

Disabled people show lower levels of confidence to participate in sport and physical activity

Our research shows that around half (51%) of disabled people do not feel confident enough to take part in sport and physical activity, and more than a quarter (29%) say this lack of confidence causes them to avoid physical activity altogether.

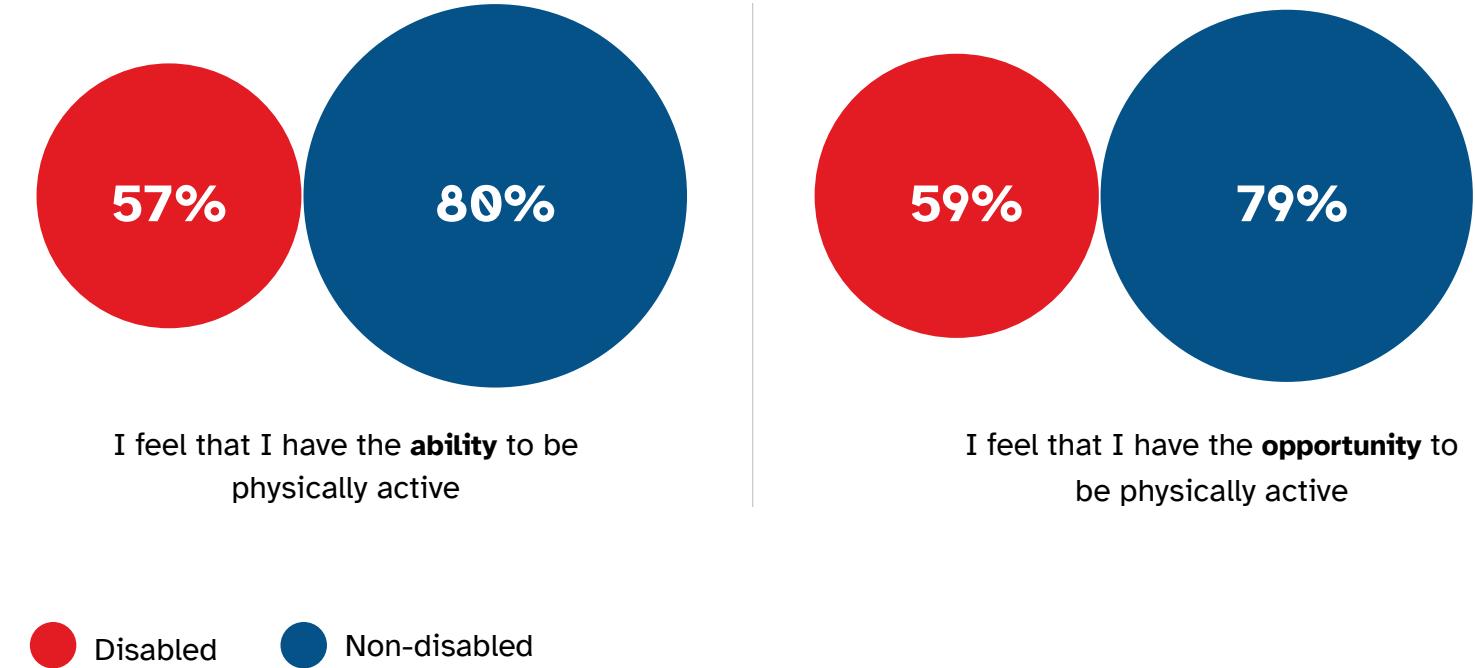
The data also revealed that disabled people are less likely to recognise the opportunity and perceived ability to be active. Only around three in five (59%) disabled people say they have the opportunity to be active, compared to four in five (79%) non-disabled people. Less than three in five (57%) disabled people say they have the ability to be physically active, versus 80% of non-disabled people.

Figure 1.1: Which of the following best describes your current engagement in sport/physical activity?

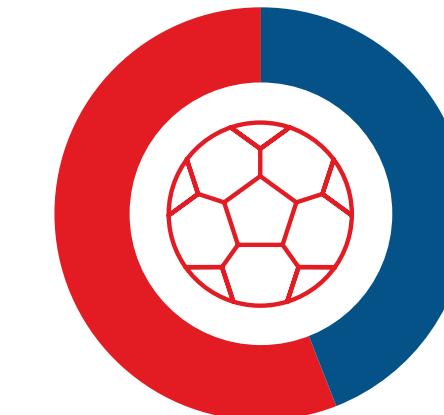


Base: All disabled adults (n=3,004) 3-wave average (Waves 1-3)

Figure 1.2: How much do you agree with the following statements?



Base: All adults (n=7,372), (Non disabled: n=4,368, Disabled: n=3,004) 3-wave average (Waves 1-3)



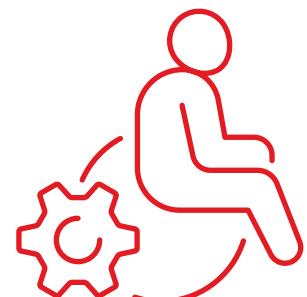
45%

of people with a physical impairment say they don't feel confident enough to participate in sport or physical activity, and so they avoid it. This is notably higher than among those with learning impairments alone, where just 26% say the same.



-20%

disabled people are 20 percentage points less likely to think they have the opportunity to be active than non-disabled people



-23%

disabled people are 23 percentage points less likely to feel like they have the ability to be active than non-disabled people

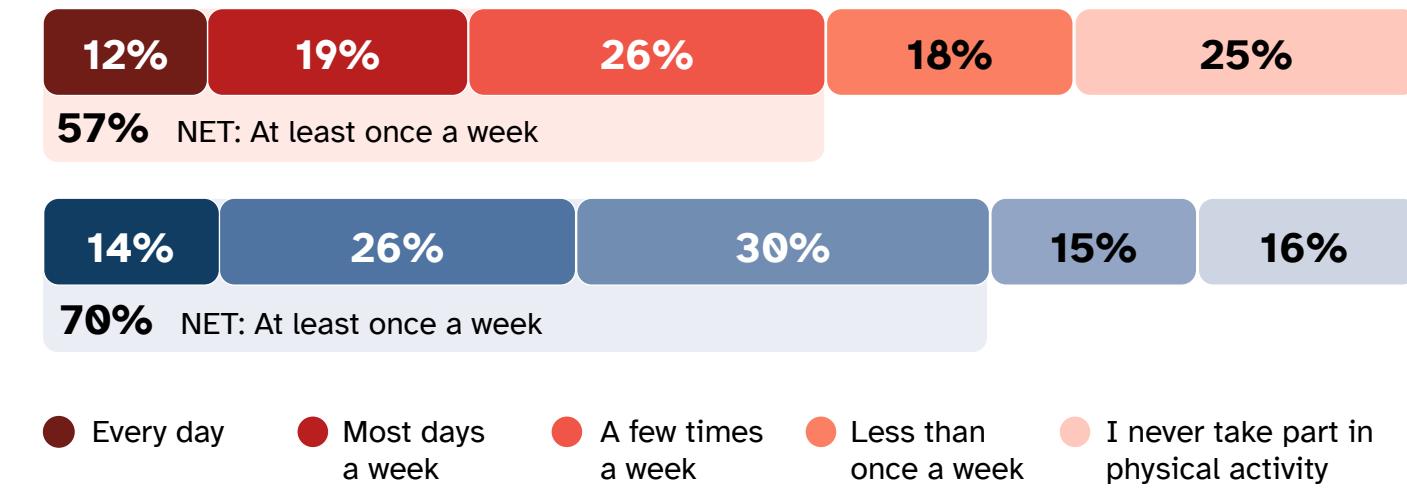
Low confidence translates into lower levels of participation

Crucially, a lack of confidence does not just define disabled people's attitudes towards sport and physical activity - it is closely linked to how much they participate. In our research, disabled people report being less likely to participate in physical activity at least once a week (57%) compared to non-disabled people (70%), and are far more likely to tell us that they never participate (25% vs 16%).

However, disabled people who say they are confident in sport and physical activity settings are significantly more likely to take part at least once a week (76%) than those who are not confident (50%). This corresponds with research by the Activity Alliance which reports that a lack of confidence and concerns about their own ability were key factors preventing disabled people from being more active, rather than a lack of interest or willingness (Activity Alliance, Annual Disability and Activity Survey, 2024).

The disparity in physical activity levels between disabled and non-disabled people carries potential consequences. Regular physical activity has well-documented benefits on both physical and mental health. Consequently, disabled people who are less active face greater risks of preventable health problems and are four times more likely to experience loneliness and reduced wellbeing than non-disabled people according to the Office for National Statistics (2019).

Figure 1.3: Frequency of physical activity: disabled vs. non-disabled adults



Base: All respondents (n=7,372), (Disabled: n=3,004, Non-disabled: n=4,368). 3-wave average (Waves 1-3)

1.2

Spaces for participation

Disabled people are less likely to take part in physical activity within public spaces

Among the British public, parks (46%), the home (34%), and gyms, health or fitness suites (26%) are the most common places to take part in physical activity. However, clear differences emerge when comparing which venues disabled and non-disabled people use. While at-home activity participation rates between disabled and non-disabled people are similar, disabled people are much less likely to use public-facing settings such as parks (43%) and gyms or fitness suites (23%) as shown in figure 1.4. Confidence appears to play a role in this decision. Disabled people who say they are not confident in sport and physical activity settings are significantly more likely to participate at home, compared to confident disabled people (38% vs 30%).

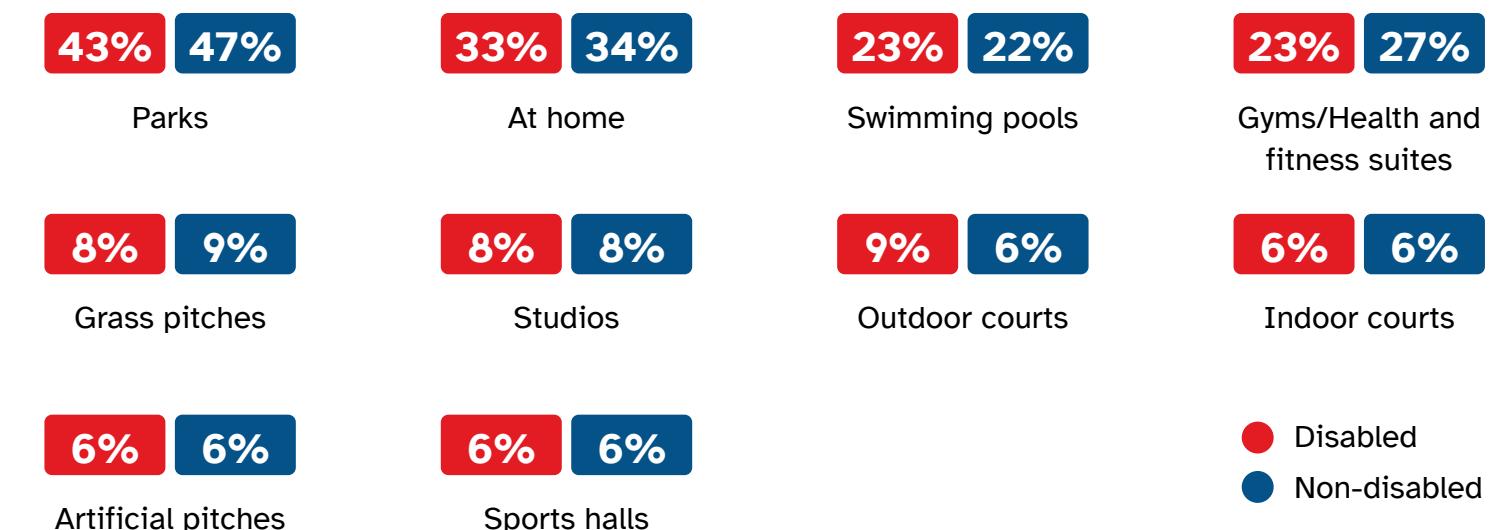
To better understand their choices, we asked disabled people what would make them feel like their needs are being met in physical activity settings. Commonly cited changes included 'less judgement from others' (44%) and 'more personal confidence' (45%).

A perceived lack of understanding and inclusive practices by providers was also identified as a notable barrier. Better trained staff (46%) and having adapted classes or groups for disabled people (32%) are seen as important steps towards making them feel their needs are being met.

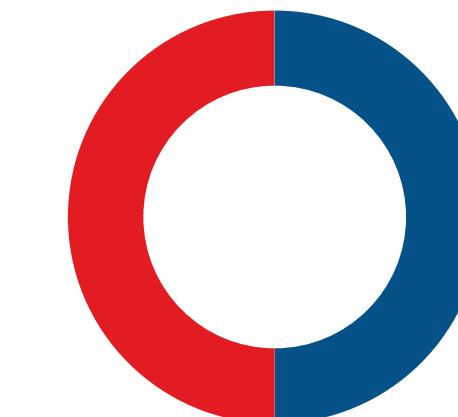
“ If people running sports/physical activity settings had more knowledge about disability, particularly about hidden disability, and also advertised that they had that knowledge, that would help me to feel more confident to attend. I don't appear disabled so people tend to assume that I am not. This means that if I need accommodations I have to ask for them (often publicly, in front of others in a class etc.). I find this very difficult to do and tend not to - instead I just don't go back to the class.

Female, 39,
with a mental health condition

Figure 1.4: Thinking about the physical activity you take part in, in which settings did you participate?



Base: All who take part in physical activity (n=6,051), (Disabled: n= 2,301, Non-disabled: n=3,750). 3-wave average (Waves 1-3)



50%

Worryingly, only half of disabled people consider sport and physical activity to be inclusive, and just 58% feel their exercise environments are welcoming – clear signals that improvements are urgently needed.

More disabled people want to be more physically active

The differences in confidence and participation levels do not reflect a lack of aspiration to be physically active among disabled people. Most disabled people want to do more sport and physical activity, with three quarters (75%) saying they are unsatisfied with their current levels of physical activity, highlighting a clear demand for inclusive opportunities.

“ [Have] classes/ equipment more catered to suit my needs, and fitness classes for example that are easy to follow and are taught by someone who understands the problems so will not be aggressive or rude when I need a break, as this behaviour has happened before to me

Female, 20,
with a visual impairment

Figure 1.6: Satisfaction at current activity levels: disabled vs non-disabled adults

Non Disabled



Disabled Adults



● I would like to do a lot more ● I would like to do a bit more ● I would like to stay at the same level
● I would like to do a bit less ● I would like to do a lot less ● Don't know

Base: All adults (n= 7,372), (Non disabled: n=4,368, Disabled: n= 3,004) 3-wave average (Waves 1-3)

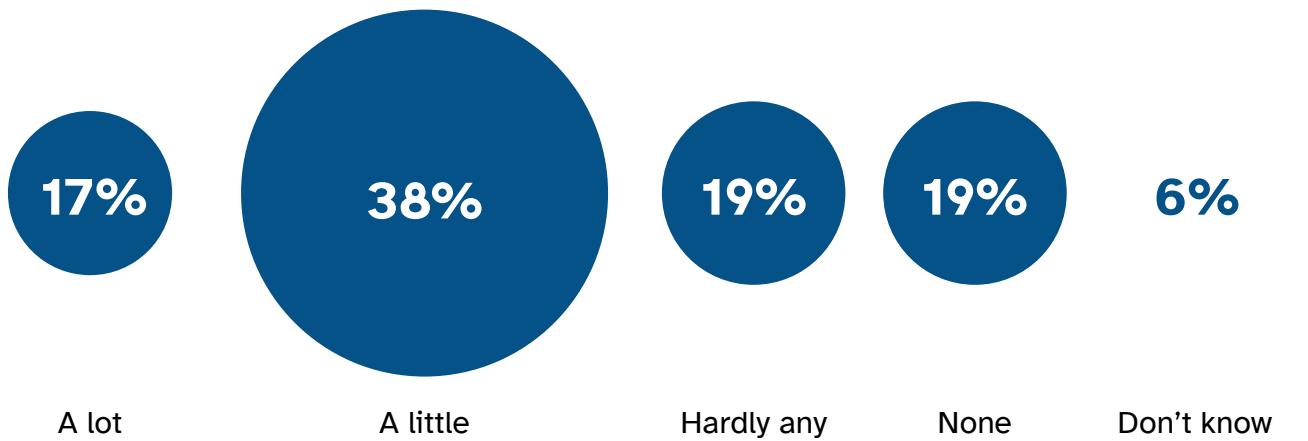


1.3 Negative behaviours and drivers of low confidence

Disabled people face prejudice and discriminatory attitudes

Our research shows that more than half (55%) of disabled people say they face at least 'a little' prejudice specifically related to their disability in Britain with 17% saying they face 'a lot'. The most common negative behaviours reported by disabled people include making assumptions and judgements about their disability or what they can do (experienced by 30% of disabled people in the past year), making accusations of faking or being lazy (27%), being rushed or met with impatience (27%) and dismissing a disabled persons condition or need for adjustments (26%).

Figure 1.7: Generally speaking, how much prejudice do you face in Britain as a disabled person?



Base: All disabled adults (n=3,004). 3-wave average (Waves 1-3)





Sport and physical activity settings are particularly poor for disabled people's confidence

Confidence levels among disabled people are notably lower in sports and physical activity contexts compared to other environments. While 71% report feeling confident at work, 56% in public, 53% in educational settings, and 47% on public transport, only 31% feel confident in sport or physical activity settings. 19% of disabled people who were asked to evaluate their confidence in sport and physical activity settings said the question was not applicable to them, which may further emphasise low levels of

participation from disabled people.

When looking at different specific sport and physical activity settings, our research shows that disabled people feel mixed confidence across venues. While over one in two disabled people feel confident spectating a major professional or major sporting event (57%), confidence is lower in venues that entail participation. The lowest confidence is found when participating in a sports team (34%) or when playing a sport in an outdoor venue (37%).

Figure 1.8: How confident do you typically feel in the following settings?

At work/in my job



At school/college/university



In a sport/physical activity setting (e.g. gym, sports club)



On public transport



In the street/out in public



● Not applicable to me ● Very confident ● Somewhat confident ● Not very confident ● Not confident at all

Base: All disabled adults (n= 1,145) Wave 1 only

Figure 1.9: How confident do you typically feel in the following sport and physical activity settings?

Being a spectator at a professional or major sporting event (e.g., a football match, tennis match or other stadia)



Participating in exercise in outdoor spaces (e.g. in a park)



Swimming at your local swimming pool or swim centre/facility



Taking part in physical activity at a local authority leisure centre



Taking part in physical activity at a private gym or fitness centre



Outside venue (e.g. local tennis courts)



Participating in a sports club or team



Very confident

Somewhat confident

Not very confident

Not at all confident

Not applicable to me

Prefer not to say

Base: All disabled adults (n=1,044) Wave 2 only



Consideration of disabled people's needs is low in sports and physical activity settings. Around a third (32%) of disabled people say other people (not including staff or coaches) do not consider their needs. Additionally, many highlight issues with staff within sport and physical activity settings: 36% say non-coaching staff fail to consider their needs, and 33% say the same is true of coaching staff and trainers.

A lack of consideration is mirrored within disabled people's experiences of physical education in school, where a third (33%) say they didn't feel included. Multiple factors contribute to this sentiment. Almost a quarter (22%) of disabled people say their teachers didn't receive disability awareness training, and a similar proportion (21%) say their teachers didn't understand or appreciate their disability.

These findings underscore how, as Christiaens & Brittain (2023) highlight, implicit bias and a lack of understanding still shape many physical activity environments. As a result, they often fall short of true inclusion, and even well-intentioned settings can end up excluding disabled people.

1.4 What needs to change

Disabled people face distinct barriers to physical activity

Our research asked people who felt they did not have the opportunity to be physically active to identify the primary barriers preventing their participation. For disabled people, the most common reason was health or disability-related reasons, mentioned by around two in three (67%). The next most common factor was a lack of time (12%). In contrast, among non-disabled people, a lack of time was the main barrier (35%).

“ Physically and mentally I'm seriously ill and severely disabled. I'm very limited in what I can do, and I don't have any help and support to do anything I want to do.



Attitudes and environments are key to making physical activity more inclusive and accessible

Our research shows that confidence is a significant barrier to participation across all physical activity settings. Nearly two thirds of disabled people report that improvements in their own confidence are necessary for them to feel comfortable joining a sports club or team (64%), exercising in outdoor spaces (63%), or participating at a local authority leisure centre (63%).

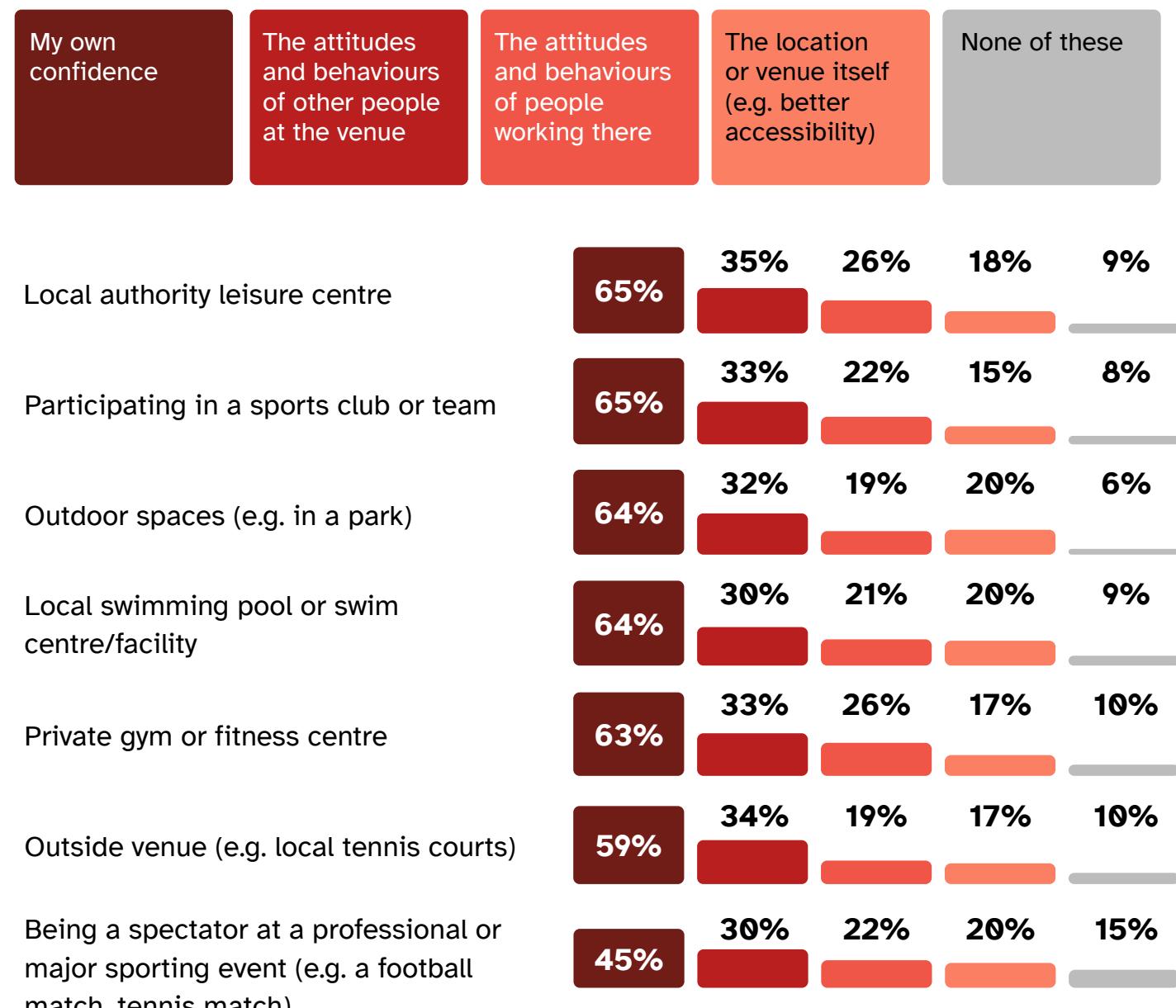
“ To make me feel more included in sports, ensure facilities are accessible and offer adaptive programs tailored to various needs. Train staff to understand and support disabled athletes, and promote a culture of inclusivity by encouraging teamwork and reducing stigma.

Male, 39,
with social and behaviour difficulty

“ To feel more included, having a supportive community with clear communication, diverse role models, and accessible entry points would be beneficial.

Male, 32,
with social and behaviour difficulty and a physical impairment

Figure 1.10: What needs to change to make you feel more comfortable?



Base: All disabled adults who say they didn't feel confident in a sports or physical activity setting (n=271-427)
Wave 2 only

Many disabled people highlight that changes in their environment and the attitudes of others would also make a meaningful difference to their comfort in physical activity settings. Across all tested sport and physical activity settings, around a third say that more welcoming attitudes and behaviours from other venue users would help them feel more comfortable, while a quarter cite improvements in the approach of staff and organisers as important.

Broader improvements to programmes and facilities are also frequently suggested as key in helping disabled people feel as though their needs are being met. Key priorities include ensuring equipment and facilities are accessible to everyone (44%), increasing investment in adaptive sports equipment (40%), and training teachers to better understand and support disability inclusion.

“ There aren't places that I am comfortable in because they have classes that the instructor insists on talking to me or otherwise singling me out in front of the group and this makes me uncomfortable.

**Female, 33,
with social and behaviour difficulty and a mental health condition**

1.5 Engagement with the Paralympic Games and ParalympicsGB campaigns is associated with higher confidence among disabled people

Our research shows a correlation between greater exposure to Paralympic Games and higher confidence in participation in sport and physical activity. Using a behavioural change model, we wanted to understand the confidence of disabled people participating in physical activity settings (see figure 1.11) and what interventions would make a positive impact on their confidence. At one end of the scale are people who are not confident enough to participate and avoid physical activity as a result (pre-contemplation), and at the other is people who feel very confident and participate regularly (maintenance stage).

Positive signs of improved confidence were observed among disabled people who attended or watched the Paralympic Games in Paris. The proportion of disabled people who did not feel confident enough to participate in physical activity (in the 'contemplation' or 'pre-contemplation' stages) reduced from 55% to 43%.

Figure 1.11: Behaviour change model



Pre-contemplation	Contemplation	Preparation	Action	Maintenance
I don't feel confident enough to participate in sport/physical activity, so I avoid doing it	I don't feel confident enough to participate in sport/physical activity, but I would like to try doing it more	I feel somewhat confident enough to participate in sport/physical activity and do little bits where I can	I feel confident when participating in sport/physical activity and take part fairly regularly	I feel very confident when participating in sport/physical activity and take part very regularly

The Games also appears to have prompted behaviour change. For example, disabled people who watched or attended the Paralympic Games are more likely to feel they have the ability to be physically active (64%) than those who had not watched or attended (48%). While simply watching the Games does not address all the barriers disabled people face in accessing sport and physical activity, the event clearly plays a role in building confidence and highlighting pathways into participation. For example, Channel 4's coverage promoted Every Body Moves powered by Toyota- ParalympicsGB's inclusive online activity finder - making it easier for disabled people to discover what's available locally. Survey data shows that this type of signposting may be impactful, with the perception of having opportunities to be active being significantly higher for disabled people who engaged with the Games (66%) compared with non-engagers (52%).

These outcomes reinforce the vital role of representation and visibility and is supported by evidence that Paralympians are a powerful source of inspiration. 43% of disabled people say they feel personally motivated to be active because of these athletes, a figure that jumps to 58% among those who followed the Paris Games.

Inspiration clearly matters and supports wider evidence that seeing 'people like me' encourages participation in physical activity among underrepresented groups. The Lionesses success at the Women's Euros 2022, for example, inspired 129,000 women and girls to get involved in football by 2024 according to the BBC (2024). The Paralympic Games appears to be having a similar positive impact on participation in sport and physical activity for disabled people. The challenge going forward is ensuring the momentum from the Paralympic Games leads to sustained engagement and increased confidence among disabled people, rather than seeing short-term uplifts every four years.



58%

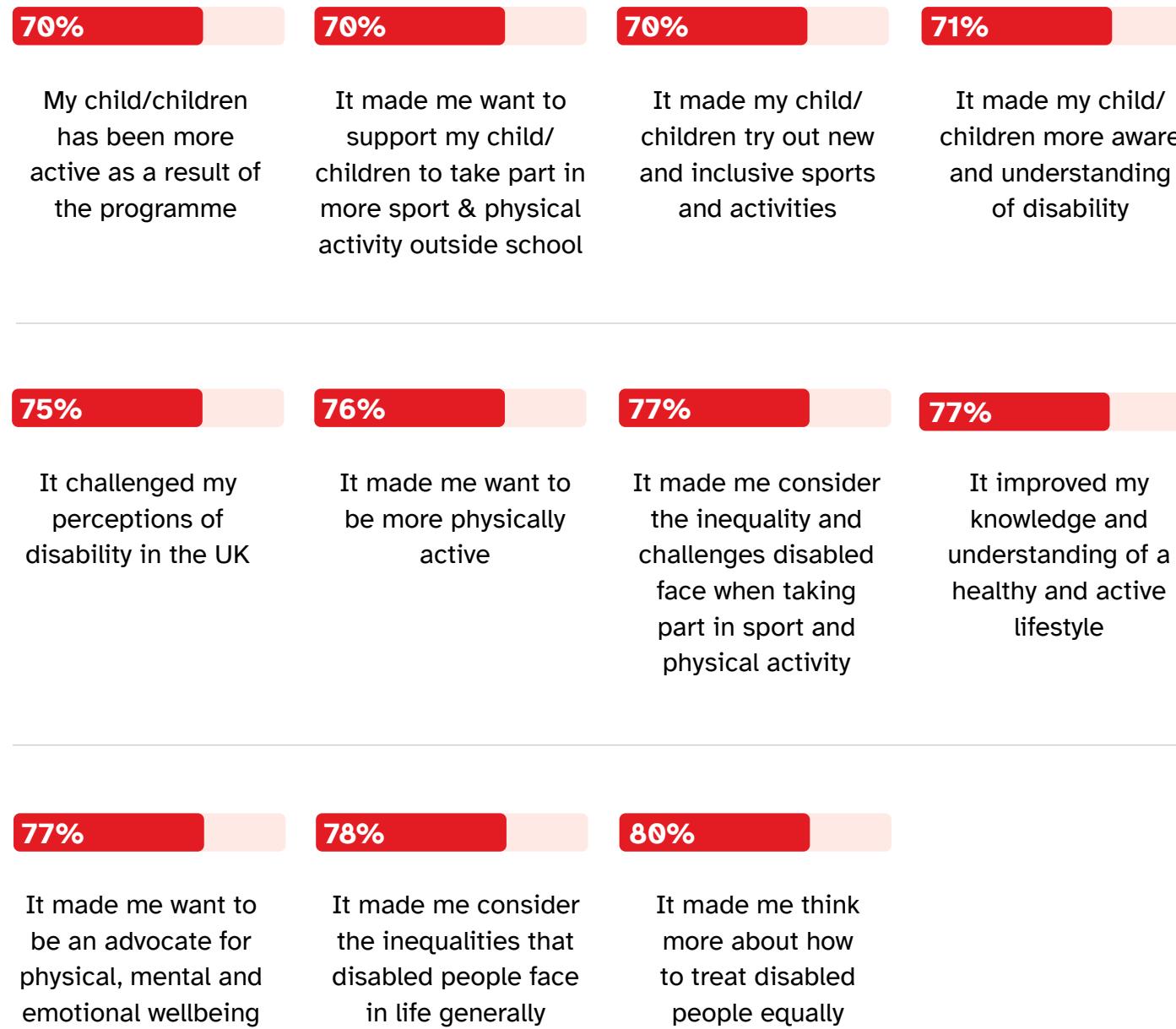
of disabled adults who engaged with the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games agreed that Paralympians inspire them to participate in sport and physical activity



Programmes like Get Set directly inspire disabled people to be more active

ParalympicsGB is focused on increasing engagement in sport and physical activity, particularly amongst young people. Get Set is the official Olympic and Paralympic youth engagement programme in Britain, providing free resources and activities to schools and community groups. It aims to inspire young people to get active, embrace Olympic and Paralympic values, and promote inclusivity – encouraging positive attitudes towards disability and participation in sport for all.

The positive benefits of engaging with the programme are clear. Among disabled people who engaged or had a child with a disability that engaged with the programme, more than three quarters (76%) said it made them want to be more physically active. Additionally, 70% said that they or their child were more active as a result of the programme. The benefits of Get Set do not stop there. As shown in figure 1.12, it improved participants understanding of a healthy and active lifestyle, encouraged people to try out new and inclusive sports and activities, and encouraged greater out of school participation.

Figure 1.12: How much do you agree with the following statements about Get Set?

Base: All disabled adults that have engaged with Get Set or had a child that engaged (n=732)
3-wave average (Waves 1-3)

Positive shifts in non-disabled attitudes may engender increased comfort and participation among disabled people

Get Set may also serve to encourage more engagement in physical activity among disabled people by changing attitudes among non-disabled people in the UK.

As explored earlier, the attitudes of people within physical activity settings can be a major barrier to comfort and confidence, which itself impacts levels of participation. However, non-disabled people who either participated themselves or had a child participate in the Get Set programme, agreed the programme has provoked attitudinal changes, such as thinking more about how to treat disabled people equally (81%), considering the inequality and challenges disabled people face when taking part in sport and physical activity (80%), considering the inequalities that disabled people face in life generally (79%) and challenging their perceptions of disability (75%).

Nonetheless, more needs to be done to improve attitudes and understanding. While programmes like Get Set are making a positive impact, broader, ongoing efforts are required across society to drive lasting change.



81%

Agreed the programme has provoked attitudinal changes, such as thinking more about how to treat disabled people equally

1.6

What ParalympicsGB is doing

Responding to this new data which highlights the disparity between disabled and non-disabled people lived experiences - we're committed to ensuring that disabled people have equal opportunity, confidence, and support to be physically active. A key part of this commitment is the continued development of Every Body Moves powered by Toyota, our inclusive online activity finder. We recognise that access to inclusive opportunities is often the first step, so Every Body Moves is evolving beyond an online activity finder - it will feature authentic stories from disabled people and allows users to share their own experiences. By amplifying lived experience, we aim to inspire participation and drive behaviour change.

Alongside this, we're working to improve accessibility and inclusivity across the sport and physical activity sector. We're collaborating with partners to establish minimum inclusion standards, promote the use of accessible data like Open Active, and encourage the sharing of good practice among providers. Our goal is to make it easier for disabled people to find, access, and feel welcome in sport and physical activity—wherever they live.

We also want Every Body Moves to become a vibrant, participant-led community. By connecting disabled people,

coaches, volunteers, and providers, we're creating a space to exchange information, celebrate achievements, and support one another to stay active over time.

Embedding disabled people's voices across the sector remains a priority. Drawing on the insights of athletes and the Lived Experience Advisory Board, the organisation will support the wider sport and activity sector in their efforts to improve inclusive practice across the workforce.

Together with Team GB, we're also expanding the **Get Set programme** to address inequalities facing disabled children and young people. We're raising awareness of the limited opportunities in PE and school sport, advocating for political action, and delivering engagement and education activities. These initiatives help young people - disabled and non-disabled - build confidence, discover new opportunities, and develop more positive attitudes toward disability and inclusion.

Taken together, these actions reflect our ongoing commitment to listening, collaborating, and driving long-term change. We're working to ensure that being physically active is not just possible - but positive, inclusive, and accessible for everyone.

2.0 Perceptions of disability and disabled people

ParalympicsGB and its members are driving improvements in access and confidence for disabled people. However, our research makes clear that progress also depends on a shift in broader societal attitudes and everyday behaviours. The following chapter explores how disability is perceived and understood by non-disabled people in the UK – examining familiarity, attitudes and behaviours, and how these perceptions shape the environment in which disabled people live, work and move.



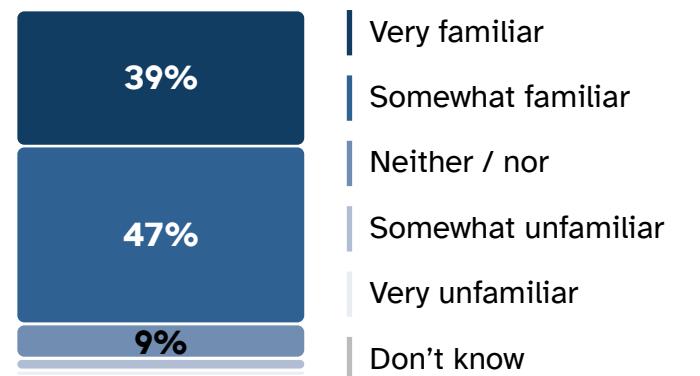
2.1 Disability awareness and interaction

A familiar term, but distant reality

Most adults in Britain reported being aware of what the term 'disability' means. Almost nine in ten (86%) British adults are familiar with the term, with two-fifths (39%) 'very familiar'.

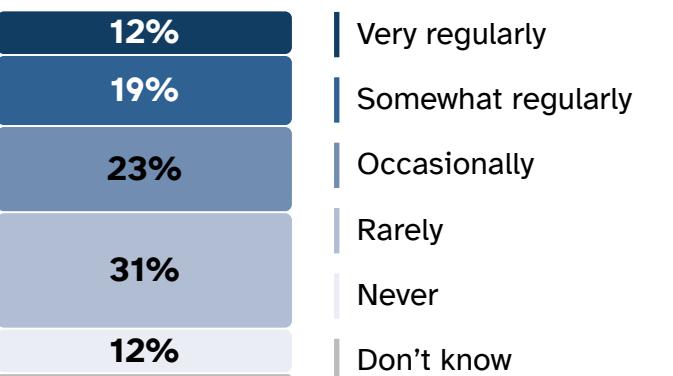
However, high familiarity with the term disability is contrasted with, what is perceived to be, limited contact with disabled people. Less than one third (31%) of British adults say they 'regularly' interact with disabled people, compared to 43% who 'rarely' or 'never' have such connections.

Figure 2.1: Familiarity with the term: amongst non-disabled adults



Base: non-disabled adults (n=4,368)
3-wave average (Waves 1-3)

Figure 2.2: Frequency of interaction with disabled people: amongst non-disabled adults



Base: non-disabled adults (n=4,368)
3-wave average (Waves 1-3)



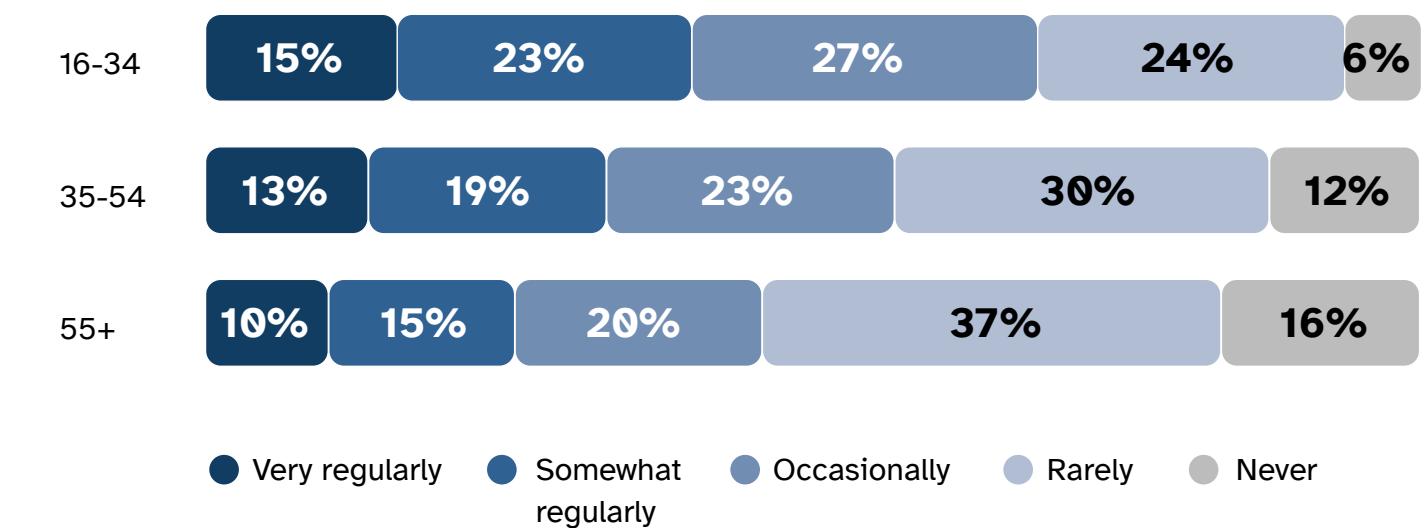


There are notable gender and age differences within these findings. Women are significantly more likely than men to say they are familiar with the term "disability" (89% vs 83%), and significantly less likely to report rarely or never interacting with disabled people (39% vs 47%). This suggests that women not only tend to have greater awareness but may also occupy more socially connected spaces when it comes to disability.

Younger people aged 16-34 (45%) are most likely to be very familiar with the term and also most likely to regularly interact with disabled people (38%).

The main reason cited for limited interaction is not personally knowing any disabled people (73%). Concerns about not wanting to offend disabled people (8%), not wanting to do or say the wrong thing (7%) or not knowing how to act around disabled people (4%) also contribute.

Figure 2.3: Frequency of interaction with disabled people by age



Base: Non-disabled adults (n=4,368). 3-wave average (Waves 1-3)

2.2

Perceptions of barriers

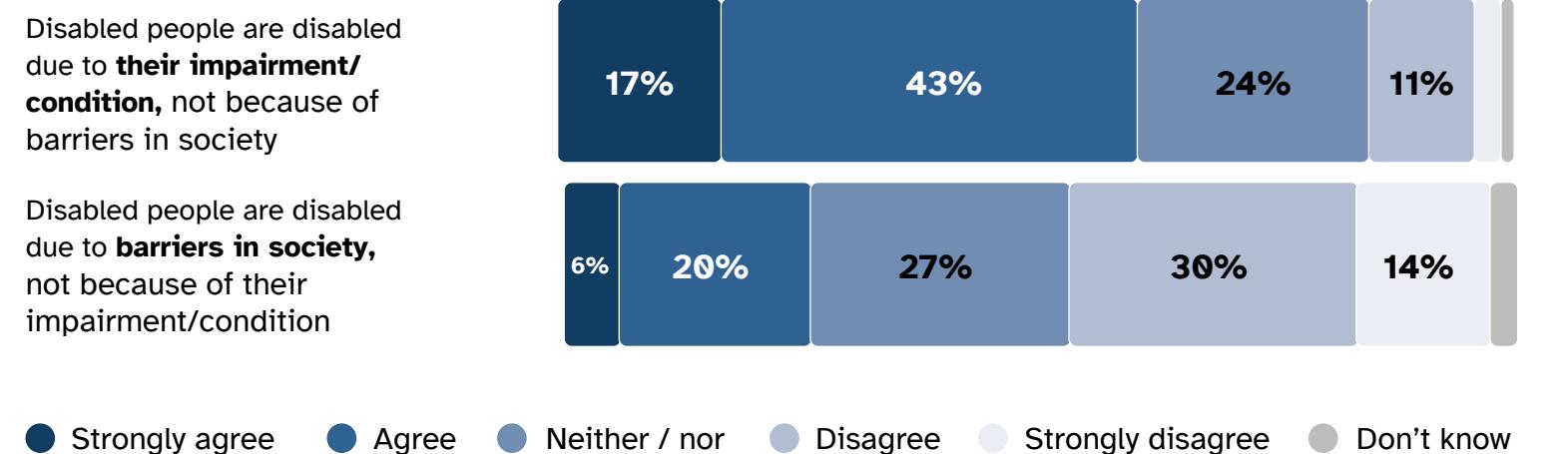
There is a low awareness of the societal barriers for disabled people

When asked about the causes of disability, three fifths (60%) of British non-disabled adults say disabled people are 'disabled' due to their impairment/condition, not because of barriers in society. In comparison, a quarter (27%) of non-disabled adults think disabled people are 'disabled' due to barriers in society, not because of their condition. When disability is seen as being caused by someone's condition rather than external barriers, there can be a lower recognition of the role that public attitudes, inaccessible

physical and digital environments and services, and policy decisions play in shaping disabled people's lives.

Regular interaction with disabled people is linked to greater acknowledgement of the social barriers faced. More than one third (36%) of people who interact regularly with disabled people think disabled people are 'disabled' due to barriers in society, compared to 24% of those who interact occasionally or rarely and 17% of those who never interact with disabled people.

Figure 2.4: Perceptions of disability: amongst non-disabled adults



Base: Non disabled adults (n=4,368) 3-wave average (Waves 1-3)



2.3 Personal behaviours and communication

Inclusion in intention but not always in practice

While most non-disabled people claim to see disabled people as equals (87%), our research reveals a gap between intention and behaviour. Fewer than a third (31%) say they always act inclusively towards disabled people, leaving a clear majority whose behaviour is not inclusive at least some of the time. Similarly, just 27% always pay attention to their language and try to be more inclusive, meaning the majority either do so inconsistently, or rarely think about their language at all. Meanwhile, 12% admit they never give it any thought.

Well-meaning stereotypes and overt prejudices

While trying to better understand the reason for this gap, our research identified two distinct patterns of behaviour that potentially reinforce barriers for disabled people.

The first, found within almost three-quarters of the British adult population, includes views that though appearing well-intentioned, reinforce negative stereotypes about disabled people. Such views are most regularly seen in older people aged 55+ and includes viewing disabled people as needing to be cared for (68%), as being inspiring for overcoming everyday tasks (72%) and being exceptional for overcoming their condition or impairment (75%). Channel 4's latest Paralympics campaign was driven by similar findings, with their research revealing that 59% of viewers watch to see athletes "overcoming disabilities," highlighting how mainstream narratives often reinforce these perceptions rather than recognising Paralympians first and foremost as elite athletes.





The second pattern, more widely seen in younger people aged 16-34, and children aged 12-15, but representing a quarter of the British adult population, involves more openly negative attitudes. This includes admitting to perceiving disabled people as people to be pitied (25%), that they can joke about (27%), who are less productive than non-disabled people (30%), or to be treated with discomfort and awkwardness (31%). As shown in Figure 2.5, these views become less prevalent with age.

It is important to note that these two patterns are not mutually exclusive. Many people hold a

complex mix of attitudes - sometimes expressing both well-meaning but stereotypical views and more negative beliefs, depending on context or experience. Positive attitudes do exist, with 87% of non-disabled adults saying they view disabled people as people to be treated equally. However, our research highlights that even this view is often held alongside less inclusive or even negative attitudes. This highlights how, even with positive intentions, people may still subconsciously reinforce stereotypes or barriers—underscoring the complexity and rarity of truly consistent, inclusive attitudes.

Figure 2.5: How often do you think of disabled people in the following ways (Always/some of the time)

	16-34	35-54	55+
As people to be treated equally	83%	84%	91%
As needing to be cared for	72%	67%	86%
As being exceptional for overcoming their condition or equipment	71%	72%	81%
As being inspiring for completing everyday tasks	71%	70%	75%
As not being able to take part in sport/physical activity	49%	40%	38%
As not being as productive as non-disabled people	37%	31%	26%
With discomfort and awkwardness	36%	33%	26%
As people to be pitied	36%	29%	5%
As being able to joke about	31%	30%	22%

Base: Non disabled adults (n=4,368) 3-wave average (Waves 1-3)

2.4

Impact on disabled people

Misunderstanding prejudice and barriers

A lack of awareness about the impact of these stereotypes likely contributes to a disconnect between the level of prejudice non-disabled people think disabled people face, and the reality. Two thirds (65%) of non-disabled British adults believe disabled people face little or no prejudice, while only a quarter (26%) believe substantial prejudice still exists.

But the reality is very different for disabled people themselves. More than half (55%) report encountering at least some prejudice, with 17% saying they face 'a lot'. This disconnect has real consequences for everyday interactions: in the past year, disabled people commonly reported experiencing assumptions and judgements about what they can do (30%), accusations of faking or laziness (27%), being patronised (26%), impatience or being rushed (26%) or having their needs for adjustments dismissed (26%).



55%

have encountered at least some prejudice



2.5 Changing attitudes

Readiness to change: Moving from intention to action

To further explore how non-disabled people approach referring to disabled people, our research applied a behavioural change model. At one end of the model are people who rarely think about what they say or how they refer to disabled people, and don't want to learn how to be more inclusive (pre-contemplation stage). At the other is people who always think about what they say or how they refer to disabled people and are always inclusive (maintenance stage).

Across the three waves of research, an average of 27% of non-disabled people say they always think about what they say or how they refer to disabled people and strive to be inclusive. In contrast, 12% are in the pre-contemplation stage, with men (16%) and those aged 55+ (15%) more likely than average to fall into this group.

A similar proportion (27%) are in the contemplation stage, where they sometimes consider their language and would like to learn how to be more inclusive.

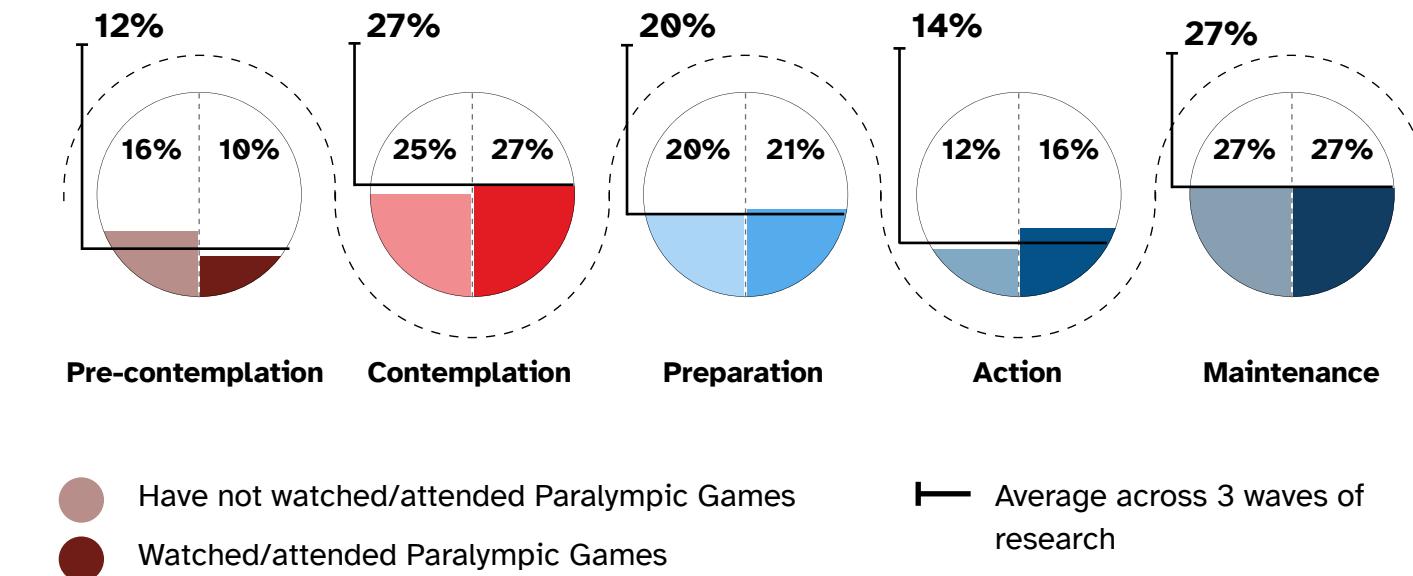
Those aged 55 and over are also the most likely group to be at the maintenance stage, with 34% reporting consistently inclusive behaviour, signalling a degree of polarisation within this age group.

Notably, engagement with the Paralympic Games had an impact on attitudes. People who have watched the Games are much less likely to be at the pre-contemplation stage (10%) than those who have not (16%). They are also much more likely to be regularly considering their language (action or maintenance stage) than those who have not (43% vs 39%) as shown in figure 2.6, showing the impact that representation of disabled people can have on improving attitudes.





Figure 2.6: Behaviour change | Consideration of reference to disabled people



Base: All non-disabled adults (n=4,368). 3-wave average (Waves 1-3)

Improving knowledge and increasing interactions

A regression analysis was conducted to identify which factors impact how non-disabled people speak and act towards disabled people. Our analysis shows that people who 'regularly' spend time with disabled people have much more positive attitudes towards disabled people. Having shared experiences and seeing disabled people represented, such as through watching the Paralympic Games, also leads to more positive attitudes and behaviours towards disabled people.

Other notable factors contributing to more positive attitudes and behaviours towards disabled people include seeing them as independent, agreeing that disability is a result of societal barriers, and not viewing disabled people as people who need to be cared for.

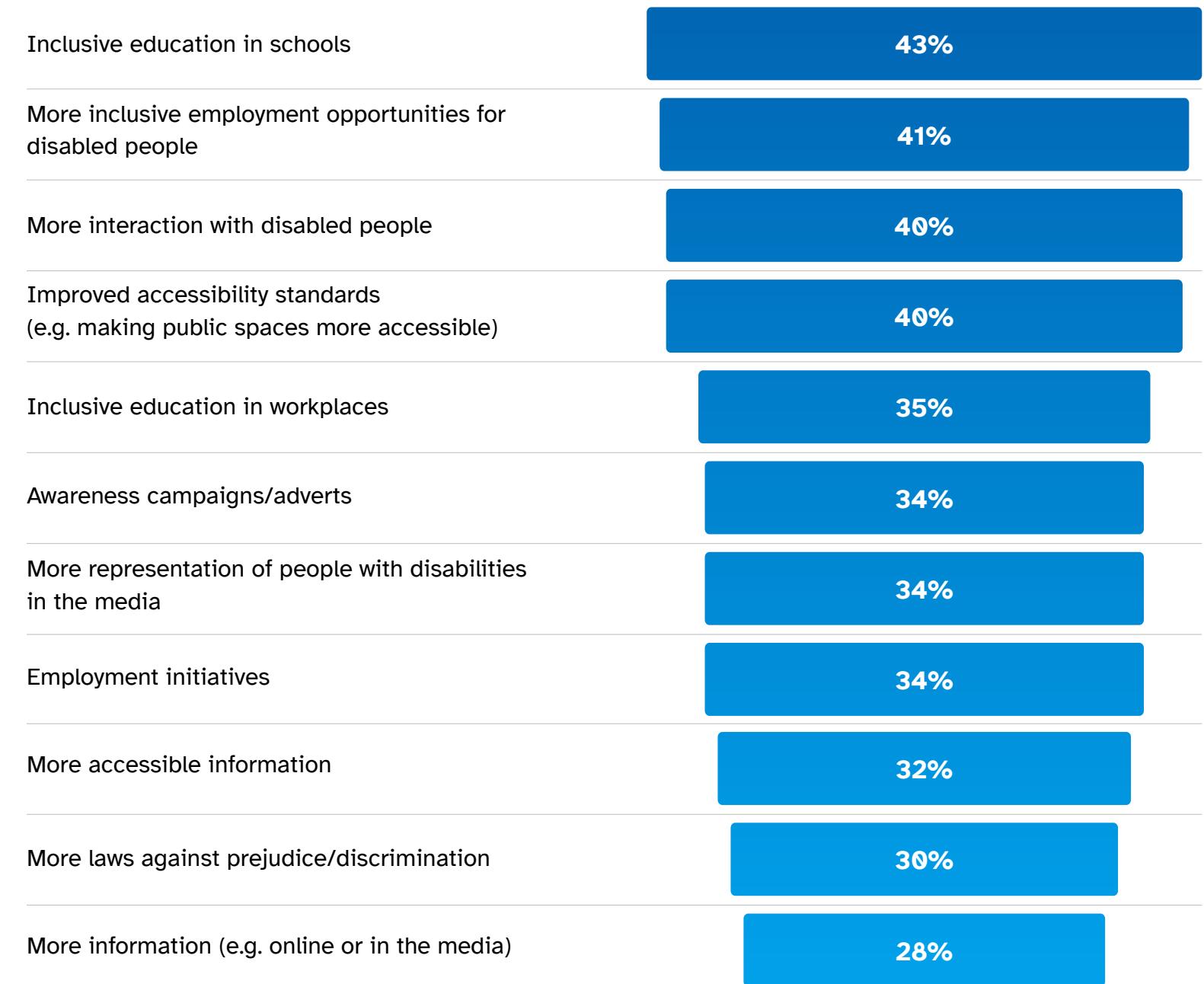
On the other hand, people who see disabled people as people to be pitied, viewing them as less capable than non-disabled people, or feel uncomfortable around disabled people are more likely to act negatively towards them.

Public appetite for policy and practical change

Public support for policy action to reduce prejudice is substantial across the UK population. Initiatives such as inclusive education within schools (43%) and greater inclusive employment opportunities for disabled people (40%) are viewed as steps that would help reduce the amount of prejudice faced by disabled people in Britain. There is also backing for practical measures such as encouraging more interaction with disabled people (40%). These steps attract comparable levels of support among both disabled and non-disabled people. However, disabled people are notably more likely to see the value in awareness campaigns and adverts (39% vs 33% for non-disabled people) and more representation of disabled people in the media (39% vs 32%). This highlights how disabled people may place more emphasis on visibility and cultural change as tools for reducing prejudice.



Figure 2.7: Measures to reduce prejudice against disabled people



Base: All respondents (n=2,439). Wave 2 only

2.6 The impact of ParalympicsGB campaigns and athletes

Campaigns drive real-world action on inclusion

National campaigns such as “Get Set”, “Every Body Moves” and “Equal Play” are making significant progress in shifting public attitudes and prompting action around inclusion. Across both disabled and non-disabled people, 81% of those who interacted with the Get Set campaign indicated that its messages encouraged them to reflect on the importance of treating disabled people equally, while 79% said it made them consider the inequality and challenges disabled face when taking part in sport and physical activity. The Every Body Moves powered by Toyota platform was similarly impactful, with 75% of those that visited saying it made them consider these inequalities and challenges.

Importantly, these campaigns have also sparked action within their participants, with 32% of people saying they would consider signing a petition supporting equal PE access after exposure to the Equal Play campaign.

Others reported considering sharing content on social media (50%), starting conversations about access and inclusion with their school (35%), or donating to related causes (34%). These findings suggest that well-designed campaigns can move individuals beyond passive support, fostering a shift from awareness to advocacy and tangible action.

Finally, positive disabled role models in the form of Paralympians, can play a role in shaping public perceptions and motivating further change. Four in five non-disabled adults (80%) agree that Paralympians can help improve how disability is perceived, while around three in four (76%) agree that increased visibility can help drive policy change.



81% **75%**

Of those who engaged with Get Set said it made them think about the importance of treating disabled people equally

Of those who visited the Every Body Moves powered by Toyota platform said it made them consider the challenges faced by disabled people



“ I think it [Get Set] is inspirational and exactly what society needs now. I think the adverts could be a bit more like unique and maybe a bit funnier to grab people’s attention but otherwise I support the cause and strongly believe in it.

Female, 29,
with a physical impairment



“ I truly believe that Paralympians inspire the next generation to have a positive mindset and attitude towards life in general. That creates a wider positive change in society.

Male, 26,
with a physical impairment



“ It [Every Body Moves] definitely helps to bring awareness to activities that you might not know were available to you in your local community. And even if there's nothing suitable they also have section for activities to do at home which is amazing.

Non binary, 24,
with a visual impairment

2.7

What is ParalympicsGB doing to improve attitudes?

In response to the persistent challenges surrounding public perceptions of disability, we're taking a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to driving attitudinal change. Central to this effort is the development and monitoring of long-term campaigns designed to challenge outdated ideas and promote greater understanding. These campaigns prioritise authentic storytelling, aiming to improve public awareness, dismantle misconceptions, and elevate the voices of disabled people.

Beyond public-facing initiatives, we're actively collaborating with partners across sectors to advocate for policy reform and build momentum for inclusion - not only in sport, but across society. The expansion of the Beyond the Podium forum exemplifies this commitment, providing a space for commercial partners, members, and organisations to share best practice, co-design inclusive approaches, and strengthen their capacity for change. The goal

is to foster meaningful improvements in disability-inclusive practices within professional and corporate environments, ultimately influencing broader cultural norms around accessibility.

ParalympicsGB also recognises the transformative power of disabled role models in shifting attitudes. By supporting current and retired athletes to share their lived experiences, we enable them to campaign on issues that matter most to them and their communities. Through public speaking and accessible content, these athletes engage directly with the public and decision-makers, amplifying disabled voices and inspiring reflection, learning, and inclusive action.

Together, these initiatives reflect our ongoing commitment to using ParalympicsGB influence and partnerships to build a society where disabled people are truly valued, understood, and able to participate on equal terms. Grounded in research, measured for impact, and focused on the beliefs and behaviours that shape everyday life, this work is helping to drive long-term, meaningful change.

3.0

Experiences and attitudes of children

This section examines the experiences and perspectives of disabled and non-disabled children, focusing on participation in school and community sport. It highlights how attitudes, confidence, and practical barriers shape opportunities and inclusion for young people.



3.1

State of play

Disabled children are more active than disabled adults, but a disability gap remains

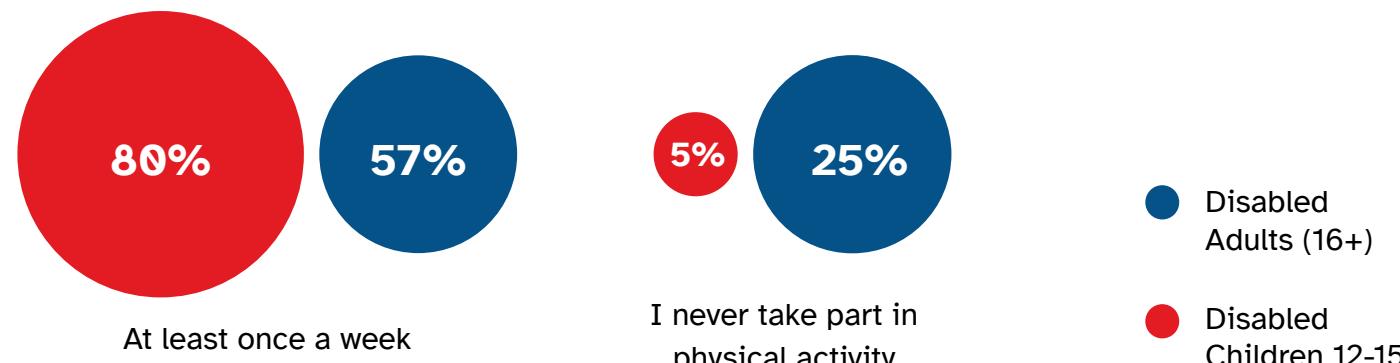
Disabled children in Britain are more likely to participate in sport and physical activity than disabled adults. Four in five (80%) disabled 12–15-year-olds say they exercise at least once a week, a figure that, while trailing non-disabled children (91%), is much higher than participation rates among disabled adults (57%). Just 5% of disabled children in this age group say they never take part in physical activity, compared to a quarter (25%) of disabled adults.

This higher participation amongst disabled children is supported by a strong sense of both opportunity and ability. More than three-quarters (77%) say they have the opportunity and ability to be physically active—significantly higher than disabled adults (57% say they have the ability, 59% the opportunity). However, these figures still fall short of the levels reported by non-disabled children, with 92% saying they have both opportunity and ability.

23%

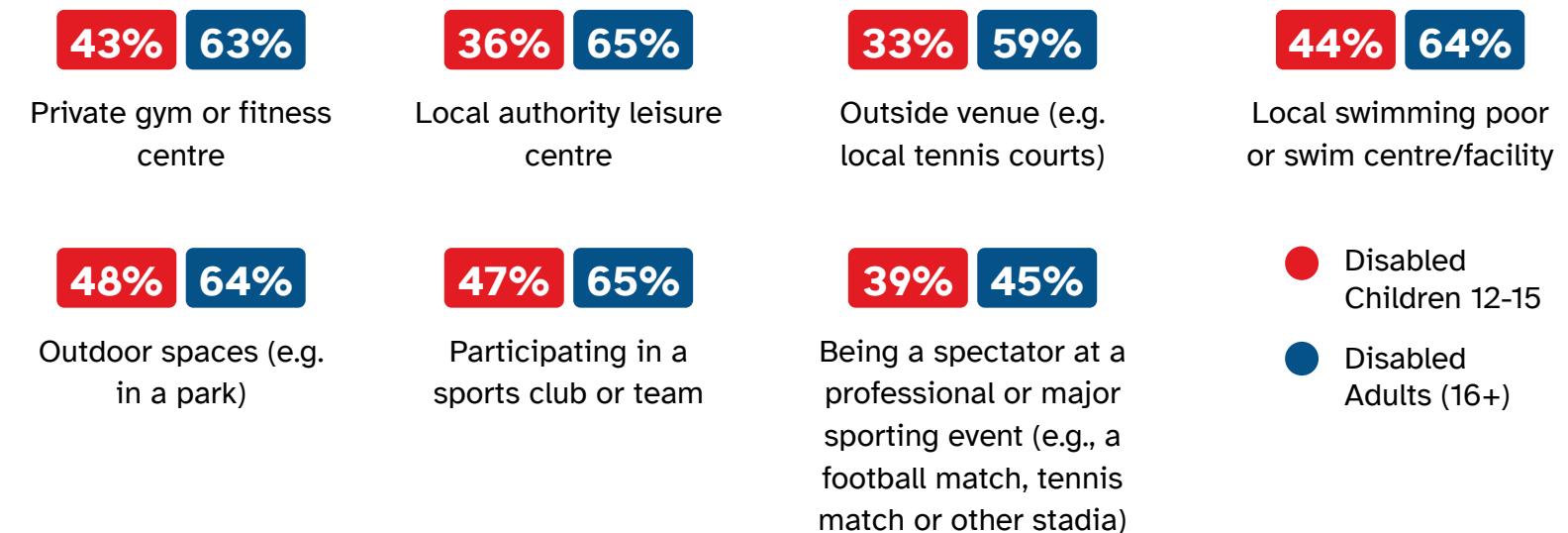
Disabled children are 23 percentage points more likely to take part in sport and physical activity at least once a week than disabled adults'

Figure 3.1: How often do you take part in sport and physical activity?



Base: All children (n=793), (Non disabled: n=570, Disabled: n= 223) 3-wave average (Waves 1-3)

Figure 3.2: Improved confidence would make me more comfortable in (% Settings)



Base: All disabled children that don't feel confident in the setting (n=23-32), All disabled adults that don't feel confident in the setting (n=271-427). Wave 2

Confidence can be a barrier for many disabled children

However, confidence is a barrier for just over a third of children. 36% say they do not feel confident enough to take part in sport and physical activity, and this lack of confidence leads 15% of disabled children avoiding participation altogether. However, this lack confidence is less pronounced among disabled children compared to disabled adults, of whom 50% do not feel confident enough to take part in sport and physical activity, and 29% say this lack of confidence causes them to avoid physical activity altogether.

While the confidence barrier is less pronounced among disabled children compared to adults, it continues to have a notable impact on disabled children's comfort across different activity settings, as seen in Figure 3.2.

However, whereas public sporting spaces present a substantial barrier to participation among disabled adults, a similar trend does not appear among children. There is no significant participation difference between disabled and non-disabled children within parks (42% vs 43%) nor gyms and fitness suites (22% vs 23%).

3.2

Lived experiences for disabled children



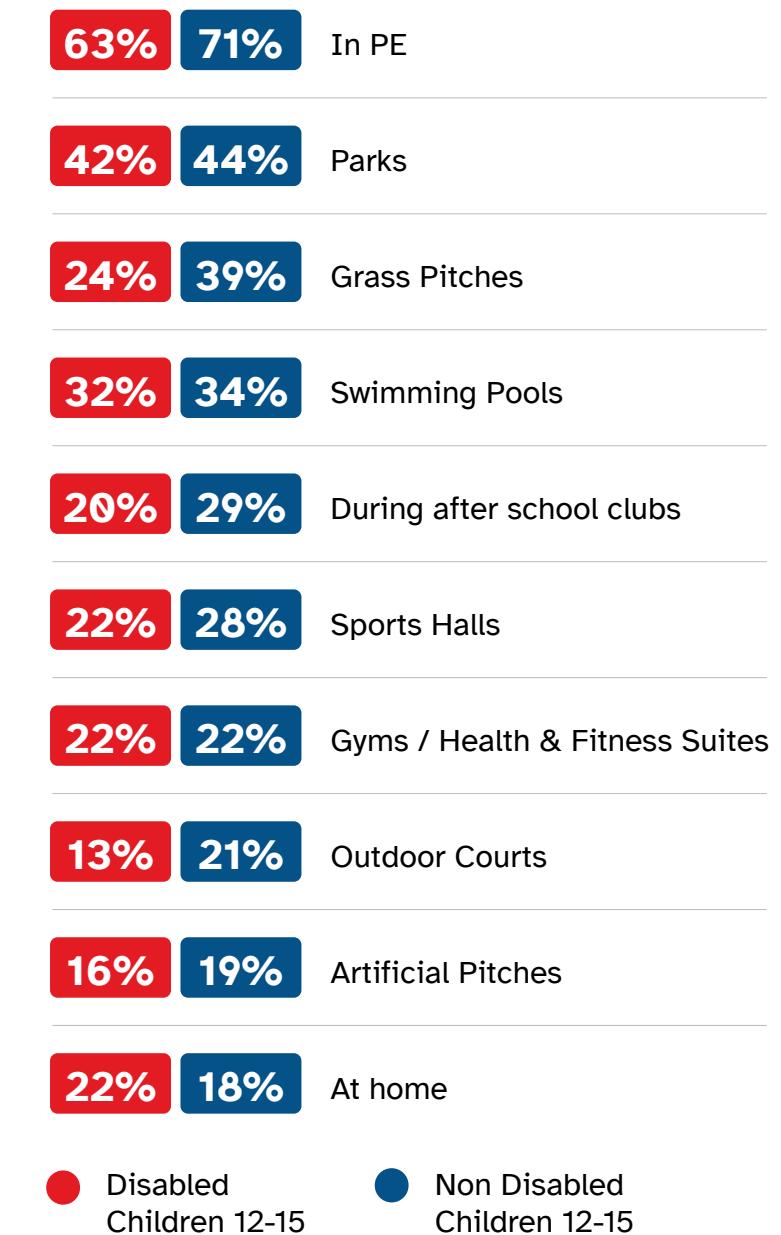
Many disabled children still encounter accessibility barriers in school sport

12-15-year-olds most commonly engage in physical activity through school PE lessons (70%). The impact of the school environment on activity is further highlighted by 28% of children saying that after school clubs are a setting within which they are active.

There are, however, major differences in settings accessed between disabled and non-disabled children in school. 63% of disabled children identify PE as a setting within which they are active, compared to 71% of their non-disabled peers. 20% of non-disabled children say they are active during after school clubs, versus 29% of non-disabled children.

High participation in PE by 12-15-year-olds, can be explained by its compulsory nature, with most children expected or required to take part. However, the significantly lower participation among disabled children, even in compulsory settings like PE, indicates that schools may not be fully inclusive or that specific barriers persist for these students. Unlike voluntary out-of-school activities, where lack of participation might reflect personal preference, lack of participation in school sport offers a clear indication of the presence of barriers. This is supported by research from the Activity Alliance that found disabled children are significantly less likely to feel they can join in with sports and physical activity at school, than those without a disability.

Figure 3.3: In which settings did you participate in physical activity?



Base: All non-disabled children that take part in physical activity (n=558), All disabled children that take part in physical activity (n=213) 3-wave average (Waves 1-3)

Judgement and unmet needs hinder disabled children's experiences, mirroring barriers faced by adults

The barriers relating to judgement and acceptance identified among disabled adults are consistent with the views of disabled children. When asked what would make them feel like their needs are being met, the top response among disabled children was "less judgement from others" (57%) echoing the top concern voiced by disabled adults. Similarly, requests for "better training of staff" (33%) and "adapted classes or groups" (31%) ranked highly, underscoring a need for continued improvements in school and community settings to foster truly inclusive environments.

These persistent barriers contribute to a sense of limited inclusion among disabled children. Just 50% of disabled children feel that sport and physical activity is inclusive, versus 63% of non-disabled children. Only 58% report that their exercise environments are welcoming, compared with 69% of non-disabled peers.

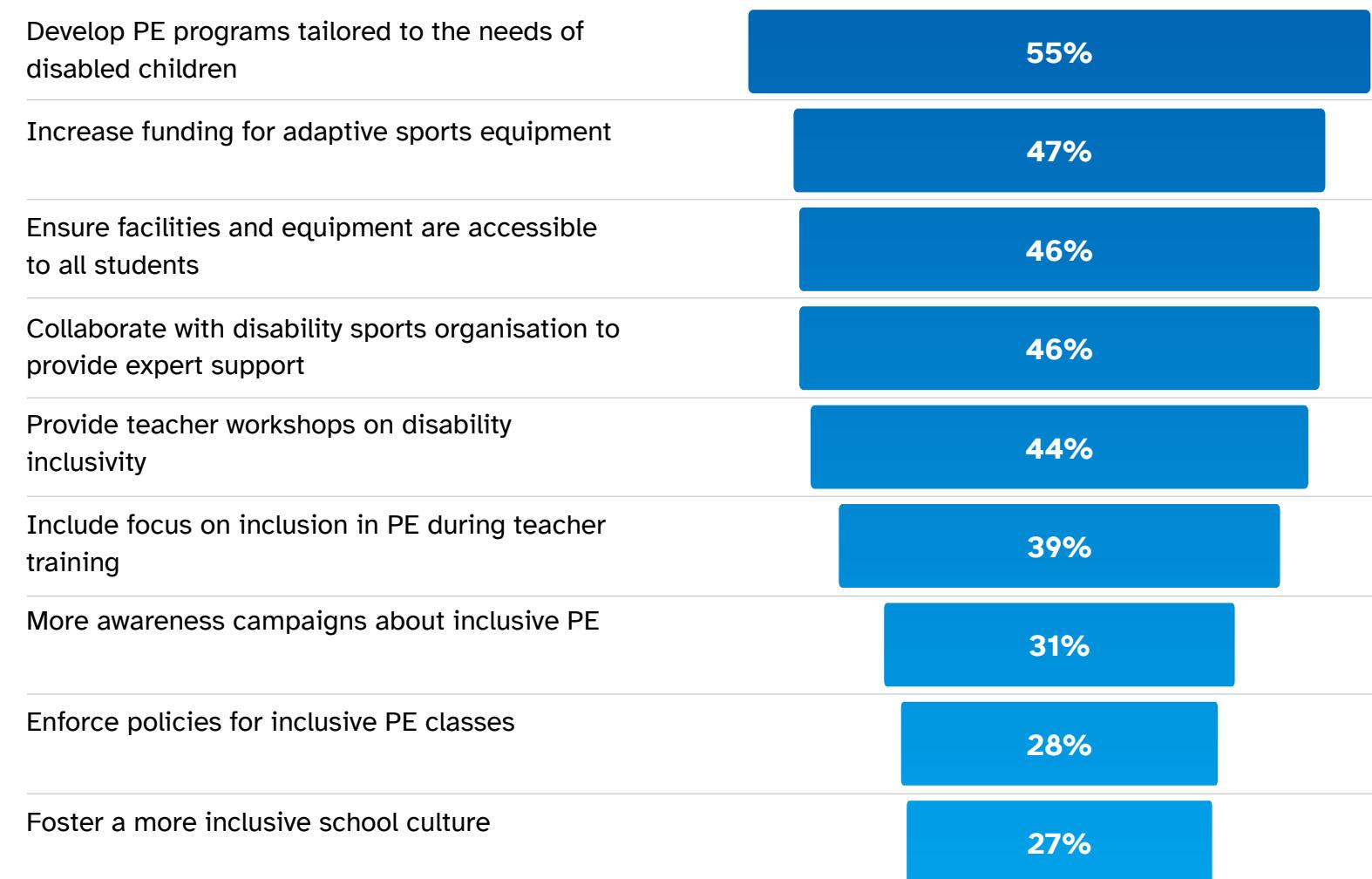
Confidence within sports spaces is high among disabled children, but access and support is still lacking

Unlike adults, where sport and physical activity emerged as the environment with the lowest levels of confidence, disabled children report similar levels of confidence in both sport and physical activity and school settings (52% for both). Additionally, these confidence scores are notably higher than those reported by disabled children for other public environments, such as public transport (37%).

However, sports and activity settings are considered those with the highest levels of unmet needs, with 51% of disabled children saying that others in these settings do not sufficiently consider their disability-related needs. This includes both non-coaching staff (40%) and coaching staff or trainers (37%).

These findings reflect similar calls for improvement heard among disabled adults and are echoed by disabled children's priorities for change. Over half (55%) of disabled children advocate for tailored PE programmes, with substantial numbers also highlighting the need for more accessible equipment (46%) and increased investment in adaptive sports (47%). Schools collaborating with disability sports organisations is particularly popular among disabled children (46%), support which is far greater than among their non-disabled peers (27%).

Figure 3.4: **What, if anything, do you think could be done to ensure all disabled children can participate in PE? (% All disabled children)**



Base: All disabled children (n=73) Wave 3 only

Targeted programmes inspire action and awareness among disabled children

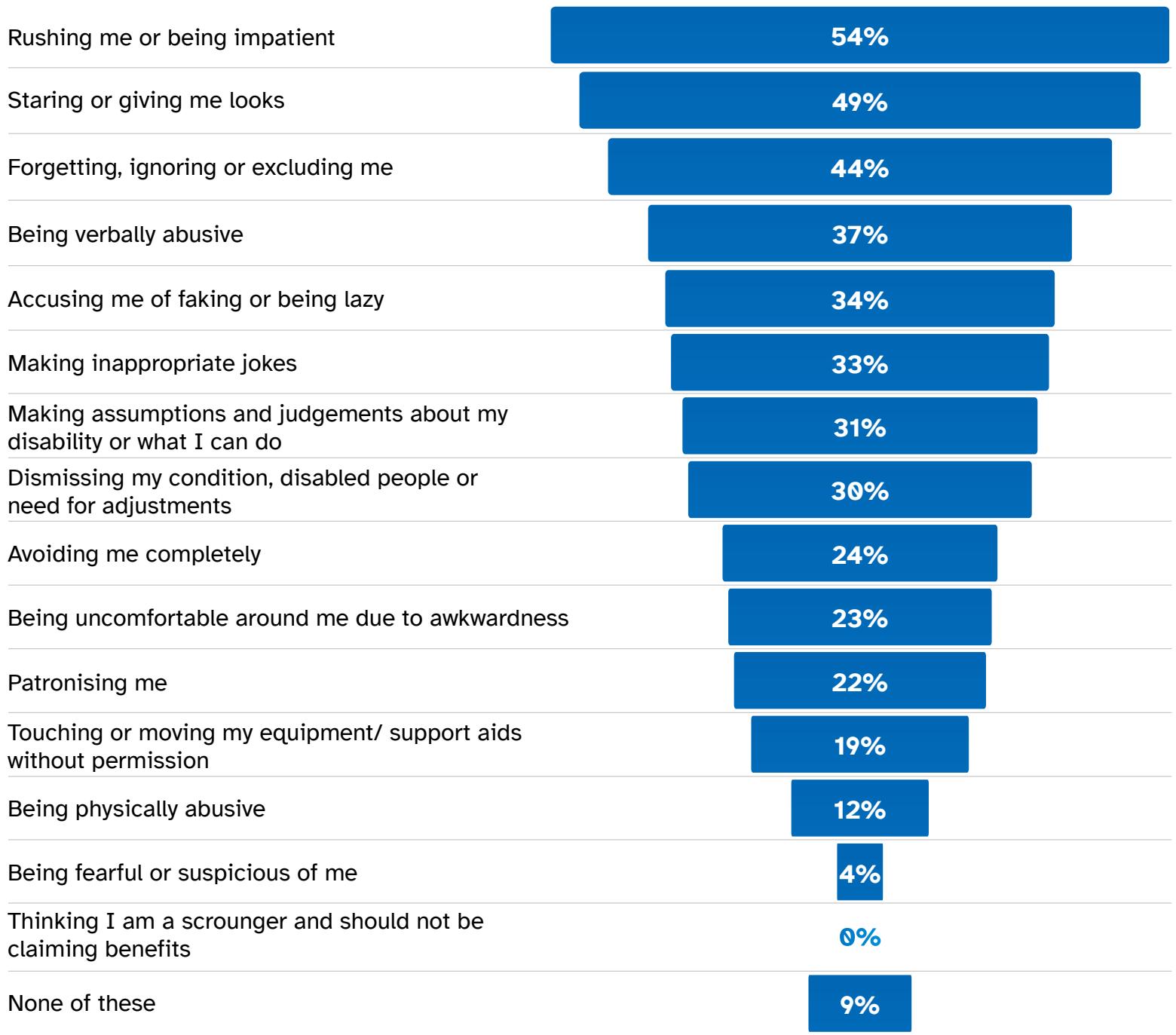
Support for collaboration is well founded. Engagement with initiatives such as the Get Set programme is associated with higher levels of confidence and positive attitudinal change among disabled children. After participating in the Get Set programme, 73% of disabled children said they were more inclined to be physically active and 83% said the campaign improved their knowledge of a healthy, active lifestyle. It has also proved transformative among non-disabled children, with 84% of those that engaged saying it made them think more about how to treat disabled people equally, and 81% saying the programme made them consider the inequality and challenges disabled face when taking part in sport and physical activity. These results highlight the broad value of visible, inclusive programmes in shaping attitudes and increasing participation among young people.

Prejudice and exclusion are more acute for disabled children

Disabled children are significantly more likely than adults to report experiencing prejudice and discrimination. Two thirds (67%) say they have faced at least 'a little' prejudice (vs 55% of disabled adults) and nearly a quarter (23%) say they have encountered 'a lot' (vs 17% of disabled adults).

When considering specific negative behaviours, disabled children report higher incidences than adults of being rushed (54%), stared at or receiving 'looks' (49%), and being excluded or ignored (44%). Some also report experiencing verbal abuse (37%) and inappropriate jokes (33%). While a small sample size means these results should be interpreted with some caution, they raise real concerns about the day-to-day experiences of disabled children both in and out of school environments.

Figure 3.5: Which of the following have you experienced in the past year?



Base: All disabled children (n=62) Wave 1 only

3.3 Attitudes towards disability among children

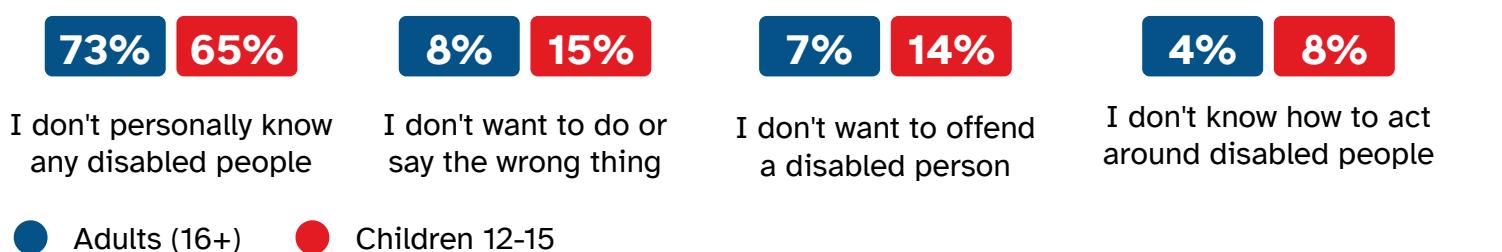
Awareness of the term disability is near universal among children

Understanding how children perceive disability is crucial for building genuinely inclusive school and community environments. While awareness of the term 'disability' is widespread among children – 91% of non-disabled children aged 12-15 say they are familiar with the term – this surface level knowledge does not always translate into acceptance of everyday behaviours.

Children report more regular contact with disabled people

This high level of awareness is underpinned by frequent interaction, with 2 in 5 (40%) non-disabled children reporting frequent interaction with disabled people – higher than among the adult population (31%). As is the case among adults, not personally knowing any disabled people (65%) is the primary reason for a lack of interaction, with concerns about not wanting to do or say the wrong thing (15%), not wanting to offend a disabled person (14%), or not knowing how to act around disabled people (8%) also playing a role.

Figure 3.6: Why don't you frequently interact with disabled people?



Base: All non-disabled children that don't frequently interact with disabled people (n=282)
 All non disabled adults that don't frequently interact with disabled people (n=2,366)
 3-wave average (Waves 1-3)

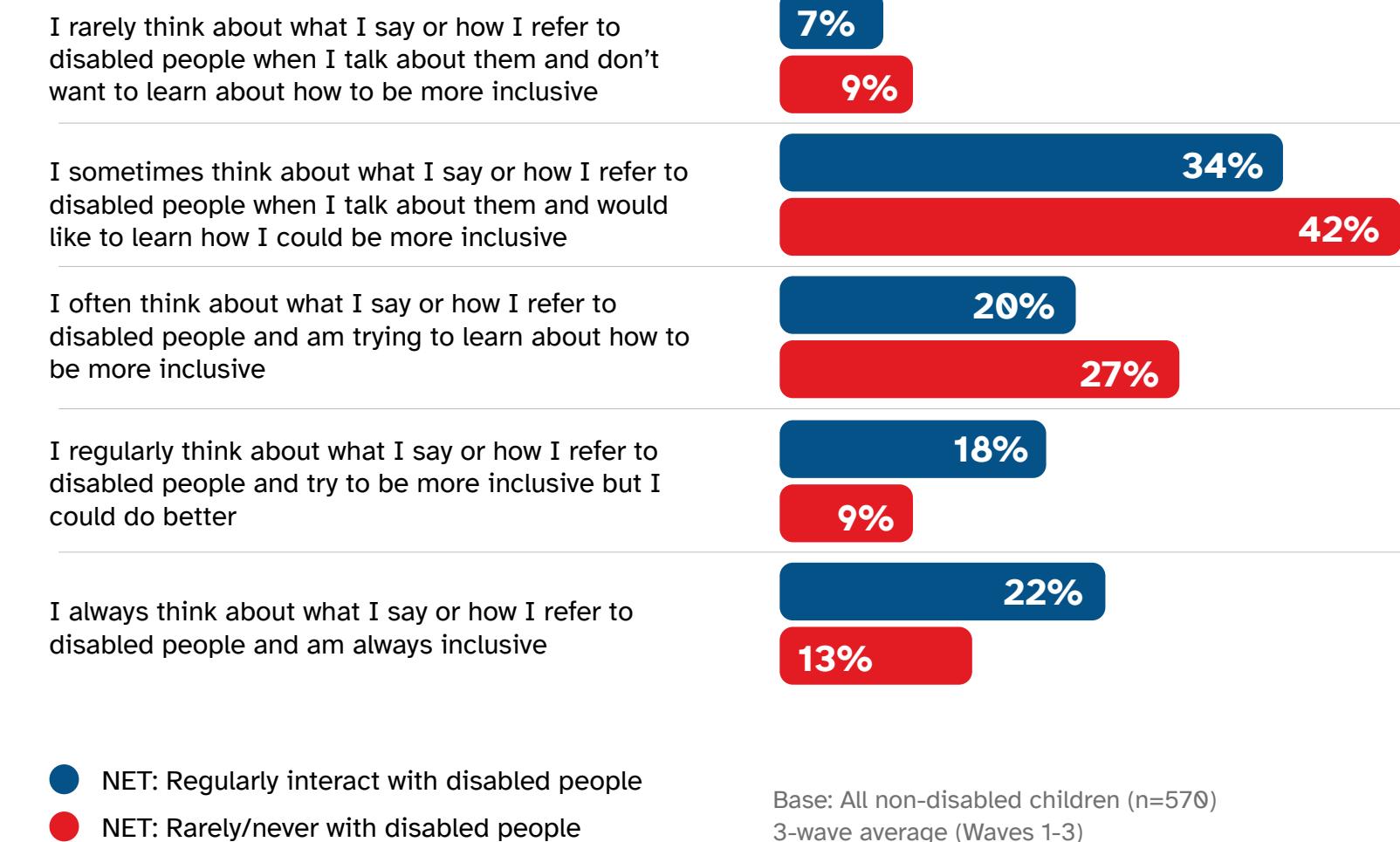




More frequent contact does not translate into more considerate language when speaking to disabled people

Despite high awareness of the term and more frequent interaction with disabled people, negative attitudes and behaviours are more prevalent among non-disabled children than non-disabled adults. Just 17% say they always think about how or what they say or how they refer to disabled people, notably lower than among adults (27%). As with non-disabled adults, regular interaction is linked to more positive attitudes and behaviours. Those who interact regularly (22%) are more likely than those who rarely or never interact (13%) to always consider how they refer to disabled people.

Figure 3.7: Which of the following best describes how you currently approach speaking about disabled people?



Negative attitudes towards disabled people are more prominent among children than adults

Both overtly negative attitudes, and subtly negative stereotypes about disabled people are more widely seen among children than adults. More than a third of children aged 12-15, have overtly negative attitudes, either always or sometimes seeing disabled people as people to joke about (36%) or less productive than non-disabled people (38%), while more than half (55%) see disabled people as not as productive as non-disabled people.

As with adults, stereotypes that perpetuate negative attitudes towards disabled people are widespread. More than three quarters of children aged 12-15 see disabled people as needing to be cared for (77%), being inspiring for completing everyday tasks (78%), or being exceptional for overcoming their condition or impairment (79%). While often well-meaning, these stereotypes reinforce notions of difference.

Figure 3.8: How often do you think of disabled people in the following ways (Always/some of the time)

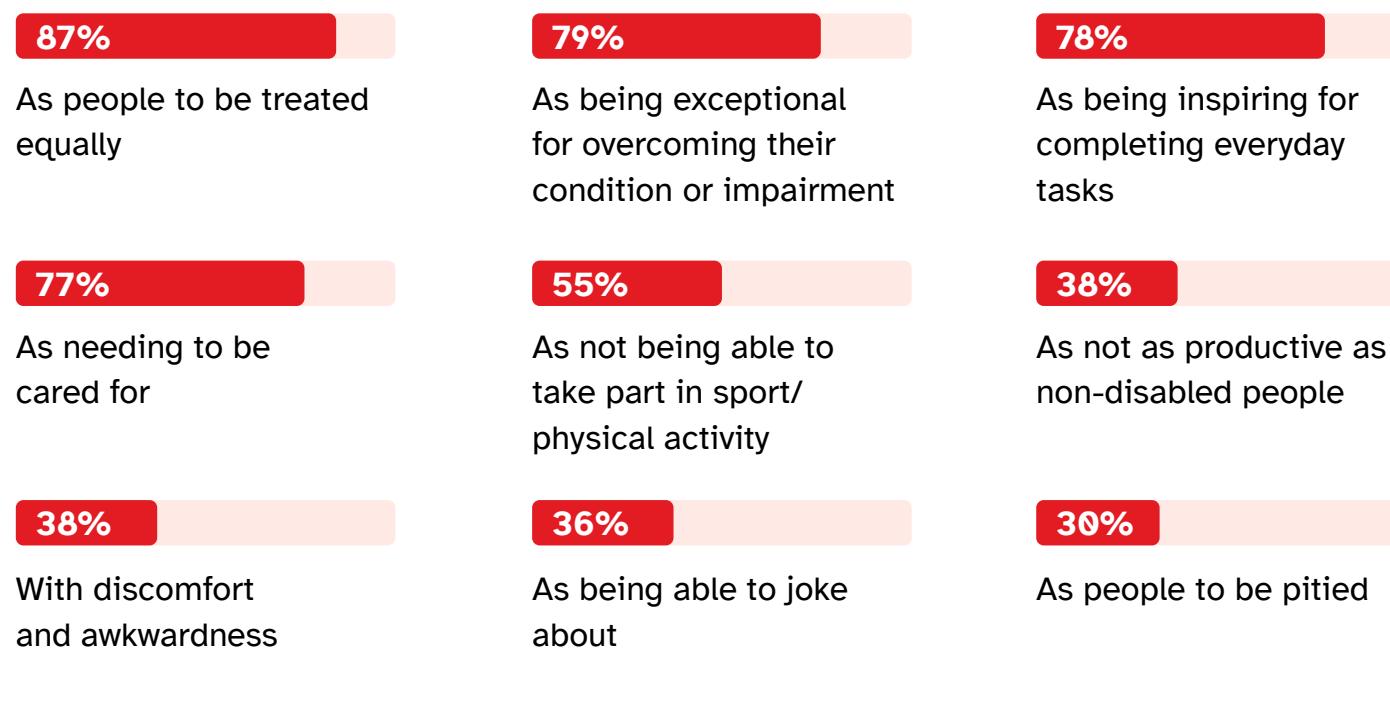


Figure 3.9: How important do you think Physical Education (PE) is, within the national curriculum, for the following groups of children?

Disabled Children



Non Disabled Children



- Very important
- Important
- Neither important nor unimportant
- Not very important
- Not at all important
- Don't know

Base: All adults (n=2,429) Wave 2

3.4 Support for inclusive PE and school sport

Awareness of the challenges faced by disabled children in school is low among the public, but support for inclusive policies is high, with broad social consensus around the value of inclusive sport. 87% of adults say they think Physical Education as part of the national curriculum is important for disabled children, in line with perceived importance of Physical Education for non-disabled children (85%). Additionally, 86% of adults say they disagree with the idea of disabled children being excluded from PE, and 82% say they would back policies guaranteeing equal access to PE for disabled children.

However, while public support is robust, lived experiences of disabled children point to a school physical education system that is not truly inclusive – often due to gaps in teacher understanding and training, as highlighted earlier in this report. When examining wider public opinion, views on what true inclusion should look like are mixed. Among non-disabled adults, 41% believe that any exclusion from PE is unfair, but more than a quarter (28%) say some level of exclusion can be justified. Perspectives are even more complex among disabled adults, with 35% saying it is fair that disabled children do not regularly participate in PE. These findings highlight that perceptions of fairness and inclusion vary not only between disabled and non-disabled people but are complex and sometimes contradictory even within these groups.

What is far clearer is the perception of what needs to be done to make school physical education more inclusive. A large majority (81%) of children believe that teachers should receive more training and support to deliver fully inclusive PE.

Improving attitudes towards disability and the lived experience of disabled children

While today's children are more aware of disability than previous generations (Scope, 2023), improving attitudes towards disability among children in Britain remains a work in progress. Without targeted education and ongoing opportunities for meaningful contact, negative attitudes and social barriers are likely to persist.

Going forward, fostering positive attitudes among children will require more than just raising awareness – which is already at a near-universal level. Initiatives that encourage meaningful interaction with disabled peers, challenge stereotypes, celebrate inclusive behaviours and equip schools with practical tools for adaptation are essential. Only then can every child, disabled or non-disabled, feel welcome, respected and able to fully participate in school and community life.



3.5

What is ParalympicsGB doing to improve attitudes amongst young people and improve the lived experience of young disabled people?

We're committed to creating a society in which every disabled child is valued, included, and empowered to participate fully in school and community sport. Drawing on the latest research findings about the barriers and prejudice faced by disabled children, the organisation is focusing on practical and strategic actions to drive more inclusive attitudes and experiences where they are needed most.

A major strand of this work is the Equal Play campaign, a national programme designed to deliver both systems and behavioural change. The ambition is clear: by the Los Angeles 2028 Paralympic Games, no disabled child should be excluded from physical education or school sport in the United Kingdom. Equal Play is raising awareness across schools and the broader community, building commitment among policy makers, teachers and families to ensure inclusive sport becomes standard practice rather than the exception.

Alongside this, we're scaling up our education initiatives as part of the Get Set programme. After a successful pilot focused on exploring the social model of disability in secondary schools, the organisation is now working towards a national roll-out. The programme helps to develop understanding of the social model of disability and brings the real stories and lived experiences of disabled people to the forefront, challenging stereotypes and providing practical routes to shifting attitudes. By working directly with young people, the programme aims to support the emergence of young change makers who will foster cultures of inclusion amongst their peers and within school communities.

Through these coordinated efforts, we're working in partnership with other organisations to ensure that all disabled and non-disabled children are supported not only to understand disability, but to value inclusive behaviour, empathy and respect throughout their formative years. The goal is a lasting cultural shift, so every young person is welcomed, understood and inspired to be active in all parts of life.

Appendix

Methodology

Below are the dates for which each wave of fieldwork was conducted. Their timing in relation to the summer Paralympic Games is also outlined.

Wave 1 (Benchmark):

- Wednesday, November 29, 2023 – Thursday, December 14, 2023.
- Provided a baseline reading ahead of campaign activity and the Paralympic Games cycle.

Wave 2 (Pre-Games):

- Monday, August 5, 2024 – Tuesday, August 20, 2024.
- Completed before the start of the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games.

Wave 3 (Post-Games):

- Friday, September 13, 2024 – Wednesday, September 25, 2024.
- Conducted after the conclusion of the Games to measure any shifts in attitudes and awareness.

Where possible and suitable, figures within this report are based on the average of all three waves to ensure greater statistical robustness. For questions included in one survey wave, data from that specific wave is reported. In some instances, even if a question has featured in all three waves, individual wave results are highlighted to illustrate changes in behaviours and attitudes over the course of the research period. This approach allows us to provide both a comprehensive overall picture and highlight specific shifts as they developed.

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We are incredibly grateful to our donors for their continued support of ParalympicsGB.

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