

Why rangatahi aren't leaving sport, they're leaving the systems around it.



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Understanding how rangatahi engage with sport and physical activity has never been more important. As participation patterns shift and the pressures on young people continue to evolve, the challenge is no longer just getting youth involved but keeping them meaningfully connected.

Amy Frost, Insights & Evaluation Advisor at Sport Waikato, has been part of the team evaluating these responses. Her contribution helps bring to light the lived experiences of rangatahi, identifying what needs to change if we are to create environments where all young people can thrive through movement.

This article draws on insights from Sport Waikato's Moving Waikato Youth Survey 2025, one of the region's most comprehensive snapshots of rangatahi wellbeing and physical activity. Through this research, a clearer picture emerges of how young people experience sport and movement today, what motivates them, what barriers they face, and where traditional systems may be falling short.

When schools, kura and sporting organisations understand the psychology of rangatahi (Years 7–14), they can create meaningful experiences that attract, engage, and retain young people in physical activity.

Too often, declining participation is interpreted as a loss of interest in physical activity. In reality, many rangatahi are not rejecting activity, they are rejecting environments that no longer reflect who they are becoming as individuals.

This is not unique to Waikato.

Nationally, Sport New Zealand's Active NZ data shows participation declines through adolescence, alongside shifts in how young people engage with and value organised sport. Similar patterns are observed internationally. Research consistently shows participation in organised sport peaks in early adolescence and declines through the teenage years, as social influences, identity and competing priorities become more significant.

Understanding the psychology of rangatahi

Adolescence is a pivotal stage of development where external influences begin to shape personal values, attitudes and behaviours. As rangatahi develop a stronger sense of identity, they increasingly look beyond their whānau and towards their peers and wider social environments for a sense of belonging.

Evidence reflects this shift. Over half (53%) of rangatahi report that their peers have a positive

influence on their physical activity, equal to the influence of whānau. Lifespan research reinforces this, showing that motivations become more complex during adolescence. Identity, social norms, and psychosocial contexts, such as peers and school environments, begin to play a greater role in shaping behaviour.

While the meaning of activity changes during adolescence, its value, for wellbeing, connection, confidence, and overall health, remains constant.

Participation and wellbeing within the greater Waikato region

In the greater Waikato region, 57% of rangatahi meet the recommended guideline of seven or more hours of physical activity per week. However, participation is not equal.

This inequity reflects a broader national picture. Across Aotearoa, Sport New Zealand data shows participation varies significantly by gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background, reinforcing that access alone does not ensure engagement.

In the greater Waikato 64% of males meet the guideline compared with just 33% of females, a 31% gap. Given this disparity, it is not surprising that wellbeing outcomes also differ. This pattern aligns with national findings, where young women report more barriers to participation and a steady decline in engagement through adolescence.

Globally, this gender gap is well documented. Research shows girls are more likely to disengage from sport during adolescence due to factors such as confidence, belonging, and environments that do not reflect their needs.

For Sport Waikato, our research shows the largest gender gap relates to belonging, where more males report feeling welcomed and included in physical activity or sport at school or kura, 17% more than females.

Evidence also shows a significant decline in wellbeing as children move into adolescence and transition from primary to secondary education settings. Interestingly, this drop in wellbeing differs depending on the schooling environment. Rangatahi in Years 7 and 8 who remain in a primary school setting report higher wellbeing than those of the same age who have transitioned to secondary school.

These findings reinforce a critical point: participation is not simply about access to sport or activity opportunities. It is about whether rangatahi feel those environments are designed with them in mind.

The “Netflix effect” and the digital bridge

To understand this shift fully, we must also consider the broader environment young people are growing up in.

Today’s rangatahi are part of an on-demand generation. The “Netflix effect” has reshaped expectations across all areas of life experiences are personalised, flexible, and chosen based on individual preference.



Sport, however, has remained largely fixed in its structure and delivery.

This creates a growing mismatch between what young people expect and what traditional sport systems offer.

At the same time, digital environments are not simply competing with physical activity, they are central to how young people connect, communicate and build identity.

Rather than viewing screens as a barrier, there is an opportunity to build a digital bridge, integrating digital tools, platforms and social connection to enhance participation, rather than replace it.

Designing activity with rangatahi, not just for them

Understanding the evolving motivations of rangatahi allows environments to be designed where young people feel welcomed, connected and empowered.

When rangatahi are involved in shaping the experiences available to them, participation becomes more meaningful and more sustainable.

Rangatahi tell us they want to be active with their friends. They want their voices to be heard, and acted on, and most importantly, they want physical activity to be fun.

This means moving beyond a sole focus on traditional competitive pathways. Competitive sport will always have a place, but it cannot be the only option.

There is increasing value in creating flexible, social and inclusive environments. Activities that prioritise enjoyment, connection and personal expression can keep young people engaged during a stage of life when many otherwise drift away from structured sport.

Reframing how we think about youth participation

The challenge for schools, kura and sporting organisations is not simply to provide more opportunities, but to provide the right ones in a system that reflects how young people live, connect and choose today.

This might include offering more social formats, enabling student-led activities, or rethinking how and when competition is introduced.

The meaning of activity may change as rangatahi grow, but its value remains profound. By listening to rangatahi and designing environments around their needs, we can ensure that physical activity continues to support their wellbeing, confidence, and sense of belonging—now and into the future.

At Sport Waikato, this shift is already shaping how we work alongside our partners to ensure more flexible, inclusive and youth-informed approaches to movement.

This includes enabling rangatahi voice in programme design, supporting schools to rethink traditional models, and investing in approaches that prioritise connection, belonging and wellbeing, ensuring physical activity remains relevant and meaningful for the next generation of rangatahi.



Data

- Sport Waikato: Moving Waikato Youth Survey 2025
- Sport New Zealand: Active NZ Survey (Children and Young People)
- Sport New Zealand: Young Women and Physical Activity Profile (2021)

Resources

- Sport Waikato: [Positive Vibes Only](#)
- Sport Waikato: [Tū Manawa Active Aotearoa Fund](#)
- Sport New Zealand: [Sport Pathways Framework](#)

Supporting Research (International Context)

- World Health Organization: [Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018-2030](#)
- UNESCO: [Fit for Life Initiative](#)