

GIVING GIRLS A POSITIVE START WITH SPORT AT HOME

Tackling Gender Stereotypes

WOMEN
N
SPORT

Supported by...



Gender stereotypes are embedded in us all even if we're not aware of it. As we bring up our children, we can unknowingly pass these on. Stereotyping can limit girls' experiences of sport, meaning they miss out on learning skills, lose their self-belief, and may never find its joy and lifelong benefits. This guide is to help us reflect on the stereotypes we are surrounding our children with and to offer some solutions.

Why sport matters to girls

Sport and physical activity gives girls resilience, courage, self-belief and a sense of belonging. It equips them with life skills and bolsters their physical health and wellbeing and success throughout their life.

We all worry about how our girls will navigate the challenging teenage years in particular. We know that if girls build a love of sport very young they are much more likely to hold on to it during secondary school and beyond. They will feel happier, healthier, and more confident in their bodies and as a person.

Why families matter

Families are all different but are united by being the first and most important influence in a child's life. What parents and carers say, what roles they take in the family, and their attitudes to sport will have a profound impact on their children's lives.

Girls are often steered away from sport from a young age, particularly contact and team sports. We can change this pattern if we are aware of it and make girls and boys feel they belong in all sport.

Why male allyship at home matters

Boys and men, whether dads, uncles, brothers or cousins, make a real difference to how girls feel about sport. Their words and actions can have a lasting impact. With their support girls are much more likely to feel they belong in sport.

Boys' beliefs and behaviours will often mirror that of the adults around them. It is important that families reflect on the things they say and do at home to instil respect towards women and girls in sport and in life.

How can we help girls develop a love of sport and physical activity?

Rough and tumble is good for girls too

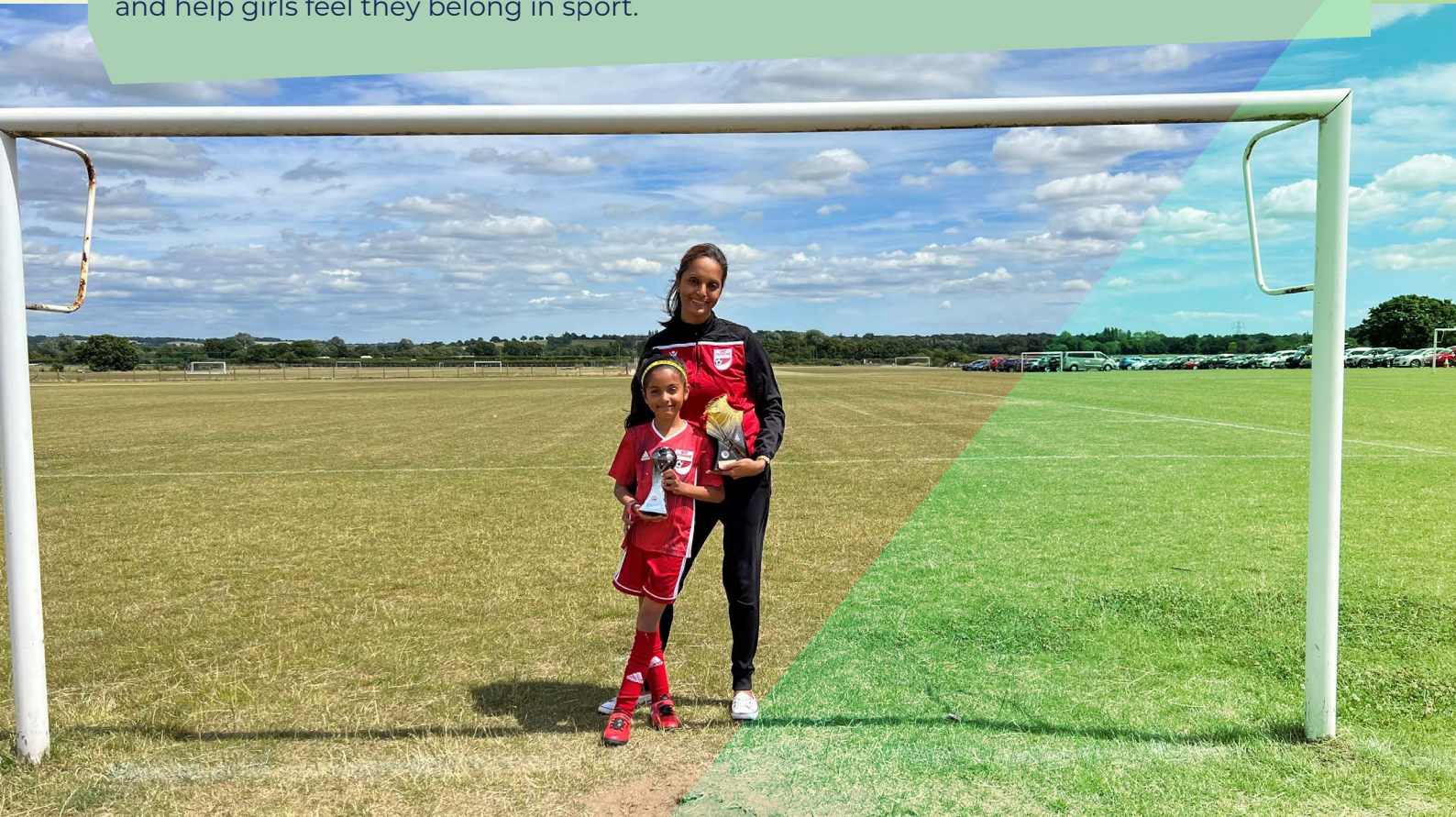
In the early years girls gain as much as boys from rough and tumble play. At home, men often take the lead when it comes to physical play but are often more cautious with their daughters and focus more on their sons. This encourages boys to be tough and adventurous early on and gain skills and confidence, while girls often miss out. It's natural to want to keep our children safe, but at this age young girls are just as resilient physically and have just as great a need to learn about their physicality.

Girls should be carefree

When they're not held back by stereotypes, girls can be strong, resilient and enjoy sport, just like boys. Girls should feel as free as boys to take risks in sport, and play contact and ball sports so they can build skills and boost their natural confidence. If we say "be careful" much more to girls than boys, we can instil fear in them. This fear will stifle their joy and sense of adventure. All children should be physically active and carefree.

All sports are for all children

Encourage both boys and girls to test out different sports and find something they love. Girls and boys are now being allowed to play the same sports and there is increasing inspiration on our screens. Boys doing dance or gymnastics, and girls playing football or rugby should be seen as normal. Giving girls bats, balls, or trainers as gifts will encourage and help girls feel they belong in sport.



Valuing women in sport

As a family, watching, supporting and talking about women's sport helps to make it normal, for both girls and boys. There's lots of coverage on TV, radio and social media. Major events and tournaments, like the Olympics and Paralympics, are a great way to watch women take part in a whole variety of sports. There's probably also a local women's sport team you can support as a family.

Siblings can have a big impact – good or bad

Positive sporting interactions with siblings can be life changing for girls' attitudes to sport. Encourage brothers and sisters to have fun and build skills together through sport. Try not to assume your daughter won't want to play football, or your son can't learn to do cartwheels. Show them you value their sports equally. Ensure that the whole family supports and celebrates your daughters' sporting activities as much as your sons'.

Think about the gender roles we take as adults

As adults, we are all affected by gender stereotypes and children see these play out in our day-to-day lives. To help break the pattern it's good to reflect on our own roles and responsibilities at home and the messages this sends to our children. Girls and boys should grow up thinking women and men both deserve to have fun playing or watching sport. If they see mothers or aunts carrying the full burden of unpaid work at home while fathers and uncles are playing or watching sport this is not helpful.

Keeping on top of life while raising children can be tough and sometimes support is hard to find. Finding any small moments and opportunities to challenge stereotypes can make a big difference to our children's lives.



Supporting girls in sport



Go the extra mile

It is important for us to remember that girls may need extra encouragement and support to get involved and progress because of all the limiting messages they receive from peers, adults and the media. So, if anything, try to over-celebrate girls' sporting activities. Girls need to be surrounded by messages from an early age that all sorts of sports and activity are normal for them.

Be an active female role model

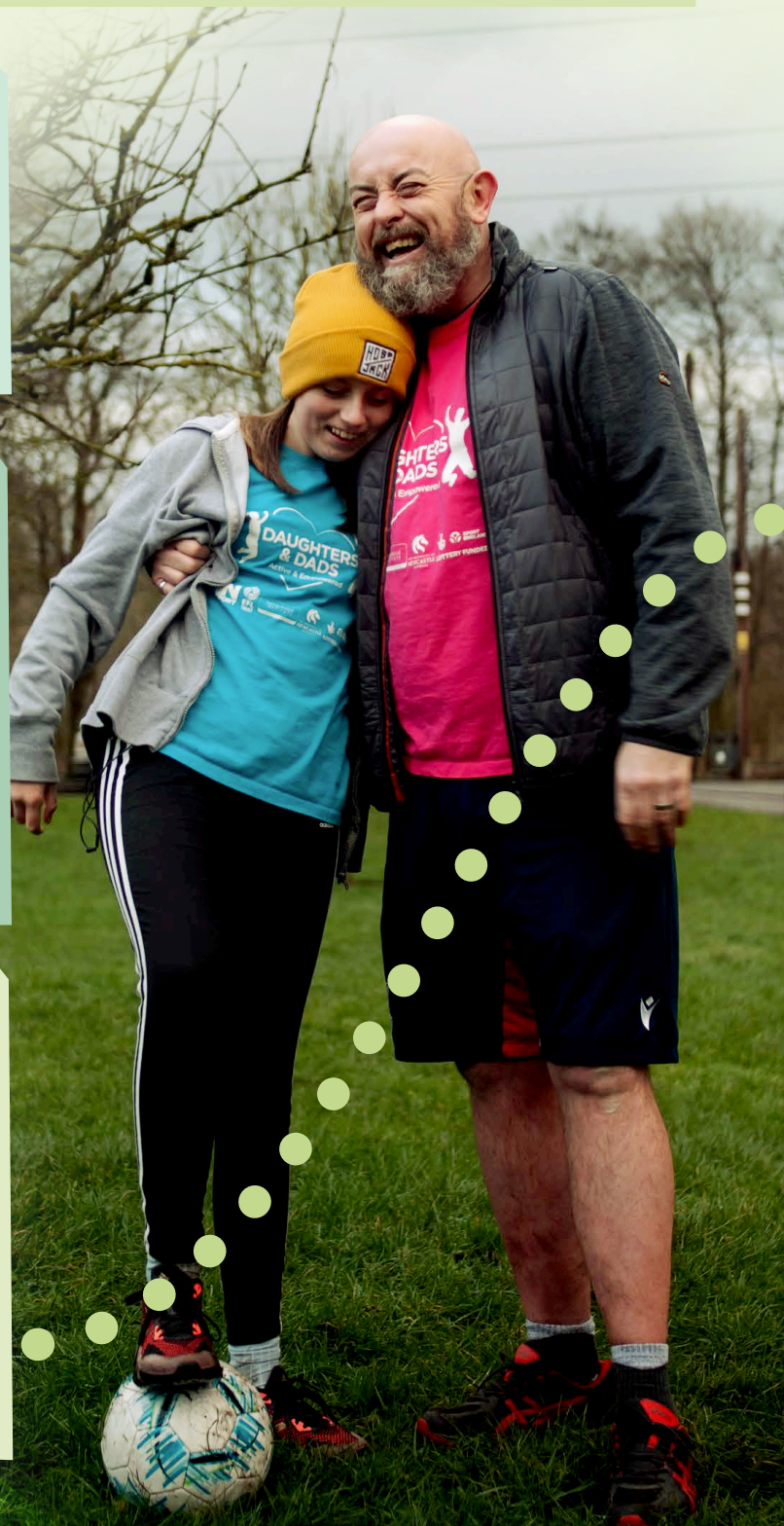
Children are more likely to do what you do, than do what you say. Female care-givers leading active lives shows girls that sport is normal for women, whether that's a walk or cycle around your local park, or a competitive game.

Growing up

Female puberty brings significant change but with the right support girls still thrive in sport. Male as well as female caregivers should help to normalise conversations about periods and sports bras and help meet girls' needs. This helps them feel more positive about their changing bodies. Without this, female puberty can serve as the straw that breaks the camel's back and makes girls drop out of sport.

Dads really matter.

Due to stereotyping, men tend to have more experience of and be more positive about sport, but also to feel they are expected to focus their active time on their sons more than their daughters. Our research shows that 31% of dads support their daughters with sport but 50% support their sons. Girls who have the backing of a sports-loving male caregiver will be far more likely to do sport.



Helping boys to be allies for girls in sport

Sport is about much more than winning

The real value of sport is in the joy and fulfilment it brings and the life skills we gain. But boys hear messages that it is all about winning and feel pressure to prove they are better than others. This can cause them to act negatively towards girls and exclude them, especially in mixed sex sport and activities. Families can help boys to think differently. Try to focus less on whether a boy has won or lost, talk more about sportspersonship, resilience, teamwork, and what they have learnt. If boys understand the true value of sport for all, they will see girls and women as equals, no matter how strong or fast they are.

Be a respectful male role model

It is the social norm for men to watch and play sport as adults. As a male caregiver, reflect on what your sons and daughters are learning from what you say and do. Don't be overly aggressive at the sidelines or on the pitch, treat and speak to and about women with respect, and challenge the bad behaviours of others in sport. Watch women's sport with your friends. Your children will see this.

Champion girls and women in sport

Boys, particularly if they don't have sisters, can grow up never watching women's sport or playing sport with girls. This can make them feel that sport is only for boys and that girls are invading their space. Families should explore ways to disrupt this way of thinking. Watching and talking about women's sport can help. Talk about women's skills, resilience, teamwork and achievements, and avoid direct comparisons to men's sport. Make great elite sportswomen household names in your family.



Brothers supporting sisters

Look for ways to make boys feel great if they include their sisters and treat them with respect. Otherwise, boys may bring a negative 'playground mentality' into the home and make disparaging comments about their sister's skills or performance, especially if they are playing sports they have been made to feel belong to men. Families, and particularly men such as dads and uncles, should challenge boys if they behave in this way. Boys should be helped to understand the impact of their behaviour, why this matters and how to show respect.