

SPORT, STEREOTYPES AND STOLEN DREAMS

WHY GIRLS STILL FEEL THEY DON'T BELONG IN SPORT

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Women in Sport knows that sport gives girls and women resilience, courage and self-belief. We also know that gender stereotypes hold girls and women back from sport, and in life. In this study we explored where gender stereotyping begins so we can challenge and inspire to create lasting change for women and girls in sport and society.

This document summarises a major research programme we ran into girls' early experiences of sport and physical activity and the attitudes and influences that shape perceptions at this young age.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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.

Currently, girls are starting out surrounded by expectations that will limit their enjoyment of and participation in sport and physical activity. By the time they are teenagers many girls have already decided that they do not 'belong' in sport, confidence and self-efficacy are on the decline, and perceptions of themselves as sporty or not sporty are often cemented and hard to reverse. This gap continues into girls' adult lives, with women and girls of every age group being less likely to be active than boys and men.

We strongly believe that 'getting it right' at an early age is key. Our insight starts to build an understanding of how to provide girls the best possible start-point, nurturing girls' competence and self-belief from a young age to build resilience and kick-start a life-long love of being active.

In primary school, **69%** of girls rate their self-belief as good or very good compared to **79%** of boys.*

Girls are not hearing the right messages or developing the right skills for sport.

Two key areas go hand-in-hand to provide a positive start point for young girls in relation to sport and physical activity: the right supporting narrative and the right skills.

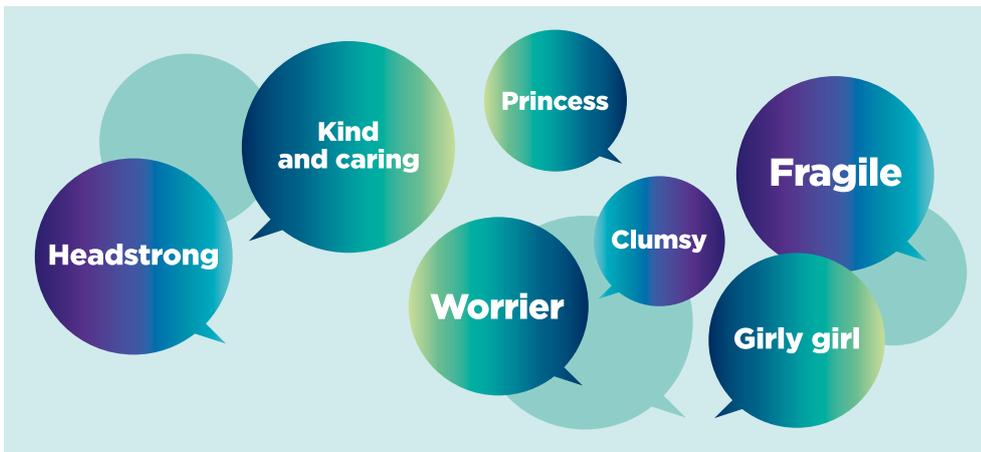


*Youth Sport Trust (2021) Girls Active National Reports for Boys' and Girls' Data

Currently, we are giving girls the wrong messages. 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; and that sport can be at odds with femininity and a girl's identity.

At the same time, young girls are not supported to develop the fundamental movement skills they need to take part in and enjoy sport and physical activity. Girls confuse this skills gap with a lack of natural ability and develop the mindset that they are not, and never will be, good enough to take part.

Providing a supportive environment and the right skills will fuel girls' confidence and resilience, strengthening the feeling that they belong in sport. In this way we will set off a virtuous circle so that when they reach adolescence, sport and physical activity are an important part of their identity.



Gender stereotypes influence young girls' experiences of sport and physical activity.

Even at a young age, gender stereotypes assign girls personality traits that do not align with being 'sporty'. This shapes the attitudes and behaviours of the key influencers on girls in early childhood: their parents and family, and the school environment.

PARENTS / CARERS AND FAMILY

All parents / carers want to give their children the best start, but being a good parent is influenced by gender stereotypes. Without realising it, parents treat their daughters and sons differently. Parents and family have the biggest influence on girls' experiences of sport and physical activity through:

1. Parents' choices of the activities their daughter takes part in. This can be limited by:
 - Perceptions of what their daughter likes ("girly girls can't be sporty") and that their daughter is delicate so certain sports aren't "appropriate" for them;
 - Time pressures coupled with the need to motivate their daughter to attend activities;
 - A lack of inspiration due to the limited activities offered for girls.
2. Positive or negative role modelling of behaviours. Sporty children are much more likely to have sporty parents. However, parents interact differently with their sons and daughters. Mums tend to spend the most time with daughters but can be less confident in introducing sport and generally enjoyed sport less themselves. Dads are often the 'sporty' parent but the influence of gender stereotypes means that Dads are less likely to support their daughters in sport than their sons, and they can feel unsure of how best to support their daughters.

Only **30%** of parents think playing sport is very important for their daughters compared to **41%** of parents for their son.

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.

3. Interactions with siblings that impact motivation and confidence. Older active siblings can be playmates, provide encouragement and help role model and inspire younger siblings. However, some brothers can reinforce gender stereotypes and bring the 'playground mentality' home by being critical of their sisters' skills or discouraging them from playing 'boys' sports.

THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Schools have a significant influence on girls' attitudes to sport and physical activity, through PE lessons, afterschool clubs, and in the playground. Yet girls are often at a disadvantage with boys receiving more opportunities and more encouragement to take part in sport, widening the skills gap. The school environment can influence girls' experiences of sport and physical activity through:

- The mindset they promote around sport and exercise for girls. Schools can be prone to gender stereotypes, prioritising boys' participation, providing more opportunities for boys, and celebrating their achievements more.
- PE lessons that do not support girls to develop skills, competency, and positive attitudes; and can put girls at a disadvantage e.g., splitting on ability.
- A limited choice of after-school clubs that are often not visible or accessible enough, and which do not make girls feel genuinely welcomed and valued.
- The playground environment, which should promote fun, play, and freedom for both boys and girls, but can often be dominated by boys' football and games.

49% of girls aged 5 to 11 take part in a team sport, compared to **70%** of boys.*

Only **28%** of parents thought their child's school provided truly inspirational PE lessons.

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How can we motivate young girls to participate in physical activity and sport?

Alongside building the right skills and surrounding them with positive messaging, it is vital to motivate and engage girls in the right way. In particular:

- Girls are not born under-confident or with lower self-esteem, but develop this due to external factors - supporting confidence and self-belief is therefore essential;
- Girls can thrive in competitive environments, given the right skills and in a fair environment;
- As a result of stereotyping, self-belief is reduced and more girls fear failure, especially in front of peers and teachers, so receiving recognition and positive feedback is key.

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.

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

What do we need to do to give girls a more positive start?

By combining these findings with our understanding of girls' broader lives we developed five success factors to creating a positive start for young girls in sport:

1 Surround girls with the expectation that they will succeed:

Parents, teachers and peers must help to change the narrative by showing that they value girls taking part in sport and expressing expectations that they will do well.

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

Encourage, expect, and support girls from a young age to master the fundamental skills they need to succeed in sport. Skills give sport meaning for girls, make competition fairer and success more attainable, building and sustaining self-belief.

3 Don't 'dumb it down' for girls:

Stop the messaging of young girls being fragile, weak and not liking competition. 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 more opportunities for young girls:

Girls need to have as many opportunities as boys in school PE, after-school clubs and in the community, particularly in team sport. Opportunities must be visible, accessible and create an environment where girls are genuinely welcomed and equally valued.

5 Harness the school and after school environment:

Teachers and coaches need to invest in closing the skills and confidence gaps between boys and girls. Use school to embed the right attitudes amongst boys towards girls in sport, so there is greater appreciation, value and respect for girls playing sport.



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