

Socio-cultural influences on physical activity

Thirteen influences that shape whether, how and why people move. Each one can open a door or close it, and most do both at once.

He Ao Kori, He Ao Mātauranga · A world of movement, a world of learning | Physical Education New Zealand · Te Ao Kori Aotearoa

This is a Level 1 resource. It is written for Year 11 ākonga working at curriculum level 6, and it stays descriptive: what each influence is, and how it can support or limit participation. Level 2 and Level 3 need a further layer of critical analysis, which this resource does not cover.

What this resource is for

Socio-cultural influences are the things outside a person's body that shape their participation in movement: the people around them, what their culture and community value, what they can afford and reach, and what they see reflected back at them in media.

Use it to build a shared vocabulary before ākonga analyse their own participation, or as a prompt bank for group kōrero. The examples are starting points, not answers. The most useful discussions usually happen when ākonga replace them with examples from their own lives.

The influences are grouped into four kinds. The groups are a way in, not a hierarchy, and nearly every influence connects to the others.

How to use it

1. Read one group at a time. Ask which influence ākonga recognise most strongly.
2. For each card, get a real example to sit alongside the one printed.
3. Use the kōrero starters when a group goes quiet.
4. Finish with the worksheet, where ākonga map three influences on their own participation.

The people around us

Whānau, peers and role models

Whānau

How

Whānau provide the emotional, practical and financial support that makes participation possible.

Why

Young people depend on adults for transport, money, encouragement and opportunity. Family attitudes towards physical activity often become the young person's own.

Can support participation. An ākonga wants to play netball. Their whānau pay the subs, drive them to games and turn up on the sideline. Confidence, commitment and enjoyment all grow.

Can limit participation. A family may put academic achievement or work commitments first, leaving less time for training and less reason to keep going.

Go deeper. Whānau support interacts with socioeconomic status. A family can be completely behind a young person and still not be able to afford an expensive sport.

Kōrero starter. *Who drove you to games? Who paid for your gear? Whose games did you grow up watching from the sideline?*

Peers and friends

How

Peers encourage, motivate, include, exclude and apply pressure.

Why

Adolescents place a high value on belonging and acceptance. Social connection often decides whether an activity feels enjoyable at all.

Can support participation. A group of friends signs up for a volleyball team together. The time with mates is the reason they keep turning up.

Can limit participation. Friends decide a sport is not cool and someone quietly drops it rather than stand out.

Go deeper. Peer influence can outweigh whānau influence during adolescence, because identity becomes closely tied to friendship groups.

Kōrero starter. *What have you tried because your mates were doing it? Have you ever stopped something for the same reason?*

Role models

How

Role models shape aspirations, attitudes and confidence.

Why

People engage more readily when they can see a relatable example of success.

Can support participation. A young Māori athlete watches Dame Lisa Carrington and takes up kayaking. A young rugby player trains harder after watching Ardie Savea.

Can limit participation. Without visible or relatable role models, an activity may never feel like it is meant for you.

Go deeper. Representation matters. People identify more strongly with role models who share part of their identity, whether that is ethnicity, gender, body type or where they grew up.

Identity and belonging

Gender, culture and discrimination

Gender

How

Gender expectations affect which activities people feel comfortable joining.

Why

Society promotes stereotypes about which activities are appropriate for males and females.

Can support participation. Growing promotion of women's sport encourages more girls into rugby and football.

Can limit participation. A boy avoids dance because he expects to be judged for it.

Go deeper. Gender stereotypes are socially constructed. They are learned and reinforced through media, schools and peer groups, which means they can also be changed.

Cultural values and beliefs

How

Culture influences which activities are valued and how participation is viewed.

Why

Culture shapes identity, beliefs, traditions and priorities.

Can support participation. A Māori student takes up waka ama because it strengthens cultural identity and connection to whakapapa. A Pacific ākonga is drawn to team sport because it fits collective values and community connection.

Can limit participation. Cultural commitments, church activities or responsibilities at home may reduce the time available for organised sport.

Go deeper. Culture usually works on motivation through identity and belonging rather than through physical benefit.

Racism and discrimination

How

Racism creates barriers to participation, belonging and success.

Why

Experiences of discrimination affect confidence, enjoyment and whether someone feels included.

Can support participation. A club that actively promotes cultural inclusion and diversity builds a stronger sense of belonging for everyone in it.

Can limit participation. A Māori student hears racist comments from opponents and starts finding reasons to miss competitions.

Go deeper. Even subtle discrimination shapes participation over time, because it erodes psychological safety long before anyone names it as racism.

Money, place, school and community

Socioeconomic status

How

Financial resources affect access to equipment, facilities, coaching and transport.

Why

Many organised sports require significant and ongoing financial investment.

Can support participation. An ākonga from a financially secure family can access private coaching and high-quality facilities.

Can limit participation. A teenager stops playing hockey because the fees and the gear are beyond what the family can cover.

Go deeper. Socioeconomic factors create unequal opportunity between people with equal interest and equal talent.

Accessibility

How

Accessibility decides whether an opportunity is genuinely available to a particular person.

Why

People cannot take part if facilities, programmes or equipment do not meet their needs.

Can support participation. A local gym installs adaptive equipment and a young person with a disability can train there fully.

Can limit participation. Limited public transport makes after-school training impossible to get to.

Go deeper. Accessibility is about more than disability. It includes transport, location, cost, language and inclusive design.

School culture

How

Schools supply opportunities, facilities, role models and expectations.

Why

Students spend a large proportion of their waking hours at school.

Can support participation. A school runs lunchtime sport, so taking part costs nothing and requires no organising.

Can limit participation. A school that concentrates on elite teams can leave less confident students with nowhere to start.

Go deeper. School policy either widens participation or deepens the gaps that ākonga arrive with.

Kōrero starter. *How much does sport matter here? Who gets coached, and how well? Which traditions pull people in, and which ones push people out?*

Community

How

Communities create opportunity through clubs, facilities, traditions and social networks.

Why

People are influenced by what is available and what is valued where they live.

Can support participation. A coastal community runs strong surf lifesaving programmes, so that is what young people grow up doing.

Can limit participation. A rural community may simply not have the numbers, coaches or facilities for a given sport.

Go deeper. Community support usually decides whether an opportunity lasts, not just whether it starts.

Social media, media and technology

Social media

How

Social media supplies information, role models, challenges, trends and constant comparison.

Why

Young people spend a lot of time online and are heavily exposed to messages about health, fitness and body image.

Can support participation. An ākonga follows creators who share workouts and training ideas, and picks up new exercises and motivation from them.

Can limit participation. Constant exposure to idealised bodies can make a teenager feel they do not measure up, so they avoid taking part at all.

Go deeper. Social media can motivate physical activity and damage self-esteem at the same time, through the same feed.

Kōrero starter. *What has your feed got you to try? Has it ever put you off something instead?*

Media

How

Media influences which sports get attention and what messages people receive about physical activity.

Why

Media shapes social norms and public perception of what counts as a real sport.

Can support participation. Coverage of the Black Ferns brings more girls into rugby.

Can limit participation. Sports with little coverage attract less interest, fewer participants and fewer resources.

Go deeper. Media representation decides whose achievements are treated as valuable and visible, which flows through to funding and opportunity.

Technology

How

Technology can support participation through tracking, coaching and social connection.

Why

Feedback and goal setting increase motivation.

Can support participation. An ākonga uses a fitness watch to track training progress and stays motivated by seeing it improve.

Can limit participation. Screen time can take the place of the hours that would otherwise go into being active.

Go deeper. Technology can increase or decrease participation. What matters is how it is used, not the device itself.

Apply it to your own participation

Choose three influences from this resource. For each one, write a real example of how it has supported your participation in movement, and a real example of how it has limited it. Then name one thing that would change if that influence were different.

Name: _____ · Kura: _____

Influence	How it has supported my participation	How it has limited my participation	What would change if this were different
1.			
2.			
3.			

Making the connections

Now pick two of your three influences and explain how they connect to each other. Most influences do not act alone.
