

# 'Fitness freaks': a healthier lifestyle?

John Balding

HEA Schools Health Education Unit

University of Exeter

A substantial number of school pupils are undertaking 'fitness' sessions in their spare time. This implies that they are responding to the powerful messages about the need for greater physical activity. But does this participation indicate a healthier way of life? Research suggests a variety of possible motives.

With so much emphasis being placed on 'living a healthy lifestyle', we have become used to finding supermarkets devoting precious space to 'healthy' foods, to seeing magazines and newspapers highlighting articles about health as a special attraction, and in the wider context to hearing perfectly ordinary people (like you and me) voicing concerns about the damage we do to the whole planet – concerns which a few years ago were considered the province of eccentrics or alarmists.

To what extent is this 'fashion' – to what extent does it reflect a deep-seated concern? How holistic is one's concept of a 'healthy lifestyle'? The most 'logical' assumption is that someone concerned about their physical wellbeing will pay equal attention to (among other things) diet, exercise, and abuse of the body through drugs. But there undoubtedly are people who compensate for the bad effects of over-indulgence by going jogging or playing squash. Is there any way of investigating the extent to which health and fitness plays a part in the lives of young people, and how it affects their lifestyle?

## Identifying the 'Fitfreaks'

We decided to examine young people and health-related exercise by analysing the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire data for 1988. Question 24 asks about the sports and physical activities pursued during the previous year, and among those on the checklist are several activities which are likely to attract someone primarily intent on improving their fitness rather than having an enjoyable time chasing a ball or indulging in a social activity in sporting surroundings. Four outside-school activities were selected on this basis – jogging, fitness exercises, aerobics, and weight training.

Those respondents who indulged in one or more of these activities at least once a week were collected into one group (whimsically termed the Fitfreaks), and those recording low or zero participation were included in the other. Having done this, the behaviour of the two groups could be compared by examining their answers to other questions contained in the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire. These other questions range over a very wide spectrum of behaviours:

Alcohol consumption	Money
Dental care	Physical activity
Diet	Road use
Drugs	Self-esteem
Homework	Sharing problems
Hygiene	Smoking
Jobs	Social activities
Leisure pursuits	Time to bed/ time up
Medication	TV, videos, etc.

## Seeking some 'fitness related' links

Although it is impossible to untangle the interdependent behaviours that contribute to any individual's lifestyle, it is tempting to suppose that the active pursuit of physical health may have particular repercussions in some of these areas. Alcohol consumption, diet, hygiene, smoking, social activities and sleep are among the more probable ones. Therefore some questions under each of these headings were examined, taking as the sample the 1680 boys and 1573 girls in the 4th year of secondary schooling who completed the Questionnaire in 1988.

Table 1 shows how this group of 4th-year pupils was divided into 'Fitfreaks' and others. Among both boys and girls a substantial minority had pursued at least one of the 'fitness' activities one or more times a week, 46% of the boys and 44% of the girls coming into this category. Examining other year groups in the same 1988 sample also produced substantial levels of participation, between 40% and 45% in years 1-3. The very similar levels for both boys and girls are worthy of note, although our figures for participation in games and general sporting activities support the common view that girls are much less involved than boys.

Table 2. The alcohol consumption of 4th-year pupils, divided into Fitfreaks and others, during the previous 7 days. Figures in percentages; one alcohol unit is equivalent to half a pint of beer or lager, one glass of wine, etc. 1988 sample: 3253.

	Units of alcohol											
	0		1-3		4-6		7-10		11-20		21+	
	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G
Fitfreaks . . . .	27	42	27	29	16	14	16	7	9	6	6	2
Others . . . . .	34	43	31	32	15	11	9	6	7	6	3	2

Table 1. The 1988 sample of 3253 4th-year boys and girls, divided into 'Fitfreaks' (those who did jogging, fitness exercises, aerobics, or weight training at least once a week) and others, who did them less frequently or not at all. Figures are in percentages of boys and girls.

	Boys	Girls
Fitfreaks . . . .	46	44
Others . . . . .	54	56
Total number	1680	1573

## Alcoholic consumption

Table 2 shows the consumption by 4th-year pupils of units of alcohol during the 7 days prior to completing the questionnaire. For the girls there is no significant difference between the Fitfreaks and the rest, but the Fitfreak boys exhibit a significantly higher level of consumption. This conclusion is supported by other data indicating the number of days in the week when alcohol was consumed.

*Comment* Are Fitfreak boys particularly thirsty people? Even Fitfreak girls show no aversion to alcohol.

## Diet

From the numerous food items included in the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire, a few 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' choices are presented to see if the pursuit of physical fitness promotes a 'healthy' diet. These are jacket potatoes, chips, beefburgers, and muesli (Table 3). It is seen that more male and female Fitfreaks than others eat jacket potatoes, that

**Table 3.** The habitual consumption of certain foods by 4th-year pupils, divided into Fitfreaks and others. Figures in percentages. 1988 sample: 3253.

	Rarely or never		Less than once a week		At least once a week		Most days	
	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G
<i>Jacket potatoes</i>								
Fitfreaks .....	15	10	34	29	39	48	12	13
Others .....	20	18	36	34	34	36	10	11
<i>Chips</i>								
Fitfreaks .....	7	18	19	30	43	37	31	15
Others .....	8	14	19	28	39	38	34	20
<i>Burgers</i>								
Fitfreaks .....	12	30	30	38	39	25	19	7
Others .....	14	28	31	37	38	28	17	8
<i>Muesli</i>								
Fitfreaks .....	46	53	21	21	15	14	18	12
Others .....	56	58	19	23	13	10	12	9

**Table 4.** The percentage of 4th-year pupils responding to the question 'Do you wash your hands after visiting the lavatory?', divided into Fitfreaks and others. 1988 sample: 3253.

	Never		Sometimes		Whenever possible	
	B	G	B	G	B	G
Fitfreaks....	5	3	30	23	66	74
Others.....	4	2	35	26	61	72

fewer eat chips, that there is no distinction between the choices of the two groups with respect to beefburgers, but that muesli is highly favoured. Other 'healthy' items such as fruit juice, bran cereals, and fresh fruit also show significant preferences by the Fitfreaks.

*Comment* Fitfreaks seem to be not only aware of the benefits and dangers of different foods, but more likely to make dietary choices in the light of this information.

**Hygiene**

Tables 4 and 5 compare the behaviour of the Fitfreaks and others with respect to washing their hands after using the toilet, and the number of times they washed their hair during the previous 7 days. Their attitude to hand-washing does not reveal any significant differences between the two groups, but the fitness enthusiasts do wash their hair more often – perhaps

in the course of bathing or showering after exercise?

*Comment* These questions, together with others studied in the course of this analysis, do not reveal any clear-cut differences between the two groups with respect to personal hygiene.

**Smoking**

Table 6 displays the responses of the 4th-year boys and girls to a question asking them to state their smoking habit. It will be seen that there is no significant difference between the Fitfreaks and the others, a result that may be considered disturbing.

This fact forces one to examine the possible reasons for smoking, and lends support to the view that the 'smoking is bad for your health' strategy is simplistic. Widespread awareness of the dangerous side-effects of smoking is apparently not enough to deter even those young people who take exercise-related fitness seriously.

**Table 5.** The hair-washing frequency of 4th-year pupils during the previous 7 days, divided into Fitfreaks and others. Figures in percentages. 1988 sample: 3253.

	0		1-2		3-4		5-6		7+	
	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G
Fitfreaks .....	0	0	24	18	46	50	15	16	16	16
Others .....	1	0	35	24	44	46	9	15	11	15

**Table 6.** The smoking habits of 4th-year pupils, divided into Fitfreaks and others. Figures in percentages. 1988 sample: 3253.

	Never started		Once or twice		Given up		Like to stop		Don't want to stop	
	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G
Fitfreaks .....	50	40	29	30	10	15	8	10	2	5
Others .....	51	42	27	27	11	17	7	10	4	5

The figures suggest that smoking among 4th-year pupils is, like drinking, a social habit determined by complex influences. It is worth pointing out that the figures for the 5th-year pupils also show no significant differences in smoking behaviour by the two groups.

*Comment* Being a fitness exercise enthusiast does not appear to put young people off smoking.

**Social activities**

Table 7 shows the answers to 'Have you a boyfriend or girlfriend?' and Table 8 gives the frequency of going to discos. The boy Fitfreaks are significantly more likely to have a girlfriend and to have been to a disco recently: the girl Fitfreaks also visit discos more frequently, and a tendency for more of them to have a boyfriend is also visible in the figures.

*Comment* Fitfreaks have a good social life – which links with the results for drinking and smoking.

**Sleep**

It is tempting to predict that a serious attitude to health and fitness will lead to early bedtimes and plenty of sleep. Tables 9 and 10 do not support this, since the boy Fitfreaks go to bed significantly

**Table 7.** The percentage of 4th-year pupils who had a boyfriend or girlfriend, divided into Fitfreaks and others. 1988 sample: 3253.

	No		Yes	
	B	G	B	G
Fitfreaks ...	59	69	41	31
Others .....	71	75	29	25

later, and get up significantly earlier, than the others! The girl Fitfreaks also get up significantly earlier.

*Comment* Fitfreaks spend less time in bed than the others – but perhaps they sleep more soundly?

**Conclusion**

Do these results, which are just a sample of the whole analysis, help us to put the active pursuit of 'health-related fitness' into a better perspective?

Staying with the assumption that the principal reason for undertaking jogging, fitness exercises, aerobics, or weight training is more likely to be for reasons of personal health and wellbeing than in the case of other sporting pursuits listed in the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire, we are faced with some conflicting

**Table 8.** *The frequency of visiting discos by 4th-year pupils, divided into Fitfreaks and others. Figures in percentages. 1988 sample: 3253.*

	Never been		Not in 6 months		Within 6 months		Within 1 month		In last 2 weeks		In last week	
	<i>B</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>G</i>
Fitfreaks ...	8	4	15	9	18	20	25	25	14	13	18	29
Others .....	11	7	28	13	21	24	21	22	9	13	11	21

**Table 9.** *The times when 4th-year pupils went to bed on the previous night, divided into Fitfreaks and others. Note that there was school on the following day. Figures in percentages. 1988 sample: 3253.*

	By 9 p.m.		By 10 p.m.		By 11 p.m.		By midnight		After midnight	
	<i>B</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>G</i>
Fitfreaks .....	4	4	25	28	43	47	20	16	7	7
Others .....	3	4	28	30	42	44	20	18	6	4

**Table 10.** *The times when 4th-year pupils got up before coming to school, divided into Fitfreaks and others. Figures in percentages. 1988 sample: 3253.*

	By 6.00 a.m.		By 6.30 a.m.		By 7.00 a.m.		By 7.30 a.m.		By 8.00 a.m.		After 8.00 a.m.	
	<i>B</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>G</i>
Fitfreaks ...	7	3	9	6	20	25	27	41	25	20	12	5
Others .....	4	2	5	5	18	21	29	39	30	27	14	6

results. The majority of behaviours we have examined, representing the daily life in and out of school of these 4th-year pupils, show no significant differences between the two groups and have not been presented here. However, the most obvious differences are a distinct tendency on the one hand towards the more approved 'healthy' foods, and on the other to a higher alcohol intake! There is also a quite normal level of smoking in the fitness enthusiasts.

It is well known that factual knowledge can be a poor influence on behaviour compared with social pressure. Are we seeing here the contrast between private and public image? Levels of spare-time exercise and dietary content may be less under the scrutiny of one's peers than forgoing in the disco or going out around the town.

Or are we seeing the fitness activities, and perhaps even the 'healthy' diet, as a form of penance, to compensate for these indulgences and help maintain them at their present level?

Or do they go jogging or undergo strange contortions simply because they enjoy it, with no thought of ulterior benefit? Are these even 'social' activities?

It is natural to be pleased to find so many young people to be classified as 'Fitfreaks'. But until the reasons underlying their enthusiasm are understood better, and their beliefs as to the good it is doing them have been examined, it would be unwise to assume that those track-suited figures pounding the pavements are really the dedicated ascetics they appear to be.

