SPORT, STEREOTYPES AND STOLEN DREAMS

WHY GIRLS STILL FEEL THEY DON'T BELONG IN SPORT

MARCH 2023

SPORT ENGLAND

WOMENINSPORT.ORG

CONTENTS

CREATING A POSITIVE START POINT FOR GIRLS IN SPORT

Introduction

Girls deserve a positive start point with sport and physical activity. We want them to develop a real passion for being active so that they can enjoy it throughout their lives.

But currently girls are starting out surrounded by expectations that will limit their enjoyment of and participation in sport. This report explains how that looks and feels, informed by our in-depth research and calls for change.

We know that girls' self-belief and enjoyment of physical activity are impacted well before their teenage years. By adolescence, many have already decided they do not 'belong' in sport, confidence and self-efficacy are on the decline and perceptions of themselves as 'sporty' or 'not sporty' are quickly cemented and are hard to reverse. With the additional challenges of puberty, periods, changing body shape and the unwanted attention when exercising, quite simply, taking part becomes a burden, instead of bringing freedom and enjoyment. It then doesn't take much of a nudge for girls to rule themselves out altogether. This negative experience sets the tone as girls reach adulthood and they can go on to miss out on the joy and benefits of sport and exercise throughout life.

We need to understand how to provide girls the best possible start point, kick-start a life-long love of being active and nurture girls' competence and self-belief from a young age. This means that when they reach adolescence, they are more resilient, with sport and physical activity an important part of their identity. To do this we must understand what is happening now.

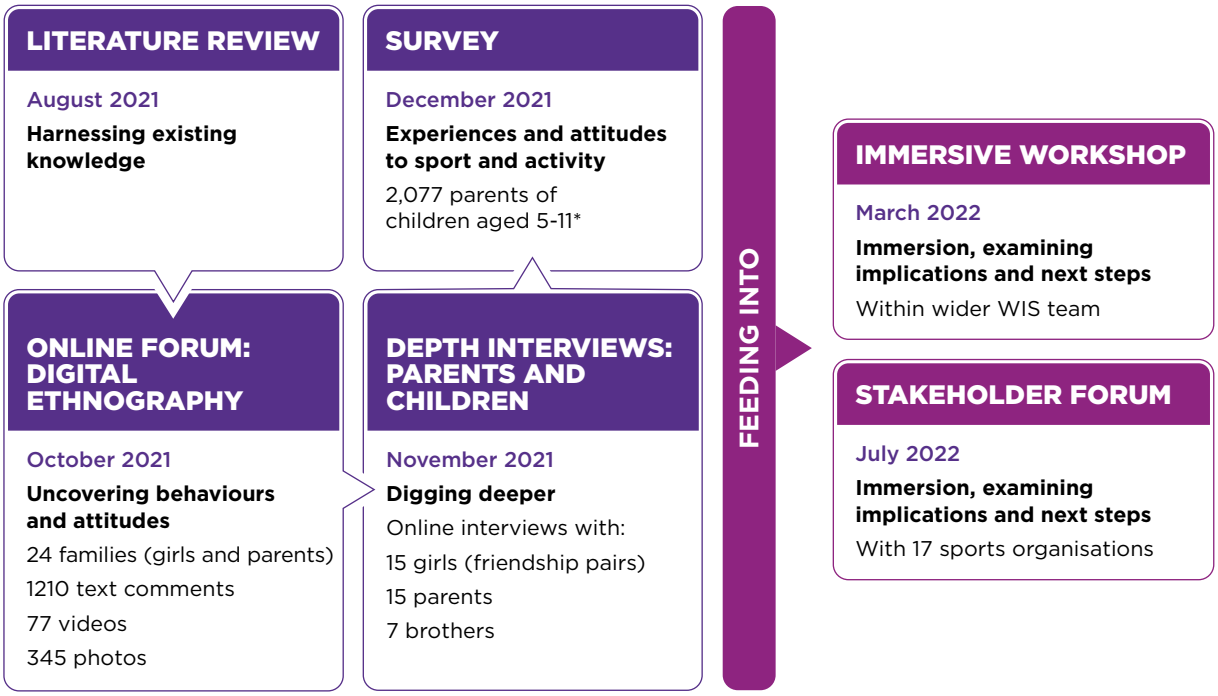
In autumn 2021, Women in Sport embarked on an insight project to examine girls' early experiences of sport and physical activity and the attitudes and influences that shape perceptions at this young age. In this report, we will look in more detail at what's going wrong and how we can start to fix it.

Methodology

We adopted a mixed methods approach including a literature review of academic research, primary research and a survey with over 2,000 parents of children aged 5-11 years. Then used the findings to stimulate new thinking amongst key stakeholders in the sector.

At the heart of this project, we undertook in-depth qualitative and ethnographic research with 24 families with daughters aged 5 to 11, from a variety of different backgrounds including White British, British Asian, Black British and mixed-race families. We connected with their everyday lives via an online community and talked to mums, dads, brothers and sisters to understand their attitudes and behaviours towards sport and exercise. Platypus, a research agency specialising in children and families undertook the research design and fieldwork and Dr Adam Galpin, psychologist at the University of Salford supported analysis and interpretation.

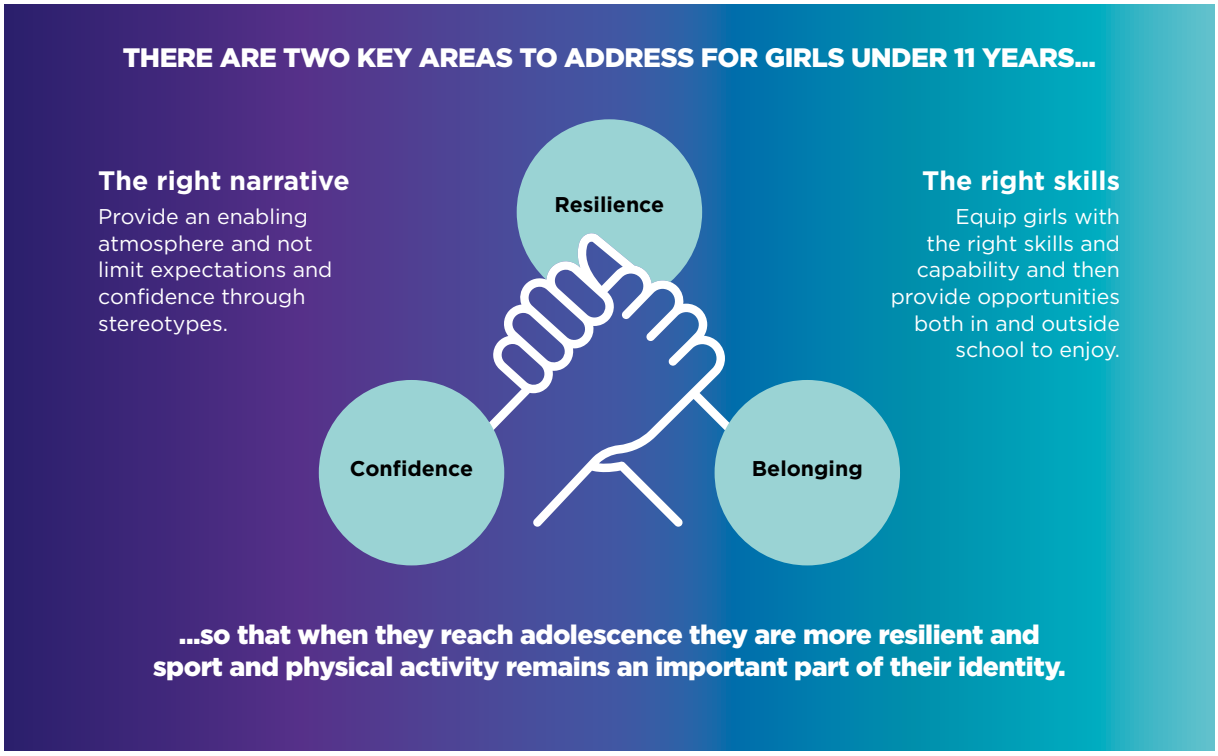
Timeline



*All statistics in this report are from this survey unless otherwise noted.

Overview: The right supporting narrative and the right skills go hand in hand

Two key areas go hand-in-hand to provide a positive start point for young girls in relation to sport and physical activity and build a strong sense of belonging.



The right narrative

It is essential we provide an enabling atmosphere and to do this we need to reframe the narrative that girls hear from others around them about women's sport, so girls believe they deserve to be part of it and truly belong. We are giving girls the wrong messages. Much of what girls hear and see on a day-to-day basis undermines self-belief and tells them that sport is not for them. In fact research into gender stereotypes showed that 75% of girls have heard disparaging statements specifically about girls or women in sport and that these primarily come from other peers, family and teachers/coaches.[1] The underlying narrative implies that girls are not as competitive; that sport is not important for girls; that they will never be as good at it compared to boys; that sport can be at odds with femininity and a girl's identity. These messages are explicit and implicit, and constant, implying that there's limited value in a girl taking part in sport and physical activity, which greatly impacts self-belief as she grows up.

The right skills

Equally important is equipping girls with the right skills and providing opportunities both in and outside school both to learn and practise them. This is essential as it fuels confidence and allows girls to try new activities to discover what they enjoy. Girls are still not supported well enough in younger years to develop the level of fundamental movement skills they need to take part in sport and physical activity, and this affects confidence in their own ability and importantly enjoyment, widening the skills gap between girls and boys. Without the fundamental skills, girls confuse lack of experience with lack of natural ability and quickly develop the mindset that they are not, and never will be, good enough to take part, ruling themselves out before they have even begun. Alongside developing skills, we need to tap into girls' motivations more effectively, to better understand what attracts them into sport and recognise the aspects that keep them going back and enjoying it, sustaining interest and participation.

[1] Spears Brown, C. and Stone, E. A. (2016) Chapter Four: Gender Stereotypes and Discrimination: How Sexism Impacts Development. In: Horn, S., Ruck, M. and Liben, L. (eds.) Equity and Justice in Developmental Science: Theoretical and Methodological Issues, Volume 50. Academic Press

Girls are internalising negative messages

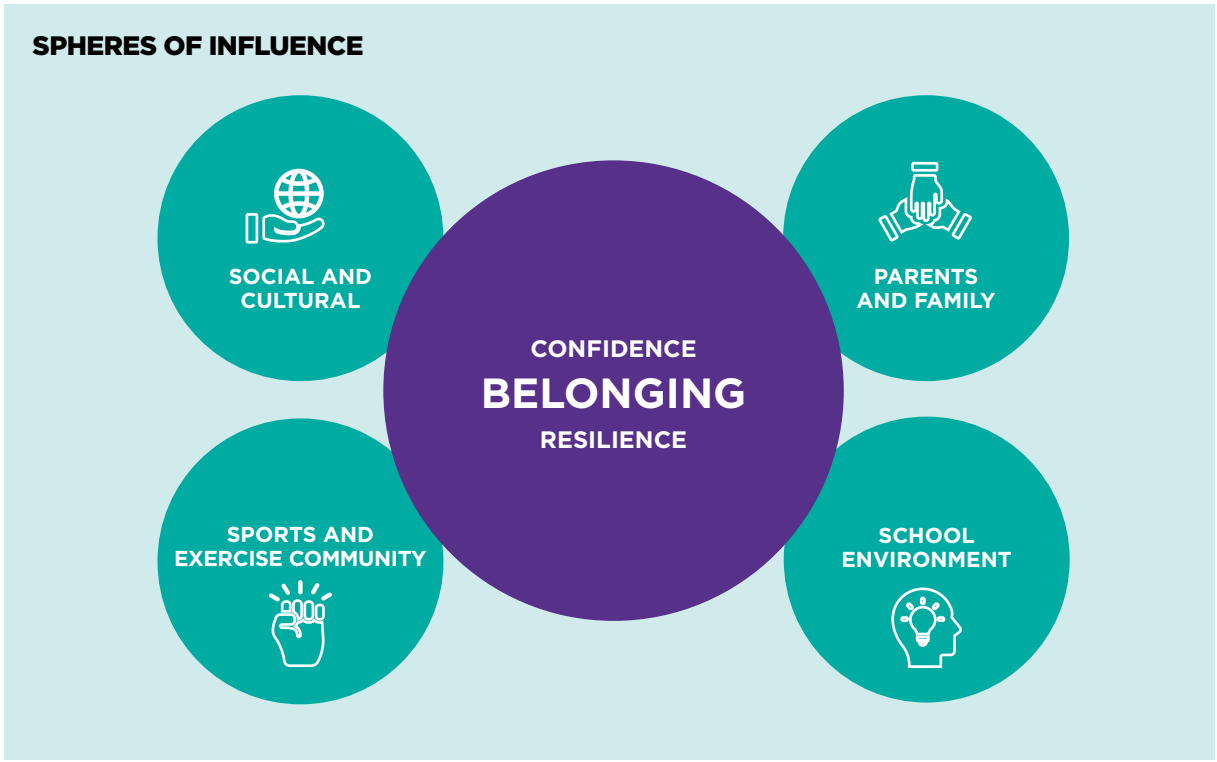
Girls absorb all this negative messaging and conclude that sport is not a natural fit for them. They are made to feel like pursuing sport is only worthwhile if they are exceptionally good. Against a backdrop of negative stereotypes, if a girl is not very good at sport the unspoken question is: why are you here?

At a young age, self-belief has already been undermined and is lower amongst girls than boys. In primary school, only 69% of girls rated their self-belief as good or very good compared to 79% of boys. This falls to 45% when girls reach secondary school (compared to 61% of boys).[2]

[2] Youth Sport Trust (2021) Girls Active National Reports for Boys' and Girls' Data

The spheres of influence

The influences on young girls' participation in and pre-disposition towards sport and exercise, come at them from all angles in what they experience, see and hear around them. However, at this young age, parents, family, peers and the school environment are the key contributors, with marketing and media playing more of a role as girls get older. These influences can have a positive or negative impact on girls' attitudes towards sport and exercise. Whilst the heightened visibility of women's professional sport in the past few years has inspired older girls who are active and value sport to dream, we know that for others it had little impact. Many of the day-to-day examples we heard, simply reinforced stereotypes and chipped away at girls' self-belief in their sporting abilities. On the back of increased visibility and successes in women's sport, we now have an opportunity to capitalise on that changing landscape and tackle the issue right at its root.



1 THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTS AND FAMILY

Parents and family have the biggest influence on their daughters' experiences and attitudes to sport and activity, through the choices they make about the activities their daughter takes part in, the examples they set through their own behaviour and the messages they convey, both intentionally and unintentionally, about women's sport.

The Expectancy-value model (Eccles and Harold, 1991) shows that parents encourage behaviours based on two factors: their expectations for the child's success and the value placed on that success. The model predicts that both factors can be shaped by gender stereotypes, where parents expect girls to be less capable or they don't fundamentally value 'sportiness' for girls.

All the parents we spoke to in our research wanted to give their children the best start and keep them healthy and active, but we saw that being a good parent was strongly influenced by gender stereotypes. Parents don't consciously realise they treat their sons differently to their daughters; however, we observed those differences play out in the language used and the expectations set. Parents also regularly sought external validation they were doing the right thing for their daughter by referencing other parents' choices, which simply perpetuates the gender divide.

> **"In my experience boys and girls do typically have differing personalities... Hormones and genetics must play a part as do societal stereotypes/ pressures. Boys are more combative and aggressive while girls are more caring and maternal. Boys like getting dirty and messy while girls less so."**
>
> DAD OF 5-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER

‘Girly girls’ can’t be sporty – parents are exaggerating personality traits

From a young age, girls are assigned personality traits that are not aligned with being sporty. Wider gender labelling can give parents fixed perceptions about their daughters’ likes and dislikes, which shape expectations and may inadvertently limit a girl’s experience of sport. When parents labelled them ‘girly girls’ or ‘princesses’, they assumed their daughters would only be interested in a narrow range of physical activities such as dance and gymnastics and did not encourage their daughters to try other activities, especially sports they might perceive to be for boys, which include most team sports. Furthermore, these labels and attitudes from family, teachers and wider society reinforced girls’ negative perceptions around their physical strength, capability and potential and this became self-fulfilling, creating a backdrop where girls didn’t feel like they were ‘designed’ to be good at sport.

> **“She’s a ‘girly girl’ so would not like a sport like rugby where it’s all about getting rough and dirty.”**
>
> MUM OF 9-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER

WIDER GENDER STEREOTYPES CAN GIVE PARENTS FIXED PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THEIR DAUGHTERS’ LIKES AND DISLIKES

- **Great variation in girls’ personalities –** some words more commonly used to describe girls than boys
- **Parents see girls’ personality traits as fixed/mutually exclusive –** claimed to always be this way
- **Prevents from trying to overcome certain challenges**
- **Parents subconsciously magnify traits** via gender stereotyping
- Affected by position in family, family make up and parents’ attitudes

FROM A YOUNG AGE, GIRLS ARE ASSIGNED PERSONALITY TRAITS THAT ARE NOT ALIGNED WITH BEING SPORTY

Girls are told they’re delicate and certain sports aren’t meant for them

Parents are more likely to tell girls to ‘be careful’ when being active from a young age. The impact on the girls was to reinforce the idea that some sports and activities are not safe for them and they are somehow too fragile to take part and may get injured.

However, prior to puberty, the physical difference between girls and boys, although real, is still fairly small, being approximately around 6% difference in terms of speed, strength and stamina. So, this fixed perception from parents, irrespective of its motivation, which may be an understandable desire to keep their daughters safe, and to be a good parent, sends girls the message that they are fragile and rules them out of certain activities. Also, parents prioritise ‘being kind’ as a behaviour for their daughters, which sometimes causes girls to confuse physical play with aggression and being less feminine, creating a disconnect.

> **“She’s always been fragile and not into that sort of thing. There’s no way she would play rugby.”**
>
> DAD OF 10-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER

Parents play a huge role in supporting their daughters to get active

Parents play a central role in their children's lives at this young age. When it comes to sport and physical activity, they are initially making the choices for them. Parents also have a role in introducing girls to new skills and games, seeking out formal opportunities for girls to take part, and facilitating those activities through payment and transport. Parents feel it is easier to keep sons active and wider popularity of boys' sports means they have more opportunities to help inspire and encourage them into sport.

Although able to list a wide range of sports and activity clubs in their local area, many parents felt a lot were not aimed at girls and that opportunities for young girls outside school tended to be limited to a small range of individual activities like swimming, or some with more of an aesthetic slant such as dance, gymnastics and with very few opportunities to take part in team sports. Even when team sports were inclusive of girls, the experience often didn't match up and girls struggled to feel a true sense of belonging when there were mainly boys in the teams and all the coaches were men.

Gender stereotypes still play out in the choices parents made for their daughters. In our survey the more physical activities such as rugby and rough and tumble were more likely to be dismissed by parents as 'not appropriate' for girls. Parents were also more likely to react similarly about skateboarding, squash, football and cricket, which play to certain traditional male stereotypes. And whilst the dial is shifting on football, 25% of parents still thought it wasn't appropriate for their daughters compared to only 11% feeling it wasn't appropriate for their sons. The young girls themselves similarly reflected that they were much more likely to see men playing most professional sports, with the exception of netball. This lack of visibility meant these sports were not even on the radar for parents or their daughters.

We need to make it easy for time-poor parents

Parents in our study told us they operated under extreme time pressures, constantly juggling work and childcare, particularly if they had more than one child.

We observed an interesting dynamic whereby lack of time and lack of inspiration, combined with the effort needed to motivate and sustain participation, conspired to make it especially hard for parents with daughters to find appropriate physical activities and to sustain interest.

Being time-poor meant that parents were not able to search out and investigate different activities for their daughters and generally received more flyers and information about boys' sport outside of school, so lacked inspiration of what sports or physical activities girls could do. They tended naturally to gravitate towards activities that other parents chose for practical reasons, to share lifts and to keep their daughter within certain friendship groups.

Against this backdrop, if girls weren't keen to do an activity, exhausted parents didn't push them. They didn't have the emotional bandwidth to fight with their daughters about attending an activity each week. We noted that some parents would give up quite quickly on their daughters when it came to sport and exercise, believing that it mattered less for a girl than a boy given the higher status attached to sporting success for boys.

This underlines the need for sport providers to make it as easy as possible for parents and to provide enjoyable ways for girls to take part. Parents told us that after-school clubs are particularly valuable because they don't require additional transportation and allow parents a few extra hours of working time. However, we also heard that club provision was not uniform across all areas and schools, and often had limited places.

30% of parents think playing sport is very important for their daughters, compared to 41% of parents for their sons.

> **"His love of football from a young age made it easier to get him to engage and football is a big common ground in boys from dads talking, playing, watching it to it being played on the school playground or a kick about in the park."**
>
> MUM OF 9-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER

> **"Although in a school setting, activities are mixed, outside of school they are still dominated by the one sex. So, the football clubs are mainly boys and [my daughter] would not enjoy that or have the right leader to help her."**
>
> MUM OF 9-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER

TIME POOR

> **"Working longer hours and finishing late leaves me tired and not much goodness left for the kids."**
> MUM OF 8-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER

LACK INSPIRATION

> **"My daughters school doesn't offer much extra-curricular or physical activity."**
> MUM OF 9-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER

EFFORT TO MOTIVATE

> **"She doesn't want to (take part). I ask her if she wants to join them when they are advertised but she says she's too tired and wants to come home and I don't force the issue."**
> MUM OF 9-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER

41% of parents of girls ages 5-11 say it is hard to motivate their daughters to take part in regular sport or physical activity.

Mums and dads are both important role models

Parents also have an inspirational role through their own attitudes to sport and physical activity and the behaviours they model. Our survey of parents showed that sporty daughters were much more likely to have sporty parents. Yet we identified several differences between the way mums and dads interacted with their sons and daughters in the physical activity space and also ways in which their previous experiences of sport and exercise influenced their approach and choices. And mums had generally had less positive experiences compared to dads.

Every family is slightly different; however, overwhelmingly, we saw that mums were more likely than dads to be managing most of the children's day-to-day activities, with 89% describing themselves as the 'family organiser'.

Girls in this age group particularly admired their mums' hard work to keep the family going as well as their careers. When it comes to choices of extra-curricular activities, we saw that mums were more likely than dads to be managing this, with 51% of mums claiming to be the parent mainly responsible for this versus only 17% of dads.

Mums tended to spend the most time with their daughters and had a deeper understanding of their daughters' emotional and psychological needs. However, mums were often less confident in introducing sport to their daughters and generally enjoyed sport and exercise less themselves, with only 43% of mums really enjoying it and 20% actively disliking it. Where mum had had a negative experience, particularly of team sport, it influenced their decisions for their daughter, making them want to protect her, and if anything did go wrong, they were quick to remove their daughter from the activity.

> **"If she doesn't enjoy a sport, I don't feel I should push this onto her as there are lots of other things she can do and be happy doing."**
>
> MUM OF 8-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER

82% of girls ages 5 to 11 with parents who loved sport also loved sport themselves, compared to 59% of girls with parents who didn't like sport.

MUM TENDS TO BE 'TEAM CAPTAIN' EVEN IN THE MOST EQUAL HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURES

- In control of family diary
- Plans job and social diary around rest of household – strict routines
- Spends most time with children
- Takes full ownership and responsibility, even where tasks shared more equally with partner
- Juggling work, childcare, household tasks, own needs
- Sacrifices own time and energy for family

"I will put the kids first and my activities come second whereas (dad) gets up, gets his gym kit on and walks out of the door knowing that I've got the kids."

MUM OF 5-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER

"I woke up, got ready, made breakfasts for kids and husband. Made sure kids were getting themselves ready. Put washing on, hung washing out. Put another load of washing out, went to watch my eldest play football."

MUM OF 9-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER

Most families told us that dads were the 'sporty ones' and generally had more positive experiences of sport in their past so were more likely to encourage their daughters to take part, especially in team sport. But when daughters lacked resilience in trying something new or got frustrated that they couldn't achieve something on the first try, dads struggled to navigate these challenges. Dad was more likely to spend time with his son(s) taking part in sport and activities and was also more likely to enjoy sport and exercise generally.

It is clear that time-poor mums and dads need more support so they can confidently encourage their daughters to develop a love of sport. In general, mums need more opportunities, help with inspiration around what to do with their daughters and confidence to introduce sports and skills, whilst dads need more guidance on how to help their daughters overcome frustrations and anxieties that they might not have seen in their sons.

Siblings are an important influence on girls' sporting activity

Siblings can have an important influence on motivation and confidence to play sport and older active siblings can be playmates, provide encouragement and help role model and inspire younger siblings with the activities they do. However, we also saw that brothers can bring the 'playground mentality' and gender stereotypes associated with sport back to the home by being critical of their sisters' skills or discouraging them from playing 'boys' sports which inevitably impacts confidence.

This can result in dad stepping in to play with the son and the mum doing other activities with the daughter and limited whole family activity times.

> **"She likes to play football and basketball with [her brother] in the garden, but he can be mean and say she is rubbish. I have to step in and go on her side to help him see it's not about winning but having fun and getting fresh air."**
>
> DAD OF 8-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER

Creating a positive start point at home – an example of success

Multiple elements are necessary to give girls a positive start point with sport and physical activity. One family in our research study was raising two happily "sporty" girls, ages 10 and 8. While every family is different, we've mapped out what worked for them.

These parents have given their daughters a solid foundation in the skills, sense of belonging and attitude needed to progress in sport. This foundation has started a virtuous cycle for the girls: as they continue to engage in sport, their confidence and enjoyment grow, and the encouragement and support they receive helped counter the negative messaging they hear elsewhere.

ENCOURAGING A LIFELONG LOVE OF SPORT IN GIRLS: A SUCCESS STORY

From play fighting with dad, to going to rugby matches as a family, to enrolling their daughter in a girl's football team with a home-grown female coach, this is how one family is nurturing their two daughters' love of sport.

"He's always done play fighting with them – it's 'all pile on'!"

Dad plays with girls – rough and tumble and football in the garden

Mum brought up with sport and always enjoyed it. Makes time for own activities.

"I watch it with dad on TV. I like Robbie Burrows."

"Saturday was perfect! Football Saturday morning then rugby in the afternoon."

Watches sport on TV/YouTube, increasing amount of girls sport

Whole family support, dad's team local rugby team, attend matches and get involved

"I want them to see girls can play any sport. She was scared to tackle so I told her to 'get stuck in' like she does with me in the garden."

Try girls out in many different activities from cheer leading to football

Encourage and support girls by watching matches and supporting through challenges at school and in clubs

"It was really fun, we all got really muddy and gave our mums a hug."

Found a supportive local girl's team and home-grown female coach

FOR INSPIRATION

DAUGHTERS & DADS ACTIVE & EMPOWERED

Take a look at how the 'Daughters and Dads Active and Empowered' initiative leveraged the power of dads to support their young daughters.

This programme encourages dads or father figures to spend quality time with their daughter, participating in fun physical activities together whilst learning how to improve skills and building confidence, self-esteem and resilience in the girls. It also gently nudges dads to view their daughters differently; not as fragile, but rather as strong, courageous and capable.

After the 11-week programme, girls felt much more passionate about sport and exercise, and were open to trying new sports. Dads felt they viewed their daughter(s) differently and were more confident to coach and help their daughter(s) overcome challenges.

Daughters and Dads Active and Empowered Programme - Women In Sport

"As a dad, you want to be careful that you're not being too boisterous and hurting them. What I learnt... was actually she can hold her own and gets into it and actually enjoys being thrown about!"

DAD IN PROGRAMME

2 THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOLS

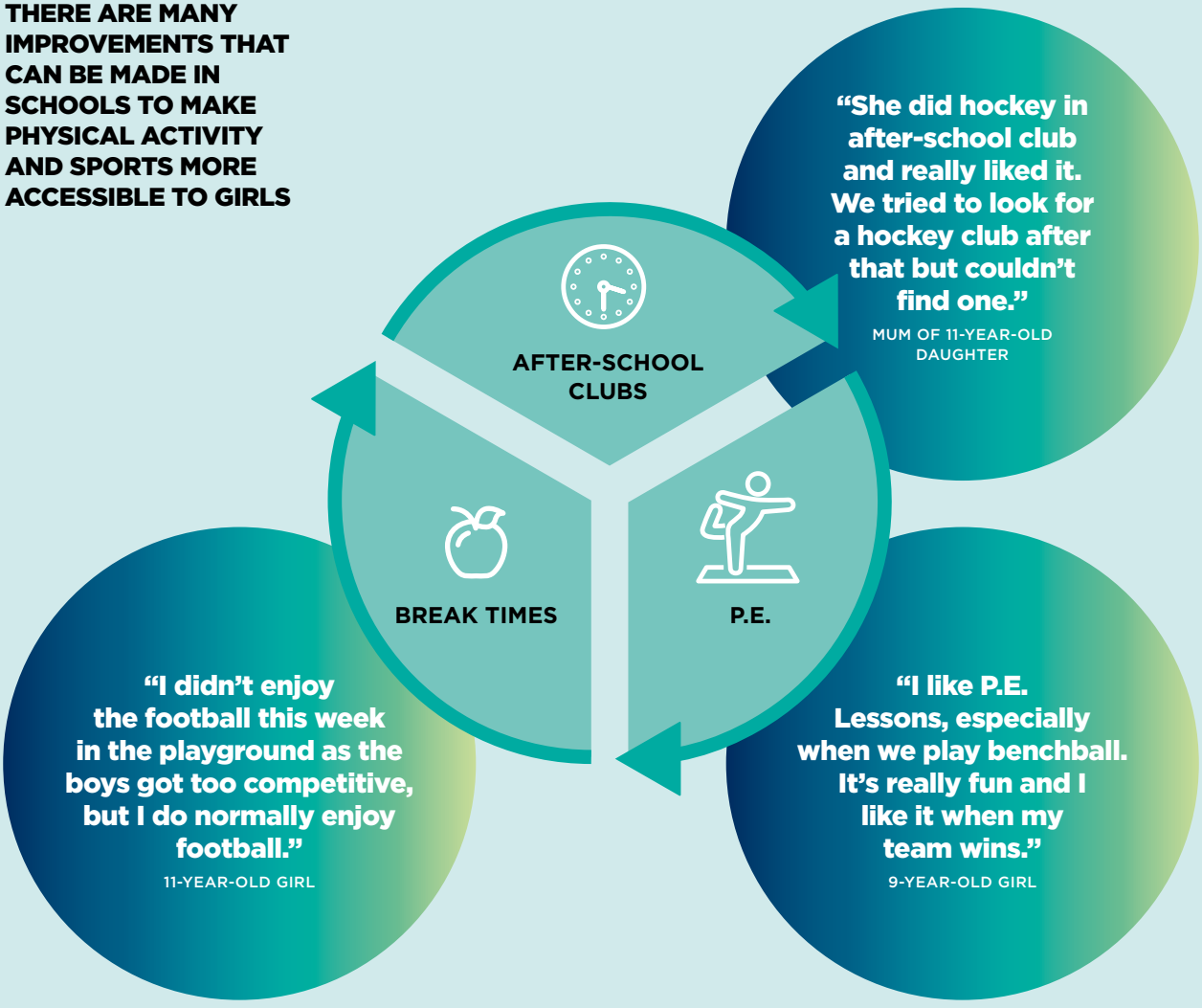
We heard from parents that schools have a very significant influence on girls' attitudes to sport and physical activity, yet girls are sometimes at a disadvantage.

40% of parents felt boys get more opportunities to take part in school sport and exercise and 34% that girls are not given the same encouragement.

In our survey four in ten parents felt that boys get more opportunities to take part in sport and exercise at school compared to girls and just over a third felt that girls are not given the same encouragement as boys.

For many girls, school PE is their first or only experience of taking part in sport and exercise and therefore has a significant impact on enjoyment and confidence. However, it is more than just the formal PE lessons that support girls' physical activity journey. The way in which the school promotes the value of sport and exercise for girls, the playground experience and what it offers in terms of after-school clubs are all important enabling factors too. Out of the main three ways in which girls participate in sport and exercise at school, PE and after-school clubs are a more positive experience than the playground.

THERE ARE MANY IMPROVEMENTS THAT CAN BE MADE IN SCHOOLS TO MAKE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND SPORTS MORE ACCESSIBLE TO GIRLS



Promoting the right mindset around sport and exercise for girls

Schools play a role in establishing the right mindset around sport and underlining its equal importance and value for girls and boys alike and yet schools were not immune from societal expectations and gender stereotyping. For example, we heard sport and physical activity talked about as important tools to channel boys' energy, but not in the same way for girls. We also heard several examples of schools prioritising boys' participation in sport over girls' by providing more opportunities and celebrating boys' sporting achievements above those of girls. Parents also told us that some schools de-prioritised girls' sport in difficult times such as during the pandemic, sending the message that it mattered less than boys' sport.

> **"[During covid] the boys' teams always seem to be running, but the girls' football team seems to be a bit more sporadic."**
>
> DAD OF 8-YEAR-OLD GIRL IN OUR DADS PROGRAMME

Formal PE lessons have a critical role in developing skills, competency, and positive attitudes

Formal PE not only develops important fundamental movement skills, but shapes views and attitudes towards physical activity for both girls and boys and builds that self-confidence and sense of belonging. With girls and boys often taking part in PE together, there is the opportunity to create an equal and mutually supportive environment. Some parents spoke of the need to provide more inspiration to engage girls in PE lessons and we heard several examples where PE lessons were divisive and put girls at a disadvantage. One, where the class was split by ability and the 'bottom group' was all girls, underlined the messaging that girls are less capable. We also heard that girls sometimes receive less encouragement.

Only **28%** of parents felt that their school provided truly inspirational PE lessons

Girls are starting with a skills gap

Our literature review into various academic studies showed that many girls are entering primary school with a deficit of fundamental movement skills: basic movements needed to take part in physical activity, such as kicking, running, bouncing, striking, catching etc. This will be linked to the impact of early years stereotyping we describe above. Add to this the experience at primary school and the girls are also leaving school with this a physical literacy gender deficit. These are the building blocks children need to be able to progress to the more complex skills required of both organised games and sport, and mastery gives children the confidence, motivation, and self-efficacy to take part in these kinds of activities.[3] This deficit in attaining the basic skills right at the start means that girls quickly feel at a disadvantage, particularly when taking part in team sports and helps explain why self-confidence takes a hit early on.

Multiple studies have found that fundamental movement skills split along gender lines from an early age. While girls generally have higher mastery of locomotor skills (run, hop, horizontal jump), they are less likely to have mastery of object-control skills (throwing, catching, striking, bouncing, dribbling and kicking).[4] An Australian longitudinal cohort study found that mastering object-control skills in childhood increased the likelihood that children took part in physical activity generally and organised sport underlining the importance of establishing good skills at a when young.

> **"When we play badminton, the teachers don't tell me I'm doing it well, but they seem to notice the boys more when they are doing something good like in football."**
>
> 9-YEAR-OLD GIRL

Overall, children with good object-control skills in primary school were **20%** more likely to be doing some physical activity in adolescence than those with poor object-control skills.[5]

[3] Barnett, L.M., Stodden, D., Cohen, K.E., Smith, J.J, Lubans, D.R, Lenoir, M., Livonen, S., Miller, A.D., Laukkanen, A., Dudley, D., Lander, N.J., Brown, H. and Morgan, P.J. (2016) 'Fundamental movement skills: an important focus', Journal of Teaching in Physical Education, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 219–225.

[4] Holfelder, B. and Schott, N. (2014) 'Relationship of fundamental movement skills and physical activity in children and adolescents: A systematic review', Psychology of Sport and Exercise, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 382–391. Hardy, L.L., King, L., Farrell, L., Macniven, R. and Howlett, S. (2010) 'Fundamental movement skills among Australian preschool children', Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport, vol. 13, no. 5, pp. 503–508.

[5] Barnett, L.M., Van Beurden, E., Morgan, P.J., Brooks, L.O., Beard, J.R. (2009) 'Childhood motor skill proficiency as a predictor of adolescent physical activity', Journal of Adolescent Health, vol. 44, no. 3, pp. 252–259.

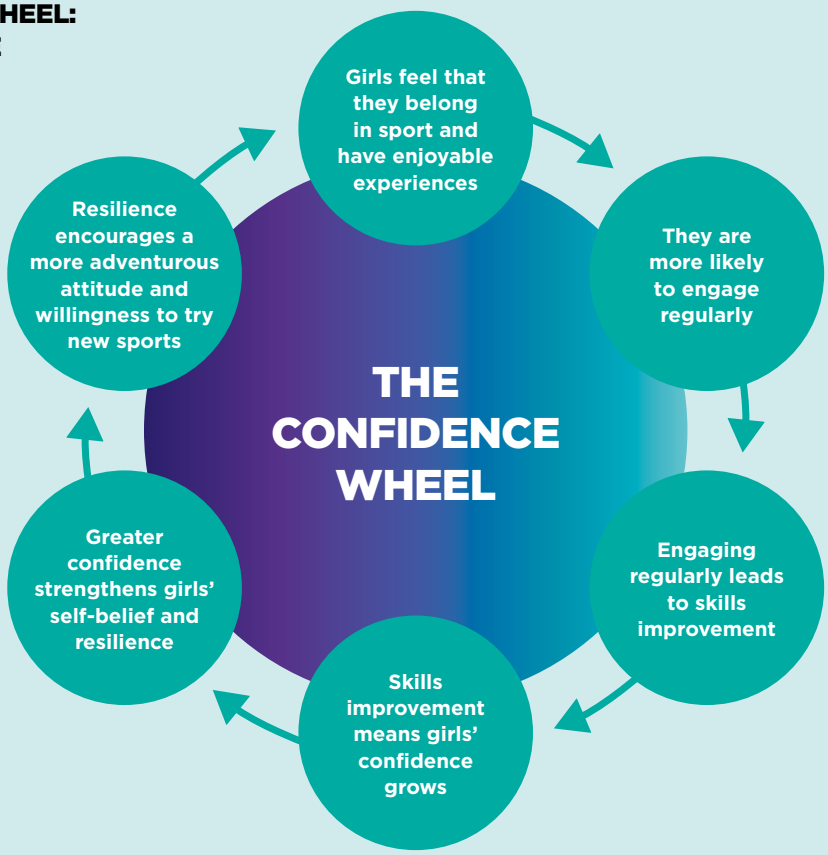
Why does the skills gap exist?

The national curriculum focuses on fundamental movement skills in Key Stage 1 (children age 5-7 years in years 1 and 2); theoretically, this means that boys and girls should have equal opportunities to master these skills. However, as discussed above, studies show that this is not the case. This gap might be due at least in part to the fact that boys receive more encouragement and positive reinforcement for taking part in sport than girls do, both at home and at school.[6] If boys are then more active outside of PE, at break times, after school and on weekends, then they are reinforcing the skills they learn in PE in ways that girls are not. It therefore becomes difficult for girls to catch up if they are not also taking part in informal or formal extracurricular sports.

The impact of the skills gap

When girls don't master fundamental movement skills from a young age, they get stuck in a vicious cycle. We heard in our research that when girls start to feel worse than their teammates or classmates in a given sport or physical activity, this affects both confidence and enjoyment. They then avoid that activity and skills will not be reinforced during play time. Meanwhile, their peers who continue to play will improve. The skills gap then grows, leading girls to believe that they can no longer keep up, embedding a sense of failure and no longer being good enough.

THE CONFIDENCE WHEEL: HOW TO REINFORCE BELONGING AND SELF-BELIEF



[6] Barnett, L.M., Morgan, P.J., Van Beurden, E., Brooks, L.O., Beard, J.R. (2010) 'Gender differences in motor skill proficiency from childhood to adolescence: a longitudinal study', Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, vol. 81, no. 2, pp. 162-170.

After-school clubs are important facilitators

After-school clubs were seen to provide an opportunity for girls to try new activities in a familiar yet more relaxed environment than school PE and to have a taster of different sports and activities they may not get the chance to try otherwise. Importantly, after-school clubs make it easier for parents logistically because they are a continuation of the school day, so no additional transport is required to get them there and a later finish time from school can be particularly beneficial to working parents. The different activities possible through after-school clubs also saves parents the effort in seeking out appropriate activities and enables the girls to attend with their school friends.

It was clear from the parents we spoke to that the provision of after-school clubs varies widely across schools and in our survey only 30% of parents described the provision as 'very good'. Some schools offered a choice of different clubs, some just one or two, others nothing at all in relation to sport and exercise. Not all after-school clubs were free, and parents sometimes found them cost prohibitive so would only opt for the free sessions. It was very hit and miss.

However, even when clubs were available, we heard that girls were not always able to get into the clubs on offer. Most schools seemed to have limited availability for places and operated a 'first come, first served' policy or a 'one club only' policy. Those clubs that were populated predominantly by boys sometimes left girls feeling like they didn't really belong and this impacted their likelihood of sticking with the activity.

> **"I would get her to do all after-school classes, but this would quickly become expensive. I think these should be free at school."**
>
> MUM OF 7-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER

45% of parents felt that boys dominate the physical spaces at playtime.

The playground is dominated by boys' football and games

The playground is where exercise becomes more about fun, play and freedom and is where many of the learnt skills are reinforced and embedded. However, there are a number of barriers to active play for girls in the playground and these have wider implications for girls' participation in sport more generally. Many of the young girls we spoke to had had a negative experience of playing active games in the playground.

It was evident that boys often dominate the playground with games of football, leaving less space for girls to play their own team games. Girls also have fewer experiences of alternative sports or games to bring to the playground, and therefore were not sure what to play. If girls tried to join in the boys' football games, they told us they often received negative comments about their lack of skills or were excluded from the game as boys would only pass to other boys, playing up to gender stereotypes around girls not being good at football.

Lack of experience in a team situation meant that some girls found playtime football more aggressive than they were used to. This was particularly evident as girls are getting older, towards the end of primary school, when the skills gap between girls and boys can widen and many girls prefer to chat with friends rather than join in with physical games and activities.

Finally, the uniform girls are normally expected to wear to school, skirts and unsupportive slip-on shoes, limits carefree activity and playground games.

> **"The boys won't pass the ball to us and they get really mad if we let a goal in."**
>
> 9-YEAR-OLD GIRL

> **"I didn't enjoy the football this week in the playground as the boys got too competitive, but I do normally enjoy football."**
>
> 11-YEAR-OLD GIRL

FOR INSPIRATION

CASE STUDY: PALTERTON SCHOOL

Take a look at how one school approached some of these challenges to make sure that girls and boys are equally encouraged and skilled to take part in sport.

- **Early focus on fundamental movement skills:**
  All students are expected to demonstrate these skills by the end of Key Stage 1, providing a solid base of skills for learning a range of sports. Result – 90-95% of Year 6 children involved in sport.
- **Providing a supportive environment where the focus is on progression:**
  Incorporating competition into sport for both girls and boys, whilst nurturing a supportive ethos amongst the pupils, rewarding effort, personal progression, and loyalty, with winning only one of many metrics of success.
- **Encouraging mutual respect and equal opportunities:**
  Encouraging mutual respect amongst girls and boys and offering equal opportunities with girls and boys attending the Friday night football club. Now boys are seeing the girls perform well, they no longer have the issue of boys not passing the ball to girls.
- **Ensuring they're not perpetuating gender stereotypes:**
  Creating mixed teams regardless of gender and selecting the most capable girls and boys for sports teams.

This success hasn't come quickly. However, as a result of their hard work, parents of former pupils say this approach has encouraged their daughters to stick with physical activity into secondary school, as well as building their confidence and resilience.

3 WHAT INSPIRES YOUNG GIRLS' PARTICIPATION

Tapping into girls' motivations

Alongside building the right skills and surrounding them with positive messaging, it is vital to motivate and engage girls in the right way. Having a purpose and taking part in activities which felt meaningful as well as enjoyable emerged as important. In this study we found that girls' enjoyment and motivation in sport centred around four key elements: personal achievement; a feeling of belonging and familiarity; seeing others like them taking part; and experiencing that feel-good factor and freedom sport and exercise elicit.

The pride experienced through progress and personal achievement is important in sustaining participation for girls. Young girls value the opportunity to progress and improve and when feedback is delivered in a positive way this motivated them to continue in sport and increased their enjoyment. It is vital for girls to gain this sense of personal achievement rather than focussing only on the outcomes of 'winning or losing'.

Girls that were most passionate about their sport and physical activity were more likely to have experienced a sense of personal achievement and appreciate the benefits of participation vs. saying it was 'fun' or 'their friends did it'. What provides a sense of achievement and what feels good varies between girls depending on personality. It is vital that girls get to try different sports and activities to be able to see what fits best with them.

GIRLS' ENJOYMENT AND MOTIVATION ARE DRIVEN BY 4 KEY ELEMENTS

1

PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENT

- Making progress
- Recognition/praise
- Challenge/ competition
- Progress/feedback
- Given responsibility
- Key to driving a passion for sport

2

BELONGING/ FAMILIARITY

- Involves support from friends or family – mum, brother, dad etc.
- Gives sense of belonging (e.g. routine, uniform, part of the club

3

PEER ROLE MODELS

- Someone to aspire to
- Someone they feel is similar to them

4

FEELS GOOD/ SENSE OF RELEASE

- Even more important since lockdown
- Uses up energy, feel free, excitement, fresh air

Don’t assume that girls don’t like competition

Just like boys, different girls have different appetites for competition. However, the belief that most girls don’t like competition is something we heard from parents in this research and hear frequently from coaches and teachers in other areas of our research. But this is not what we heard from the girls themselves! Most girls were happy to compete when they felt like they were playing within their capability; what they actually shy away from is being set up to fail or feeling like the weak link, particularly in a team environment. When girls with limited exposure to sport or physical activity are forced to play with others, sometimes boys, who have more skills and experience, they are turned off to competition, because it makes them feel bad about themselves. They confuse lack of experience with lack of natural ability.

Unfortunately, this misunderstanding of girls’ attitudes to competition has resulted in competition being taken away from girls entirely in some instances, to let them play “just for fun”. This seems to originate from the belief that fun and competition can’t go hand in hand. It can make the activity feel meaningless and without purpose it can, in fact, reinforce the message that sport is not taken as seriously for girls. However, if girls have the skills necessary and are competing in a fair environment, they can thrive. This is especially true for team sports.

> **“She doesn’t want to do something she is not good at.”**
>
> DAD OF 5-YEAR-OLD GIRL

> **“It doesn’t matter if we don’t win as we just all help each other in the team, and we know we’ll get better.”**
>
> 11-YEAR-OLD GIRL

Girls fear failure, especially in front of peers and teachers

We observed that girls struggled to build up resilience in sport due to the immense pressure they felt to do well, even at this young age. The binary nature of "getting it right" in sport (you either catch the ball or drop it, make the goal or miss it) compounded by having less developed fundamental movement skills and expectations generally that they would not be as good as boys, meant that girls enjoyed it less.

Girls' negative perceptions of their own skills were reinforced by comments and actions from others, such as when boys refuse to pass them the football at break time or when PE teachers give girls the "easier" option in an activity. Girls worried about embarrassing themselves in a PE lesson or letting their team down if they made a mistake in a game. This fear was exacerbated by boys' tendency to get mad when girls let a goal in during PE or break time ball games, or when the boys blamed 'the girls' when they lost. Against this backdrop of an inculcated fear of failure, teachers' and coaches' feedback mattered even more for girls.

> "You have this perfect picture of what it's supposed to go like. And then when it doesn't go right, you feel disappointed and kind of, like, crushed."
>
> 11-YEAR-OLD GIRL

GIRLS DO NOT WANT TO TAKE PART IN SPORT OR ACTIVITIES THEY DON'T FEEL THEY ARE GOOD AT OR WORRY ABOUT 'FAILING'.

✔

Most likely to feel confident in abilities when...

Experienced praise from others

- Outcome or judgement is subjective
- Prompts lots of praise
- e.g. drawing, arts, crafts, singing, dancing, a good listener, gymnastics

✘

More likely to lack confidence in abilities when...

Experienced what they perceive as 'failure'

- Activities that have obvious success/failure outcomes
- Sports/activity and school work e.g. catching a ball, ice skating, dribbling in football, push ups, back flips, maths/ spelling/phonics

Experienced negative judgement

- Experienced from boys, especially football
- Receive less praise than for other activities or vs boys
- Pressure of letting team down

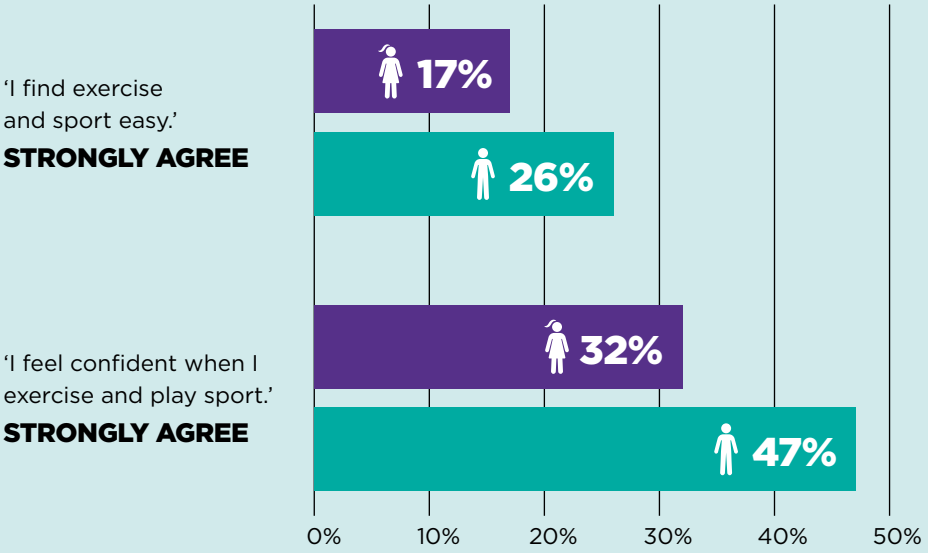
> "Yes, I'd like to think that if I practice, I can improve because when we're doing things like football before I was doubting myself, thinking that I couldn't do it, and I wasn't improving. Well, now I realise that I am improving. Not just in the skills, but as in with my confidence in what I actually can do."
>
> 10-YEAR-OLD GIRL.

Girls are not born under-confident or with lower self-belief

Parents recognised this lower confidence amongst their daughters, although some saw it as a natural part of a girl's response to sport and activity rather than something created through external factors around them that could be prevented and changed.

Supporting confidence and self-belief is therefore fundamental. Various academic studies have shown that judgements about our own ability to succeed is a better predictor of behaviour than actual ability and that these stem from a number of sources, including comparing one's own skills to others. Self-efficacy in sport, is already lower for girls than for boys, even in primary school, and the Sport England Active Lives CYP survey shows that girls are less confident than boys in their ability to take part in sport and exercise and less likely to say it is easy (a measure of competence).[7]

CONFIDENCE AND COMPETENCE IN SPORT IN CHILDREN IN YEARS 3-6



"I think boys like sport more than girls and that boys have more confidence to play sport. I think girls – especially with social media today, puts lots of pressure on girls and they lack confidence and are more insecure than boys."

MUM OF 5-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER

Only **32%** of girls in school years 3-6 say they feel confident when exercising or playing sport.[7]

[7] Sport England (2021) Active Lives Children and Young People Survey, Academic Year 2020-21

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

We need to recognise that low self-confidence in young girls is not in-built, but created by what they see, hear and experience around them, and can therefore be prevented.

If we can close the skills gap for girls in primary school, eliminate external messaging telling girls they don't belong in sport and counter with positive expectations of success, we can support girls to build an internal narrative of self-belief and self-efficacy. A critical factor in this will be to encourage those around them to have the same mindset and high expectations for girls as for boys. In this way we will set off a virtuous circle that will propel girls to continue their involvement in sport.

It's hardly surprising that, with what we have discovered in this research, girls are already primed to disengage with sport and activity well before puberty. We know that a significant 43% of teenage girls, 1.3 million girls in the UK, have fallen out of love with sport and exercise since primary school and no longer consider themselves sporty.[8] How can we give them the tools they need to keep up their sport and physical activity habits throughout their teenage years and into adulthood? If we could turn back the clock for these girls, what would we do differently?

[8] Women in Sport (2022) Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls: Tackling Teenage Disengagement

5 Success Factors

1 Surround girls with the expectation that they will succeed

From the outset parents, teachers, and peers need to show that they value girls taking part in sport and express an expectation that girls will do well. This will stop girls questioning whether they deserve to be in sport and whether they can be good, or feeling that they must justify taking part. If the narrative continues to be that sport doesn't really matter for girls and they can never be as good as boys, it will continue to shape girls' expectations and remain a self-fulfilling prophecy. Changing this narrative will create a stronger sense of belonging in sport and resilience in society.

2 Build girls' skills early so there's a level playing field

Girls should be encouraged to, expected to and supported to master the fundamental skills they need to succeed in sport from a young age, at the same pace and to the same level as boys. Once established, these skills allow girls to choose diverse activities in playtime, build their capability, and embark on sport and exercise with comparable confidence and performance to boys. Given there is a skills gap now, studies show that short-term interventions to upskill children in fundamental movement skills in pre-school and primary school can level the playing field between boys and girls. Skills give sport meaning for girls, makes competition fairer and success more attainable. In this way self-belief can be built and sustained, rather than confidence taking a nose-dive.

3 Don't 'dumb it down' for girls

Girls want to feel embraced and valued in sport, not just "tolerated" as if they are second-rate participants, or moved into less meaningful activities. The recent successes in women's professional sport challenge the assumption that most girls don't want sport and activities to be competitive and sometimes even tough, just so long as girls are given the choice and equipped with the right skills. We need to stop the constant drum-beat of messages telling very young girls that they are fragile and weak and don't like competition. We should instead reinforce the expectation that they can be courageous, powerful and fearless in their own way and are expected to be, and can be, good at sport.

4 Provide many more opportunities for young girls

Girls need to have as many opportunities as boys in school PE, after-school clubs and in the community. Team sport opportunities for girls are particularly lacking. Offering a range of sports and activities, with nothing off-limits, will inspire girls and allow them to flourish. The environment must also be right, with girls genuinely welcomed and equally valued if they are to enjoy the experience and want to continue. Also, importantly, the opportunities must be visible and accessible, both financially and geographically. Given that currently opportunities are limited, younger girls would benefit from more opportunities for families to get active together to reinforce skills through play.

5 Harness the school and after school environment

Use every opportunity at school to embed the right skills and build mutual appreciation, value and respect between boys and girls in PE, after-school clubs and the playground. School provides a unique opportunity to offer sporting opportunities equally for all, across diverse communities, and to promote boys' and girls' sport fairly, recognising their achievements in the same way. Teachers and coaches need to be aware that most girls have been surrounded by limiting messages in their early years, and therefore should invest in closing the skills and confidence gap that results. This skills gap, the attitude of some boys and cultural diversity, may require single sex sport to be available in some circumstances. Now is the right time to make sure the day-to-day messaging at school is aligned with the growing media profile of women's sport. This will shape the next generation's attitudes.

Next steps

Women in Sport are building on our insight through further research with young boys and girls and developing initiatives around these five important success factors through our policy, campaigning and programme work. We will be looking to partner with others in the sector to drive change to ensure a positive start point in sport for young girls in all their rich diversity.

Check out our website if you want to get involved in future work in this area. We would love to hear from you: www.womeninsport.org

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THANK YOU TO...

All the brilliant girls and their families for sharing their lives and experiences with us during this research project!

Thank you to Sport England who helped fund this research.

Thank you to our research agency partner, Platypus, together with Dr Adam Galpin, University of Salford, who helped design, implement, and interpret the research with us.

Women in Sport
4th Floor, House of Sport
190 Great Dover Street
London SE1 4YB

020 3137 6263

womeninsport_uk
ukwomeninsport
womeninsport_uk

WOMENINSPORT.ORG