

Markus Gaebel · Mar 27

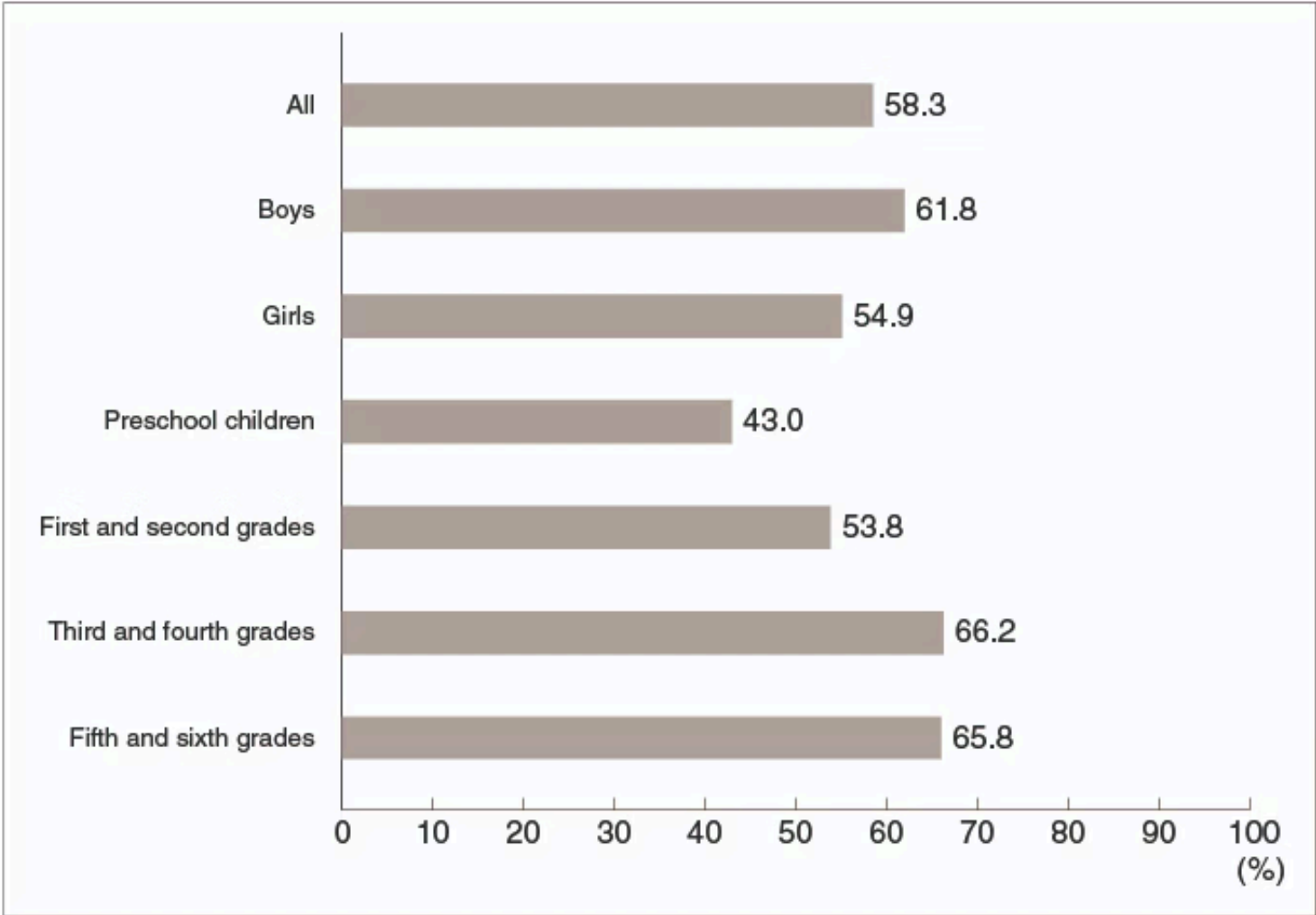
# Participation in Sport Clubs and School Sport Clubs by Children and Young People in Japan – Insights from the Survey "White Paper on Sports in Japan"



*The White Paper on Sport in Japan 2023, published by the Sasakawa Sports Foundation (SSF), provides comprehensive insights into the current state of sport participation across Japan. Based on this White Paper, the SSF has also published a series of focused articles highlighting specific topics to deepen understanding and stimulate discussions around sport participation and development. These articles can be accessed on the [SSF's dedicated webpage](#).*

## Participation Among Children (Aged 4-11)

According to the SSF National Sports-Life Survey for Children and Young People (2021), the overall participation rate of children aged between 4 and 11 years in sports clubs was 58.3%. This indicates that more than half of Japanese children are actively involved in sports through structured club environments. A closer look at these statistics by gender shows notable differences:



SSF National Sports-Life Survey of Children and Young People (2021)

**Figure 5-3 Membership in Sport Clubs among Children Aged 4-11 years**

These gender differences become more apparent during elementary school ages, pointing to a possible need for targeted programs that encourage sustained female participation.

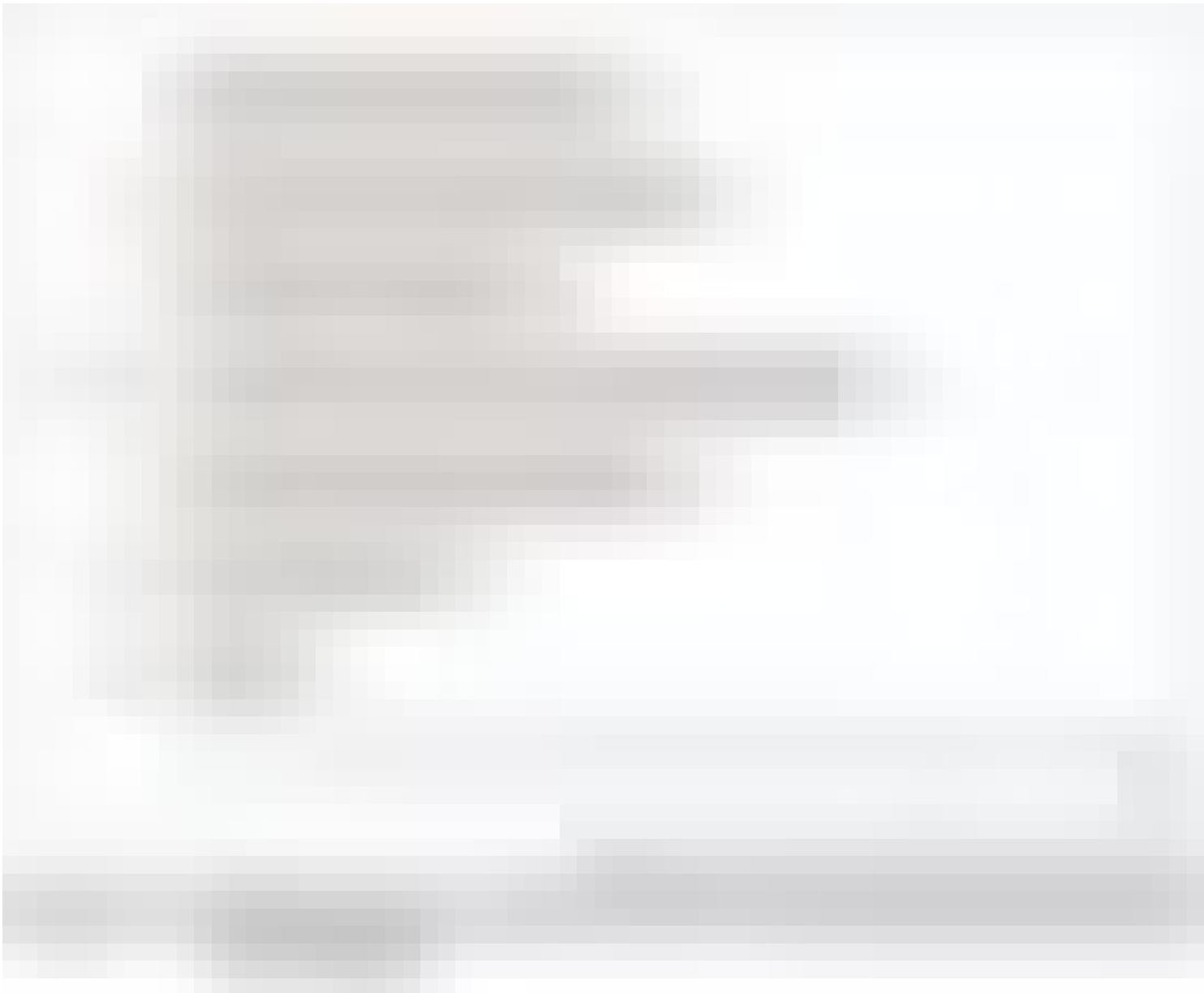
Examining participation by age reveals interesting developmental trends:

- **Preschool (ages 4-6):** Participation is at 43.0%, indicating early exposure to structured sports.
- **Elementary School (grades 1-2):** The rate increases to 53.8%, suggesting growing interest or parental encouragement as children start formal schooling.
- **Grades 3-4:** Peak participation of 66.2% occurs, highlighting a crucial window where sports engagement is most popular.
- **Grades 5-6:** Slight decline to 65.8%, though remaining relatively high.

The survey further identified the types of clubs children most commonly participate in:

- **Private Sports Clubs:** The most popular, accounting for 61.7% of participants, indicating that parents prefer specialized facilities, particularly for sports like swimming, gymnastics, or martial arts.
- **Community-Based Clubs:** Drawing 32.3% of young participants, reflecting local accessibility and community-driven sports activities.
- **School Sport Clubs:** Attracting 24.7%, showing school-based clubs have substantial room for growth and improvement.

Participation Among Young People (Aged 12-21)



The participation landscape changes significantly for young people aged 12-21, with an overall lower participation rate of 44.6%. This decline suggests changes in lifestyle, increased academic pressures, and other competing interests during adolescence and early adulthood. Gender differences in this older age group are also more pronounced:

- **Boys:** Participation remains relatively high at 52.5%.
- **Girls:** Participation noticeably lower at 36.6%, emphasizing a critical drop-off among female athletes.

A breakdown of participation by educational level further illustrates the decreasing trend with age:

- **Junior High School:** The highest participation rate (71.0%), reflecting the structured school club systems present in Japanese junior high schools.
- **High School:** Participation rate drops significantly to 49.6%, indicating potential stress from academic pressures or shifting social interests.
- **College/University Students:** A further decline to just 25.8%, showing reduced structured sports engagement among this demographic.
- **Young Workers (ages 18-21 in employment):** Only 9.8%, suggesting limited time or opportunities for structured sports activities post-schooling.

## Dominance of School Sport Clubs

School sport clubs play a significant role among adolescents, capturing the majority (78.7%) of young participants aged 12-21. This dominance underscores the critical importance of school-based clubs in maintaining youth sports participation throughout adolescent years. Community and private sport clubs play a considerably smaller role for this age group (11.3% and 8.3%, respectively).

## Current Trends in School Sports Clubs in Junior High and High Schools

The White Paper highlighted concerning trends in junior high and high school sports club participation rates, aligning with Japan's broader demographic issues of declining youth populations:

- Membership rates in junior high school sports clubs have gradually decreased over recent years from 65.5% in 2016 to 61.4% in 2021.

- The number of junior high school students itself has also decreased, a reflection of Japan’s declining birthrate, further affecting overall membership numbers in school-based sports clubs.

## Implications and Future Directions

The White Paper points toward several key areas for future action: **SFN**

1. **Increasing Female Participation:** Efforts to understand and mitigate factors that deter female students from sustained sports participation are essential. ©2025 SFN (Squash Facilities Network) / [Privacy Policy](#) / [Accessibility Statement](#)
2. **Addressing High School Drop-Off:** Strategies to balance academic and extracurricular commitments could help maintain higher levels of sports engagement in high school.
3. **Strengthening Community and Private Clubs:** Diversifying and increasing access to community and private club options could provide alternative paths for continued youth sports engagement beyond school settings.
4. **Policy & Infrastructure Support:** Sustained policy support at municipal and national levels can reinforce infrastructure and provide incentives for increased youth participation.

## Conclusion to this Survey

The White Paper on Sport in Japan 2023 emphasizes that sport clubs are more than recreational outlets; they are crucial environments for social integration, physical health, and skill development. Addressing participation challenges highlighted in the report will be crucial for maintaining Japan’s vibrant youth sporting culture and ensuring sport remains an integral part of life for future generations.

For further reading, visit the official [Sasakawa Sports Foundation website](#).