



Getting and Keeping K-12 Girls in Sports and Physical Activity

Evidence-Based Best Practices and Keys



Over a six-month period, a research team from the Departments of Kinesiology at Cal State East Bay and Saint Mary's College of California, with support from the Positive Coaching Alliance Gender Equity Initiative, examined best practices and breakthroughs for getting girls* into the game and advancing gender equity in youth sports programming. The team, all of whom are lifelong athletes and coaches dedicated to advancing gender equity in sports, convened to review over 150 research studies and reports to highlight what works for helping girls engage in K-12 athletics. These top 10 evidence-based tips summarize the findings to empower youth sports coaches, families, school staff, community leaders, and all stakeholders to level the playing field for girls and women in sports.

Recommendations

● Promote Girl-Only and/or Girl-Centered Programming

Having girl-only and/or girl-centered programming^{1 2 3} is a key part of many effective programs, oftentimes relating to culturally and gender-responsive programming as a whole.^{4 5} Rethinking a co-ed model as the primary way to include girls in sports is needed due to many girls' challenging experiences sharing sport spaces with boys and the lack of interpersonal safety that girls report in this environment.^{7 8 9 10} Girl-only and/or girl-centered programs help.

● Ask Girls What They Want

When asked what they want in sports, most kids (including girls) say fun and an opportunity to try their best.¹¹ Specifically, provide opportunities for girls to voice their opinion in program design and delivery of athletic/physical activity.^{12 13 14 15} Share approachable methods of open communication and record feedback to facilitate the desired goals of participants. Maintaining relevant, culturally-appropriate material that responds to the girls' perceptions of program success will result in a more enjoyable, fun experience and will help lessen disengagement.^{16 17}

● Develop Skills Then Introduce Healthy Competition

Developmentally appropriate and cooperative skill development in fun, low-pressure environments give girls the opportunity to build confidence for future organized sport. This can help foster an interest in competition and enhanced enjoyment of physical activity if not already present.^{18 19 20 21 22} A mixture of non-competitive and competitive programming²³ meets the needs of more girls and can be a key retention strategy for girls who opt-out of competitive sports while simultaneously engaging other girls through healthy competition.^{24 25}

● Emphasize Social Support From Family and Friends

Peer and family support, especially from mothers, increases girls' feelings of competence, enjoyment of activities, and persistence with sports.^{26 27 28} Families also serve as role models through both direct involvement (e.g., enrolling girls in leagues, buying equipment, coaching) and indirect involvement (e.g., spectatorship, fandom, and role modeling participation).²⁹ Conversely, teasing and taunting by coaches and non-sport playing peers, particularly related to insecurities around physical appearance, "attractiveness" to peers, and loss of "femininity," were cited as strong concerns among girls who left sport.^{30 31} Social support is key.

☛ Support Women Coaches

Recruiting, training, retaining, and mentoring women coaches positively impacts girls' experiences in sport and retention in sport.^{32,33} For African American and Latinx girls, it is additionally impactful to have coaches with racial and ethnic identities that connect with the girls they serve.³⁴ Women coaches importantly provide girls with similar-identity role models, helping girls of all intersecting identities to grow their confidence, be inspired, share their experiences, and feel seen and supported.^{35,36} Women coaches are highly effective for any and all kids.³⁷

☛ Train All Coaches How to Coach Girls

Require or support coaching education for all coaches that includes information related to recognizing and eliminating gender inequity, sexism, stereotypes, gender bias, and racism.³⁸ Coaches directly influence the experiences of participants,³⁹ play a critical role in supporting girls' engagement with and enjoyment of sport,⁴⁰ and can significantly impact girls' initial receptivity to try activities.⁴¹ Negative experiences with coaches are more likely to cause girls to drop out of sports than boys.⁴² Invest time and resources into coaching education as a strategic way to improve the experience of girl participants.

☛ Make Uniforms More Accessible

Provide functional, practical, culturally-aware,⁴³ and comfortable uniforms. Uniforms can have a negative impact on girls' participation due to cost⁴⁴ as well as issues related to body concerns, size, and fit,^{45,46} especially as girls progress through adolescence. Well-fitting, girl-oriented uniforms facilitate girls' play.

☛ Design Culturally-Responsive Programs

Provide translated materials through multiple communication channels,⁴⁷ create low-cost opportunities,⁴⁸ and build connections with families in order to effectively recruit and retain girls from underserved communities.^{49,50} Socio-economics, ethnicity, immigrant status, and language were found to be major factors to consider with girl-centered programming.⁵¹

☛ Create Accessible Opportunities

Program factors such as transportation and facility safety, as well as cost in general,⁵² should be addressed to meet the needs of participants. Scheduling consistent practices and games at desirable times optimizes the availability of safe transportation⁵³ therefore increasing the likelihood of participation. Access to facilities with supervision and proper lighting establishes an environment for girls (and their caregivers) to feel comfortable and safe while playing.⁵⁴

☛ Add Intentional Girl-Centered Policies and Procedures

Solidify girl-centered practices through clearly articulated policies and procedures aimed at increasing and retaining girls' participation in sport.^{55,56} Monitor and evaluate policies on a regular basis in order to assess whether girls' needs are being met. Title IX and applicable state laws should also be monitored and evaluated when relevant.⁵⁷ These efforts are especially important in mixed-gender environments.

Based on our literature review and parameters imposed, the following stood out as gaps in research around best practices related to girls' participation in sports, for further exploration and study among other topics:

- ▮ What roles do recess and P.E. play in introducing and reinforcing physical activity and sport for girls and what best practices can be leveraged to encourage girls' participation?
- ▮ What additional, specific gaps in access and equity do girls and women of color, especially in low-income communities, face in sports and how can gaps be addressed and removed?
- ▮ How can boys, men, and others (family members, peers, and/or colleagues) positively impact girls' and women's experiences participating in physical activity, sport, and coaching?
- ▮ What role does women's sport spectatorship play (e.g., viewing and attending women's school, college, and professional sporting events) in driving girls' interest in participation?

*Girls, women, and people referenced of any gender herein are broadly defined and we support full equity and inclusion along the spectrum of gender identity.

Endnotes

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