

TAKING A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH TO GENDER EQUALITY IN SPORT AND ACTIVITY

Busting the Myths



Gender stereotypes are embedded in us all. They lead to biases and inequalities with wide-reaching consequences for children. In sport we know that girls are limited by stereotypes which stifle their joy, prevent them from learning skills, and steal their self-belief. Girls from less affluent backgrounds and diverse communities, or disabled girls may face additional barriers to sport.



Commit

Schools commit to raising awareness of gender stereotypes and challenging myths about girls and boys in sport and physical activity.



Educate

Educators and children explore these myths together in planned and informal ways. Critical thinking is modelled by educators, so children learn to separate fact from fiction.

Change the narrative

The whole school community promotes the lifelong value of sport and physical activity for all children, taking active steps to recognise and remedy stereotyping language, behaviour and assumptions.



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

“Boys are naturally more active and physical than girls”

Before puberty there are only slight differences in physique between boys and girls. It is natural and healthy for all children to play and be active, but gender stereotyping means that, even before starting school, girls will normally have been less active and played less sport. This compromises their physical literacy and habituates girls to more sedentary activities, in contrast to many boys.

“Boys need sport to let off steam more than girls”

On average, young boys have marginally more natural strength and energy than girls but the difference is very small. The concept that only boys benefit from ‘running-off’ energy is self-fulfilling, the less a girl runs about the less she enjoys running about. To tackle the inactivity crisis all children need to be active. Sport and physical activity bring girls, as well as boys, health and wellbeing, teamwork, discipline, resilience and self-esteem.

“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. School sport that is mutually supportive teaches values that help all children as they transition to adulthood.



“Girls are innately uncompetitive”

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 make 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.

“Girls can’t play boys’ sports”

Society has excluded girls from numerous contact and team sports in the past. Perpetuating this inequality is deeply harmful and limits girls’ opportunities. Stereotyping steers girls away from team sports which far fewer girls therefore play, and towards aesthetic activities. Both have great value for girls and boys, children must not have their choice of sport limited by gender stereotypes or expectations.

“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 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. Educators need to recognise this pattern and disrupt it, understanding that any under-confidence in girls is not innate.

“I can’t help, I’m not a PE teacher”

It is important that a whole-school approach is taken to equality in sport in school. Children spend more time at playtimes, lunchtimes and afterschool clubs than in P.E. lessons each week. All adults in the school will contribute to children’s perceptions and so can either reinforce or dismantle gender stereotypes about sport.

