

BUSTING THE MYTHS ABOUT GIRLS AND BOYS IN COMMUNITY SPORT

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Gender stereotypes are embedded in us all. They lead to biases and inequalities with wide-reaching consequences for children.

In sport we know that gender stereotypes can limit girls' sporting experience, undermine their sports skills, and with this their self-belief and joy. Girls from less affluent backgrounds and diverse communities, or disabled girls may face additional barriers to sport.

Commit

Clubs and sports providers commit to raising awareness of gender stereotypes and dispelling myths about girls and boys in sport to create positive environments for girls in which they can thrive.



Educate

Clubs and sport providers educate everyone involved about the impact of harmful stereotyping and how to coach equitably. They ensure everyone understands how their interactions can have a lasting effect on girls' participation in sport.

Change the narrative

Everyone in the sporting environment takes active steps to recognise and remedy stereotyping language, behaviour, and assumptions. Gender equality is spelt out in club values and regularly shared with parents and carers.



Below are some common myths based on stereotypes that need to be challenged around girls and boys in sport.

“Boys are better at sport than girls”

If we only value absolutes, the physical differences between boys and girls, especially after puberty, will imply that boys are indeed better at sport. The only other gendered difference may be in sporting skills which girls will lack due to lack of experience, caused by limiting stereotyping.

But what does being good at sport really mean? Beyond absolutes such as strength, speed and winning, we need to value the person’s skills and the breadth of qualities they learn and apply through sport, such as resilience, determination, respect and teamwork. Sports clubs provide a brilliant opportunity to redefine what being good at sport means.

“Boys need sport more than girls”

Community sport is often seen as a way for boys to let off steam, learn discipline, find positive role models and somewhere they belong. Sport is just as important for girls for all these reasons. Without this outlet, whereas some boys may get into trouble, girls are more likely to internalise their struggles and harm themselves.

Sport can change lives for everyone. Sport brings girls, as well as boys, health and wellbeing, teamwork, resilience and self-esteem. We need to redefine the value of sport to recognise its equal value to girls and boys.

“Sport will make a man out of a boy”

This excludes girls despite sport holding equal value to them. Stereotypes that sport is about winning at all costs, ‘manning up’ by not showing vulnerability, and as a gateway to macho manhood is damaging to both boys and girls. It encourages boys to see masculinity as being about dominance, and to act negatively towards girls and women in sport and life. Sport that is mutually supportive teaches values that help all children as they transition to adulthood.



“Girls don’t like competition”

Boys and girls have equal potential to enjoy competition. But stereotyping means girls normally enter sport with a skills gap and an awareness of this gap, reducing their self-belief. Boys have normally developed stronger skills. Boys have also been stereotyped to be highly competitive and view sport as integral to their status.

As a result, an unlevel playing field in mixed sport can set girls up to fail and the devaluing and removal of competition in girls-only sport, can play sport feel meaningless.

No one enjoys being set up to fail or taking part in meaningless activity. Girls, like boys, can thrive in fair competition.

“Sport doesn’t matter for young girls... they’ll drop out anyway”.

It is not inevitable that girls will drop out of sport as teenagers. This is a limiting narrative for girls that becomes self-fulfilling. If clubs and coaches provide enough positive and meaningful experiences for girls at a young age it can build a love of sport that becomes part of their identity. With this, girls can navigate the challenges of puberty and external pressures to conform to stereotypes which all too often lead to dropout. Girls need to see and hear strong messages that sport does matter for them, and that they do belong in the club.

“Girls are naturally less confident than boys in sport”.

Girls are not born underconfident. However, their confidence is often stifled by overt and covert messages suggesting girls don’t belong in sport. As a result of these expectations girls will have fewer opportunities to play, learn fewer skills and feel their self-belief ebb away. Boys and coaches are not immune to this messaging, and if they believe girls are less suited to sport, underconfident or overly self-conscious, then girls are put at a disadvantage from the outset. Coaches need to recognise this pattern and disrupt it, understanding that any under-confidence in girls is not innate.

