



# The Active School Environment

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How Outdoor Gyms Transform Children's Health, Happiness & Learning

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RESEARCH INSIGHTS FROM UK PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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# Executive Summary

The evidence is clear: when children have access to enjoyable, accessible outdoor fitness equipment, they move more, feel better, and learn more effectively.

This report presents findings from research conducted across UK primary schools that have installed outdoor gym equipment. The data reveals a compelling picture of how active school environments support physical health, emotional wellbeing, and academic readiness.

With childhood inactivity levels rising and schools under increasing pressure to support whole-child development, outdoor gyms offer a proven, sustainable solution that children genuinely enjoy using.

97%

Enjoyment

of pupils enjoy using the outdoor gym equipment

90%

Breaktime Use

of pupils use equipment during break and lunch

85%

Increased Activity

of pupils report exercising more since installation

75%

Learning Benefits

of pupils say it helps them focus in class

"Children who enjoy being active at school carry those habits into adulthood."

Fresh Air Fitness

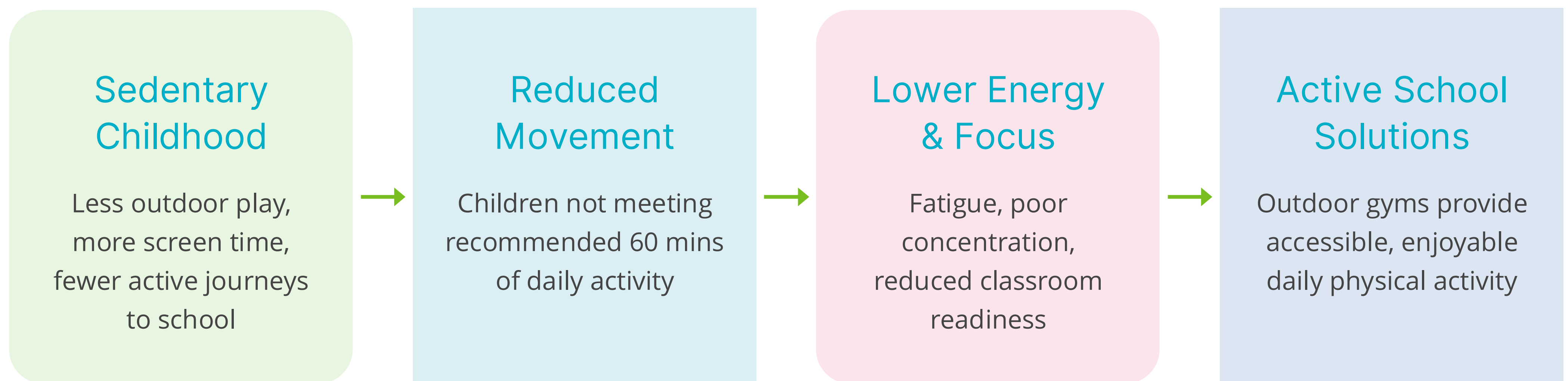
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# The Challenge

Children today face unprecedented challenges to their physical and mental health. Sedentary lifestyles, increased screen time, and reduced opportunities for unstructured outdoor play are contributing to rising levels of childhood obesity, anxiety, and disengagement from learning.



## The Scale of the Problem

**1 in 3**  
children leave primary school overweight or obese

**Only 47%**  
of children meet the recommended 60 mins daily activity

**70%**  
of children spend more time on screens than playing outdoors

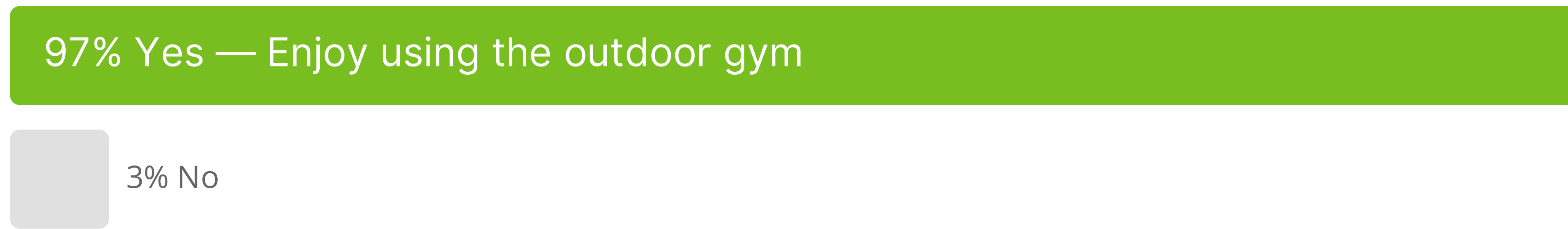
## The Opportunity

Schools are uniquely positioned to address childhood inactivity. With outdoor gym equipment, every child has daily access to enjoyable physical activity — no kit required, no competition, no barriers.

# Key Research Findings

What the data tells us about outdoor gym impact in UK primary schools.

## Do pupils enjoy using the outdoor gym?



## When do pupils use the equipment?



90% of pupils use the outdoor gym during break and lunchtimes

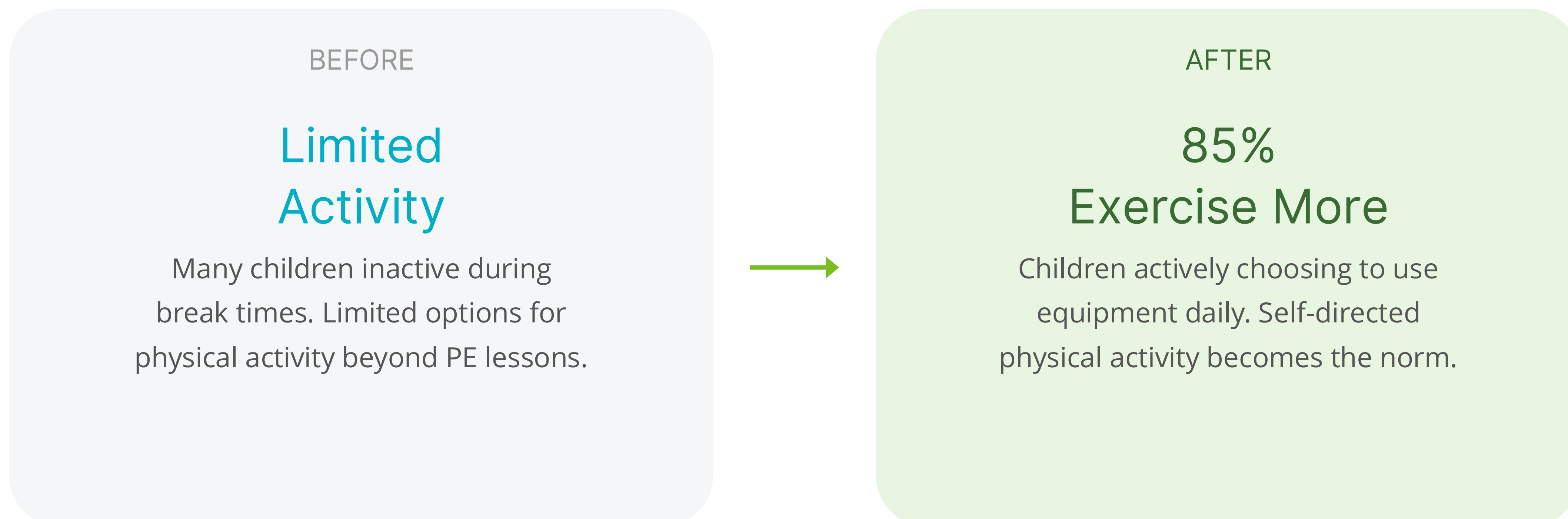
This demonstrates that children actively choose to be physically active when given accessible, enjoyable equipment. Usage is self-directed — not teacher-led.

## Key Insight

When equipment is enjoyable and accessible, children don't need to be told to exercise — they choose it.

# Key Research Findings

How has the outdoor gym changed exercise habits?



**85%**

of pupils report exercising more since the outdoor gym was installed

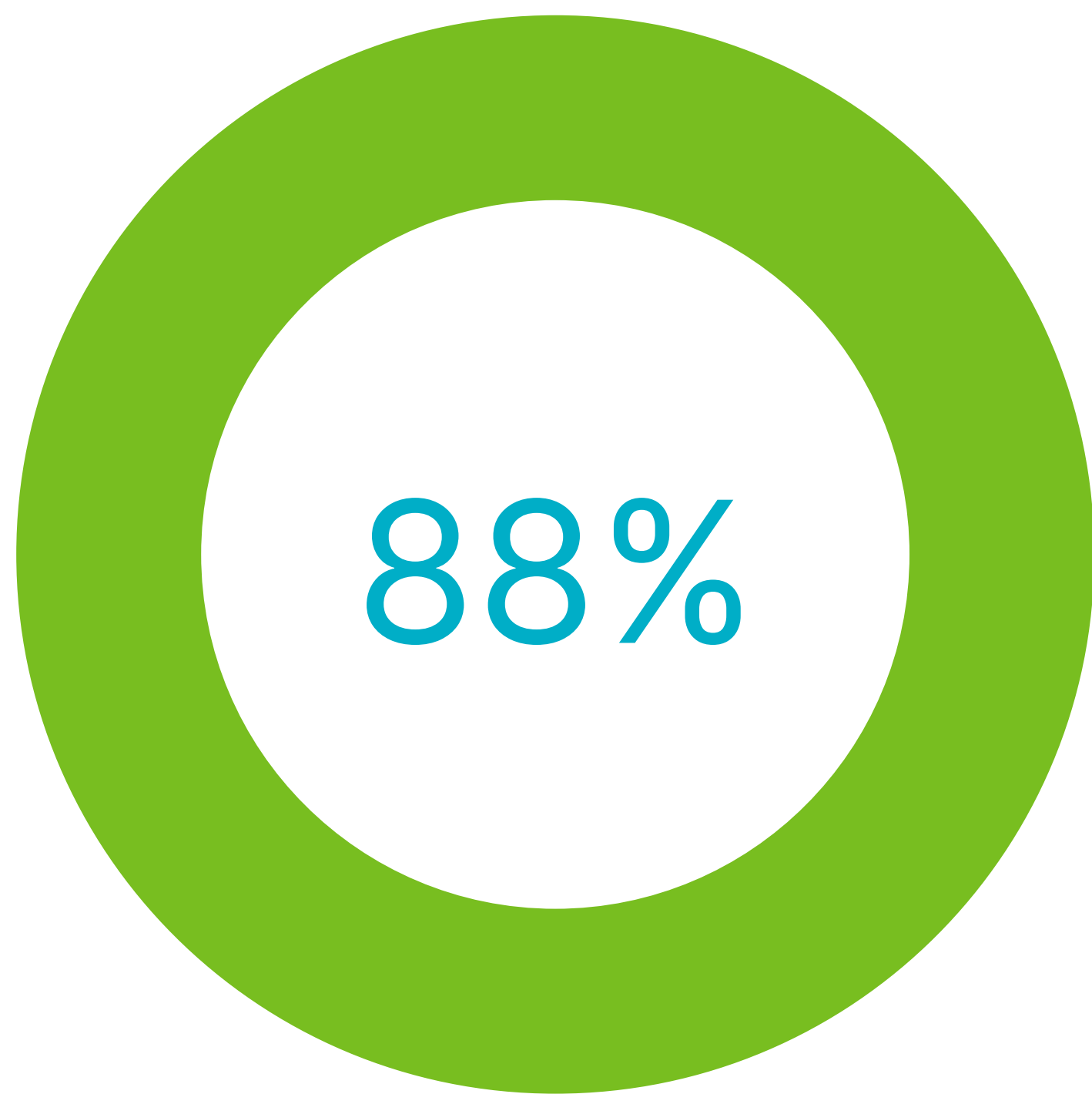
"The outdoor gym has transformed our breaktimes. Children who previously stood around are now actively engaged every single day."

## Additional Findings

<p><b>92%</b></p> <p>Would recommend to other schools</p>	<p><b>88%</b></p> <p>Use equipment at least 3x per week</p>	<p><b>79%</b></p> <p>Try new activities they hadn't before</p>
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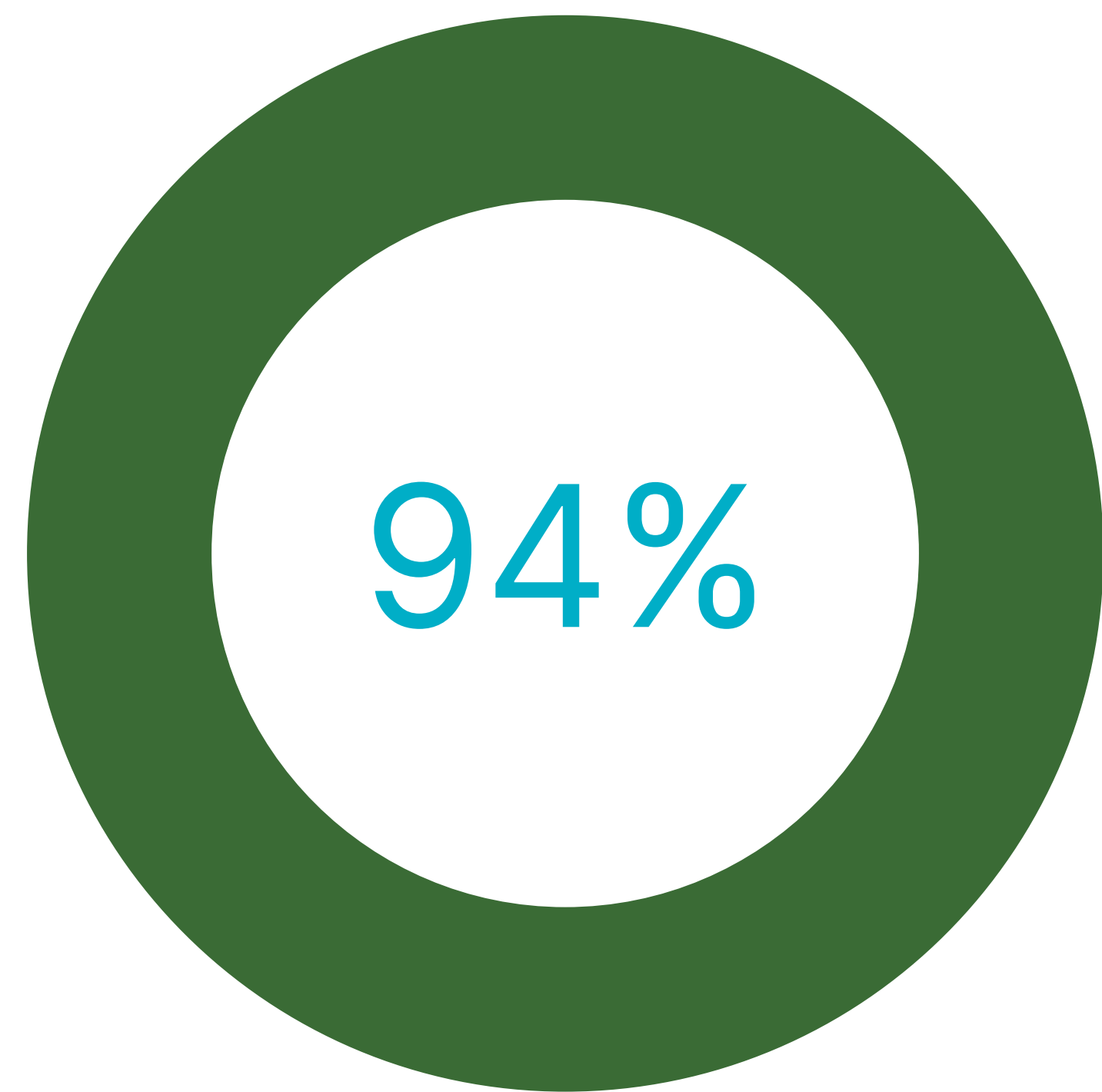
# Health & Wellbeing Impact

The outdoor gym delivers measurable improvements in how children feel — both physically and emotionally.



## Feel Fitter

of pupils report feeling physically fitter since using the outdoor gym



## Feel Happier

of pupils say the outdoor gym makes them feel happier at school

Regular access to enjoyable physical activity supports both physical health and emotional wellbeing. Children who feel fitter and happier are better equipped to engage with learning and build positive relationships.

## What the Research Shows

### Physical Confidence

Children develop body awareness, coordination and strength through regular use of age-appropriate equipment.

### Emotional Regulation

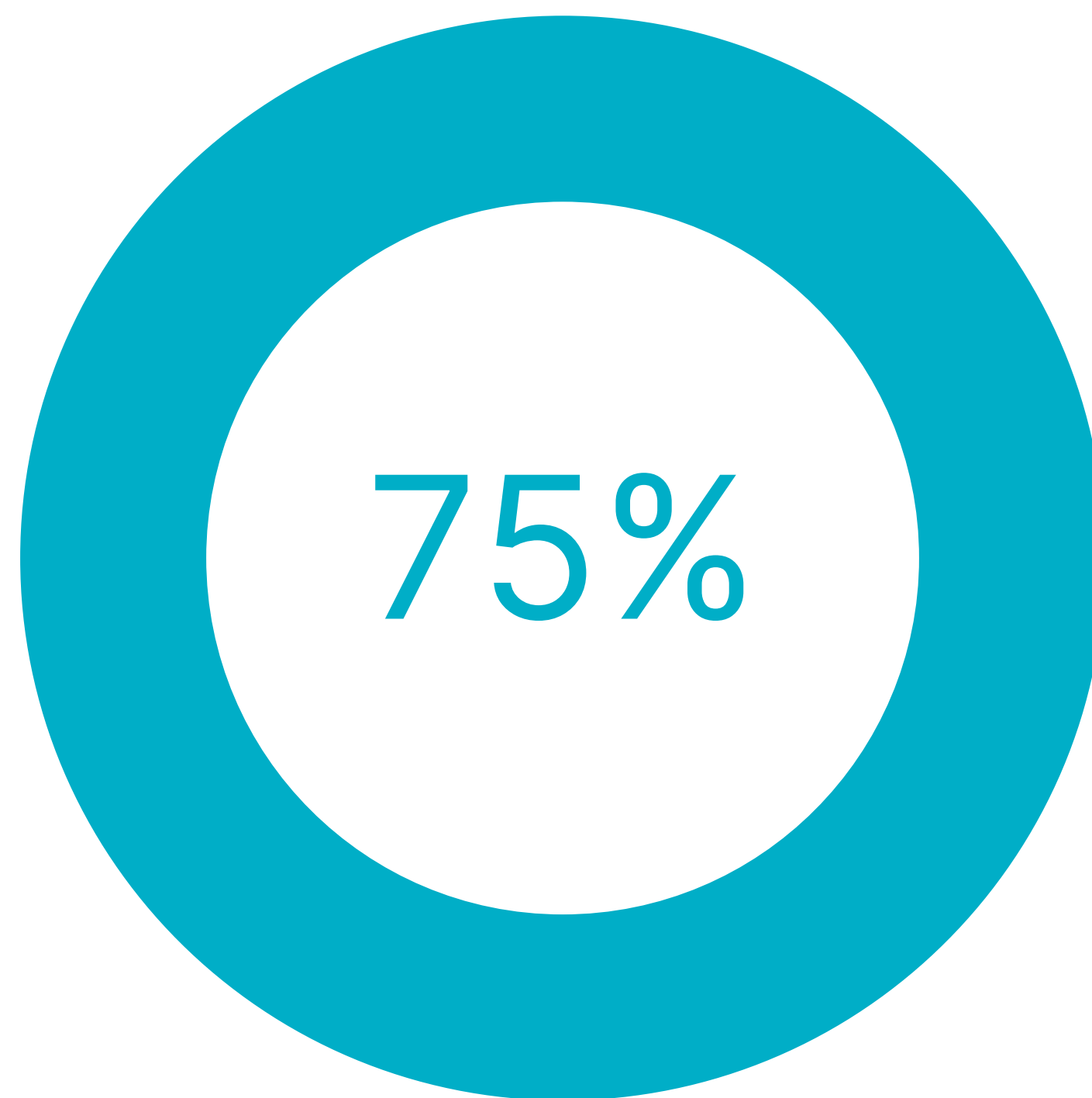
Active play helps children manage stress, release energy, and return to class feeling calm and focused.

### Social Connection

Shared physical activity builds friendships, teamwork, and a sense of belonging within the school community.

# Learning Impact

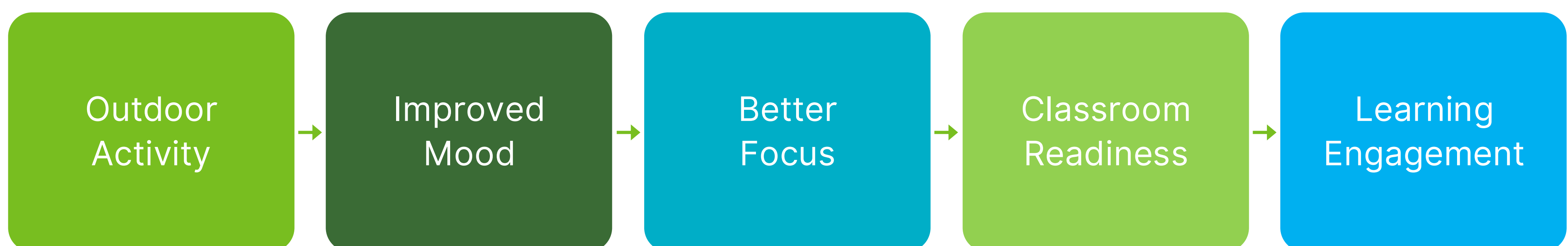
How outdoor physical activity supports focus, engagement and classroom readiness.



## Improved Learning Focus

of pupils report better concentration and focus in the classroom

## The Learning Pathway



Evidence consistently shows that physical activity before learning improves cognitive function, working memory, and attention span. Children who are active during break times return to the classroom calmer, more focused, and ready to learn.

82%

Better concentration

78%

Calmer in class

71%

More willing to learn

## Fresh Air Fitness

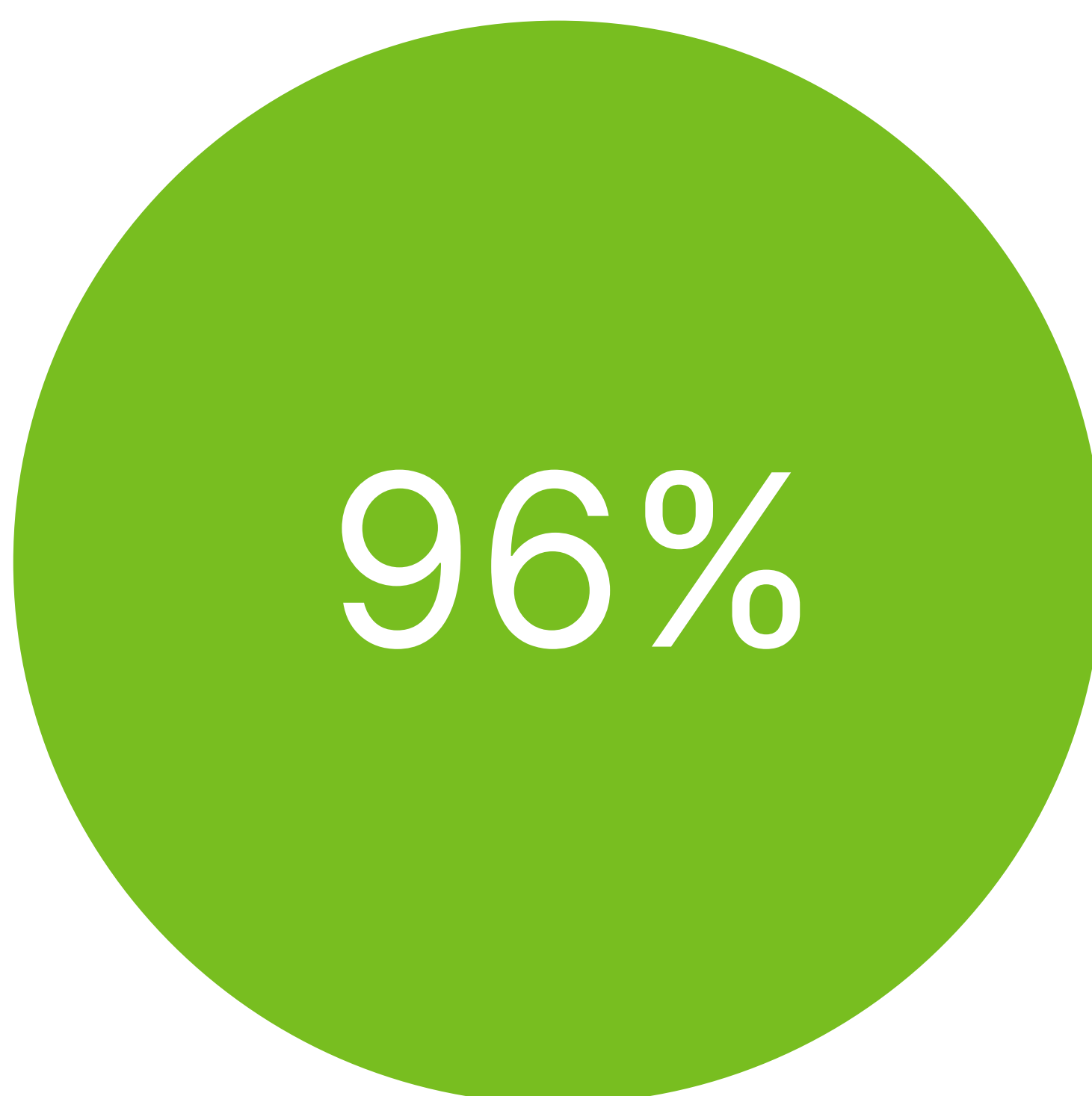
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# Making Schools Better

Pupils overwhelmingly believe the outdoor gym improves their school experience.



of pupils believe the outdoor gym makes their school a **“better place”**

## School Culture

Building a positive, active school identity

## Inclusion

Every child can participate and belong

## Positive Experiences

Creating memories that last a lifetime

"The outdoor gym is the best thing about our school. Everyone can use it and it makes playtime really fun."

— Year 5 Pupil

## Fresh Air Fitness

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# Why Outdoor Gyms Work

Four key principles that make outdoor gym equipment uniquely effective in schools.

## Accessible

All abilities can participate

Equipment designed for every child regardless of fitness level or physical ability. No prior skills needed.

## Inclusive

Non-competitive and welcoming

Children use equipment at their own pace without pressure. No winners, no losers — just active play.

## Engaging

Children choose to use it

90% of pupils voluntarily use the equipment at breaktimes. Enjoyment drives consistent daily activity.

## Sustainable

Available every school day

Durable, weather-resistant equipment requires minimal maintenance and provides year-round access to activity.

Unlike structured PE lessons or competitive sports, outdoor gym equipment removes barriers to participation. Every child — regardless of ability, confidence, or fitness level — can be active every single day.

# Strategic Benefits for Schools

A layered model showing how outdoor fitness equipment delivers cumulative value.



## Benefits for School Leaders

### Supports wellbeing priorities

Aligns with Ofsted's focus on personal development and PSHE outcomes.

### Encourages active lifestyles

Helps schools meet the recommended 30 active minutes during the school day.

### Improves pupil experience

96% of children say it makes their school a better place.

### Creates long-term value

Durable equipment with minimal maintenance delivers years of daily use.

Investing in outdoor fitness equipment is not just a playground upgrade — it is a strategic decision that supports whole-school improvement across health, wellbeing, behaviour and academic readiness.

# Conclusion

The findings from this study demonstrate the positive impact that accessible, engaging physical activity opportunities can have on children's health, wellbeing and school experience.

The Fresh Air Fitness survey found that pupils not only enjoy using outdoor gym equipment, but also report being more active, feeling fitter and happier, and benefiting from improved focus in the classroom.

Against a national backdrop where many children are not achieving recommended activity levels, schools have an important role to play in creating environments that encourage movement throughout the day. Outdoor gyms provide an inclusive and enjoyable way to make physical activity a natural part of everyday school life.

While the survey reflects the experiences of pupils in schools with installed outdoor gyms, the results highlight the wider value of investing in active environments. By encouraging regular movement, supporting wellbeing and enhancing pupil engagement, outdoor fitness spaces can contribute to healthier, happier and more positive school communities.

## Impact at a Glance

97%

Enjoyment

90%

Usage

85%

More Exercise

94%

Happiness

75%

Learning

96%

Better School

"The evidence is clear: when children have daily access to enjoyable physical activity, they are healthier, happier, and better prepared to learn."

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