

TACKLING THE OPPORTUNITY GAP FOR GIRLS IN SPORT

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Our sportswomen continue to achieve incredible feats in international competition. In 2026 England hosts the Women's T20 Cricket World Cup and there is much greater visibility than there has been in the past for women's team sport. As a result, Women in Sport's research consistently shows that while many girls are inspired to play and be more active, both girls and their parents report that it is very hard to find opportunities for girls to play sport in clubs and communities across England. For girls, school PE is often the only way they can get active with others and yet PE and after school provision remains inconsistent in the state sector, something our charity continues to work to improve in close partnership with others.

1.3 million

girls who once loved sport drop out in their teenage years

A lack of opportunity to play locally in communities and in particular to play in girls-only settings, is frequently cited as a key barrier to girls' engaging and thriving in sport. We wanted to find out more about this as we are concerned that this opportunity gap is contributing towards girls being less active than boys and the stubborn 24% gender gap we see in team sport participation. We also believe that it needs addressing if we are to reduce the numbers of girls dropping out of sport during their teenage years, which currently stands at 1.3m. While factors such as lack of support around female puberty, poor kit choice, oppressive social media and early years stereotyping all shape girls' experiences, our research shows that a fundamental issue remains: girls lack the opportunity to engage locally and in the right way.

As a result, girls and their parents are naturally frustrated by the apparent lack of value put on their sporting opportunities and teams. There is also a lot to think about as society adjusts to the new world order in which girls and women are permitted to play sports like football, rugby and cricket that were off-limits when I was young. These sports are still "boy-dominated" and how these sports include girls now is critical. Even traditionally female or mixed sports need to consider how they ensure the space for girls to play in light of the research and data showing the benefits of at least some female-only spaces from a young age.

This report, generously supported by Metro Bank, and with the cooperation of National Governing Bodies of sport, aims to find out more about the gender divide in sporting opportunities for children and young people, and to give urgency to the need to provide more girls-only sports opportunities. A full evidence base is a vital part of ensuring that public money is going to girls and boys equally.

Unless we close the gender opportunity gap, we will never close the gender activity gap or the vast gender team sport gap. And nor will we be in a position to counter the growing and deeply worrying mental health crisis afflicting girls and young women.

I've met countless men who say that their sports club was their second home as a youngster. They talk of the sense of safety and community, the inspiration and encouragement from brilliant volunteers and coaches, and of meeting people from all walks of life. For many, their sports club also opened up new horizons, giving them openings for work as well as sport. When I hear them speak, I feel happy for them but pained because this experience for girls is so desperately rare. And yet girls need just this – sport in a safe setting – to help them stay well and strong to counter the unprecedented mental health epidemic they face.

Stephanie Hilborne OBE
Women in Sport

Girls' happiness is in freefall with long-term health impacts

It is a desperately sad statistic that only 40% of girls aged 12-21 report feeling happy with their mental health [1]. Data shows that in early teenage years around one in five boys and girls have a probable mental health disorder. Aged 17-19 this proportion drops by 7% for boys to 15%, and rises by 9% percent for girls to 32% [2]. The widening gap is also reflected in broader wellbeing measures too: girls' life satisfaction has seen a steady decline, whilst boys' has remained relatively stable [3]. These gendered mental health inequalities open up and remain in different forms into later life stages.

The hyper-visibility created by the social media world is playing a part in this with over one in five girls (21%) unhappy with their appearance, compared to 9% of boys [4]. Over half of girls (53%) aged 11-21 say their body image or weight is most likely to negatively affect their mental health [6]. Three-quarters (77%) of girls and young women aged 7-21 have experienced online harm in the last year [5], and over a third (36%) of girls aged 11-21 say they often feel depressed after spending time online or on social media [6].

More than one in three girls and young women aged 11-21 say they feel sad most days or every day, with younger girls aged 7-10 feeling more sad and lonely compared to 10 years ago [6]. Of 7-21 year-old girls, 89% report feeling generally worried or anxious compared to 78% in 2016. Only 14% of girls aged 11-16 describe themselves as 'very happy' compared to 38% in 2009. The collapse in happiness affects older girls the worst, with only 8% of girls aged 17-21 reporting feeling 'very happy', down from 29% in 2009 [7]. And this unhappiness and anxiety is reflected in girls being at least three times as likely to experience eating disorders [2], self-harm [8,9] and post-traumatic stress disorder [10].

This is not just about childhood. Women face higher rates of depression and mental health problems throughout life [11], with stress contributing to women making up 80% of autoimmune cases [12]. The gendered health inequalities are also physical, with half of women over 50 years old fracturing a bone due to osteoporosis compared to one in five men [13].

Sport can be a remedy

Sport and activity can be a powerful antidote in children and young people to counter these trends. For example, up to 90% of female peak bone mass is built by the age of 18 [14], so impact exercise in teenage girls could help to prevent the next generation of post-menopausal fractures.

But it is not just physical health sport would help. Physical activity has been shown to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression, enhance self-esteem, and foster a sense of accomplishment and self-worth, particularly crucial in adolescent development [15,16,17]. Active children have higher levels of happiness, resilience and mental wellbeing, and girls who participate in physical activity report greater life satisfaction and are more likely to see their lives as worthwhile than their less active peers [18].

Where ambitions are high for a daughter's academic achievement, it is important for parents to know that physically active children achieve higher levels of educational attainment than their less active peers. Being active and taking part in organised sport can enhance concentration, improve cognitive functioning and health and wellbeing, all of which contributes to more effective learning [19].

Sport can bring valuable life skills such as overcoming fear barriers and building resilience, as well as fostering strong social connections and a sense of belonging. Team sport in particular can also build skills in leadership, communication and teamwork. Girls recognise the value of sport and physical activity for their mental health and wellbeing, feeling good about themselves, feeling fit and healthy, and to build confidence, have fun and be happy [20].



But girls are less active and take part in less organised sport than boys

More than half of girls are missing out on the physical and mental wellbeing benefits that being active can provide. Only 46% of girls are physically active compared to 52% of boys (ages 5-16) [18]. Ethnically diverse and less affluent communities are the least active and girls are less active than boys at both primary and secondary school ages across all ethnicities.

Less than half of girls

(46%) meet recommended levels of physical activity

The biggest gender gap is in participation in team sport, with 46% of girls taking part (in the last week before the survey) compared to 70% of boys [18].

Women in Sport research shows that 43% of girls (around 1.3 million), no longer consider themselves 'sporty' in their teenage years and fall out of love with sport and exercise, a much higher rate than boys at 24% [20]. Our research also points to a root cause of this being a loss of self-belief in sporting ability during primary school years, caused by stereotyping and lack of opportunity [21], as well as the impact of female puberty and social issues during teenage years [20, 22].

24%

fewer girls than boys play team sport in England

The visibility and exciting and memorable moments within women's elite sport in recent years have not led to a sudden uptick in engagement. In fact, the number of girls dreaming of reaching the top of sport has fallen to 23%, down from 38% in 2024. There is a widening gender dream deficit with more than twice as many boys dreaming of reaching the top (53%). Even girls who "love sport" who started to dream after the 2022 Lionesses Euros win have seen their dream rates crash by 35% in a year [23].

So how can we increase participation in sport and improve the lives of girls?

The right opportunities play a big part in this. Opportunity gaps in sport and physical activity mean girls are missing out on one of the key protective factors that could support their health and wellbeing. Only 40% of girls (56% of boys) strongly agree they have the opportunity to be physically active [18]. Over four in ten girls say more opportunities to try different sports at a young age and to join clubs and teams outside of school would encourage more girls to get in involved in sport [24].

To achieve gender parity in sport, 36% of girls and 41% of boys agree that equal opportunities for boys & girls/men & women to participate in all sports is an important factor. But boys are less aware of the opportunity deficit faced by girls, with 64% of boys agreeing that 'girls have the same opportunities to participate in sports as boys'. Only 35% of girls agree with this statement [25].

The need for more opportunities for girls and women to try different sports, for more girls' teams (at school and locally), and the need to make sport more welcoming and inclusive for women and girls, are cited by girls as some of the most important priorities for the growth of women and girls' sport when we asked 13-24 year olds their views [23]. In terms of barriers to reaching the top in sport, one in three girls cite lack of opportunities and 17% the lack of girls-only opportunities (compared to 6% of boys who report lack of boys-only opportunities as a barrier) [23].

There is a real need for greater and more equal opportunities for girls to play sport. This is true both at school and in the community. In school for example, less than half of girls (45%) agree they have the same opportunities as boys to do the sports and activities they want [26].

This report, the first of its kind, seeks to examine the differences in sporting opportunities available to girls and boys.



Aims

There is a significant lack of data available to understand the opportunities available in sport for girls, which our research sought to address. Through this report, we aim to provide a broad evidence base to support a deeper understanding of the issues at play for girls, specifically to:

- Build an indicative picture of the organised opportunities available for girls and boys aged 5-16 to take part in sport and activity across England, specifically girls-only, boys-only and mixed sport provision.
- Understand parents' and girls' experiences of, and attitudes to, different opportunities for girls to take part in sport.

Methodology

We utilised a mixed-method approach for this exploratory research to assess the picture of opportunity for girls in sport. We conducted desk research to gather insight from existing research reports and data, including the collation and analysis of large-scale opportunity datasets from across sport. As the key enablers and facilitators of sport and activity for their children, we explored parents/carers' attitudes to sporting opportunities through a nationally representative survey. Interviews with parents and girls were carried out to understand their experiences of finding and taking part in different types of sporting opportunities.

This research approach enabled us to assess the scale and type of opportunities available to children and young people, as well as parents' and girls' lived experience of them. The research was conducted between October 2024 – January 2026.

1 Evidence Review

- Desk research to review existing data and evidence to identify trends and issues around girls' participation and opportunities in sport, including key datasets such as Sport England's Active Lives Children & Young People Surveys.

2 Assessing the Sporting Opportunities Available to Girls

- A data collection exercise to assess the scale and type of sporting opportunities available for girls and boys aged 5-16 across different sports, and the proportion that are girls only, boys only and mixed.

3 Parents' Attitudes and Perspectives on the Opportunities for Girls

- Nationally representative survey of 840 parents with children aged up to 18 years. All figures presented in the key findings are from this survey unless referenced otherwise.
- Interviews with parents and their daughters to understand their experiences of finding sporting opportunities and participating in mixed and girls-only environments.

Sourcing Data on Opportunities in Sport

Data Collection

Women in Sport partnered with 4Global, a data and technology solutions expert, to assess the availability of organised sports opportunities for girls across England by accessing relevant data sets from across the sport sector.

For the purpose of this research, a participation opportunity is defined as a formally organised team or structured session delivered by a club or programme, where children or young people aged 5-16 can participate in sport.

Using Sport England's Active Lives Children & Young People Survey data, the 20 most popular sports for children and young people aged 5-16 (school years 1-11) based on participation outside of school [29] were investigated.

Work was undertaken to source data on the opportunities available across England from National Governing Bodies of sport, with sources such as Activity Finders and OpenActive also explored. Programmatic data extraction [i] (Google scraping) was also tested, but the results did not provide consistent or detailed enough information, particularly on whether opportunities were girls only, boys only or mixed. A lack of standardisation in how opportunities were recorded across different types of data sources made it difficult to reliably compare data across all 20 sports.

The findings presented in this report are therefore reliant on a combination of data supplied directly by National Governing Bodies of sport (affiliated club and/or programme data) and from 4Globals' existing DataHub [ii] datasets. In the case of dance, Google scraping was used due to the absence of structured opportunities provided by National Governing Bodies of dance.

National Governing Bodies in particular play an important role in overseeing opportunities for children and young people to take part in sport through programmes and affiliated clubs. The most recent data available estimates that there are c.72,117 clubs in England affiliated with National Governing Bodies [27] illustrating the scale of potential reach to children and young people.

While many non-affiliated clubs and community organisations also offer sporting opportunities, the collection of standardised data from individual providers on a mass scale was beyond the scope and capability of this project and should be assessed in future research.

Data Preparation

Data from the different sources was cleaned, standardised and aggregated into a single dataset for analysis, then matched to demographic data including the Office for National Statistics [28] datasets to enable comparisons of the volume of opportunities available to girls and boys across England.

From the initial exploration of the top 20 participation sports, 7 were excluded due to missing or incomplete data. This resulted in a final list of 13 sports (Figure 1) and a total of 39,317 opportunities identified for analysis. Whilst participation in Rugby is not separated by format (League and Union) within the Active Lives Children and Young People Survey, opportunity data was supplied by the respective National Governing Bodies for these different formats of play and are therefore presented as separate sports in relation to opportunities.

Each opportunity was categorised as girls only, boys only, or mixed based on how participation is structured. Where this information was not specified or available in the datasets received, assumptions were made based on National Governing Body policies and guidelines on mixed-sex participation for children and young people by age group. These were used to determine whether an opportunity was likely to be mixed, girls only, or boys only for each sport. If a club delivered multiple formats, each format was counted as a separate opportunity.

[i] Programmatic data extraction is systematic data collection using automated methods (technology) to collect data from sources such as Google Maps and other Point of Interest (POI) datasets based on key word searches, ensuring comprehensive coverage.

[ii] The DataHub is a sector initiative that aggregates sport and physical activity data from across the UK leisure industry. By connecting with leisure management systems and data capture systems, live participation data from over 2,500 venues, facilities and programmes feeds into the DataHub daily. This represents the largest collection of detailed and accurate activity data in the UK, which is used to inform future planning and investment by operators, local authorities and national funding bodies.

Figure 1 – Children and young people’s overall participation in activities outside of school once a week or more (school years 1-11 in England) [29] in the 13 sports analysed

Sports Included in Analysis	Overall Participation Rate %
Football	34%
Dance	27%
Swimming and Diving	23%
Running and Athletics	22%
Basketball	12%
Gymnastics and Trampolining	11%
Boxing	7%
Rugby League	6%
Rugby Union	6%
Tennis	6%
Netball	6%
Cricket	5%
Hockey	3%

Limitations in Data Collection

The methodology used aimed to minimise limitations and maximise use of reliable data, however some limitations exist and will persist, due to the way data is currently collected and/or categorised across the sector. The limitations outlined below mean the findings should be interpreted as indicative of broader trends rather than a complete or exhaustive picture of all opportunities available. Future research should take these limitations into account and seek to address these:

- The quality of data collation and collection varies by National Governing Body, with some able to provide higher-quality datasets than others. Minimum standards in data collection and more investment to support data management are needed.
- While all National Governing Bodies provided club data, six did not collect or supply programme data for their respective sports. As a result, the available data may not fully capture the breadth of the programme offering in all sports. Where data is available, future research should seek to analyse a wider range of sports and physical activity.
- Some sports are more widely played than others, and National Governing Bodies depend heavily on submission of data by volunteer-led and run clubs. This makes it challenging to ensure complete, up-to-date and accurate data is held, even by the larger National Governing Bodies.
- The data captured by a majority of National Governing Bodies lacked granularity in age provision, with some unable to specify the opportunities available for younger age groups. Comparisons of opportunities between age groups (e.g. primary and secondary school-aged children) were therefore not possible, in addition to other demographic analysis. For example, only three of the sports analysed provided data relating to disability provision.



THE PICTURE OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR GIRLS IN SPORT

39,317
Opportunities

67% Mixed Sex
(26,224)

16% Girls Only
(6,434)

17% Boys Only
(6,659)

9 of 13

sports analysed have lower participation rates overall for girls

1/6

opportunities across all regions are girls only

6 of 10

mixed sports (ages 5-16) analysed have lower participation rates overall for girls

20%

of team sport opportunities are girls only

20%

of opportunities in boy-dominated sports are girls only

27%

of opportunities in contact sports are girls only

7%

of opportunities in individual sports are girls only

GIRLS' PARTICIPATION IN SPORT

Sport provision for children and young people plays a crucial role in shaping healthy activity habits and lifelong engagement. There is wide recognition within the sport sector that participation in sport and physical activity among girls and boys is unequal. The Active Lives Children and Young People Survey [29] shows the gender participation gap in specific sports and types of physical activity [iii]. In 9 of the 13 sports explored in our research, girls participate at lower rates than boys with more significant gender gaps in some sports than others (Figure 2).

The sports that girls take part in at a much greater rate than boys are netball, gymnastics and dance. These sports have historically been dominated by women and girls and are perceived as 'appropriate' for girls, encouraged at home, and offered in school and the community. The Childwise Monitor Report found that at secondary school age, girls played almost five times the amount of netball and three times more gymnastics than boys in school. In contrast, boys were almost three times more likely to play football, and around twice as likely to play rugby and cricket than girls [30]. We know from previous

research, in line with gender stereotyping, that creative/artistic sports are also parents' preferred choice of sport for their daughters [31]. Parents and girls may also find that female-dominated sports provide a safe space where girls can feel a greater sense of acceptance and belonging with other girls.

While hockey has historically been a more gender-equal team sport in terms of participation, many of the most played team sports are male-dominated sports (football, basketball, rugby, cricket), influencing the 24% team sport gender participation gap. Our survey of parents in 2024 showed that only 35% of parents prefer their daughter to take part in team sports, compared to 50% for their sons [31]. Whilst most male-dominated team sports have made significant efforts to increase girls' participation with targeted programmes and initiatives, the team sport gap has widened between girls and boys (from 18% in 2020-21 to 24% in 2024-25) and is the greatest inequality in sport for girls.

Participation is generally more equal between girls and boys in individual sports such as tennis, athletics and swimming.

Figure 2 – Girls' and boys' participation in activities outside of school once a week or more (school years 1-11 in England) [29] in the 13 sports analysed

Sports Included in Analysis	Type of Sport	Mixed-Sex	Girls Participation (%)	Boys Participation (%)	Gender Gap (%)
Football	Team	U18 only	19.3	49.5	-30.2
Basketball	Team	U9/10/11 only	7.5	15.5	-8
Rugby League	Team	U9/10/11 only	3.4	9	-5.6
Rugby Union	Team	U9/10/11 only			
Boxing	Individual	Yes	3.8	9.2	-5.4
Cricket	Team	Yes	3.3	7.4	-4.1
Tennis	Individual	Yes	5.1	7.1	-2
Running and Athletics	Individual	Yes	21.6	22.4	-0.8
Hockey	Team	U16 only	2.5	3	-0.5
Swimming and Diving	Individual	Yes	25	22.6	2.4
Netball	Team	Yes	8.7	2.5	6.2
Gymnastics and Trampolining	Individual	Yes	32.9	17	15.9
Dance	Individual	Yes	43.6	11.7	31.9

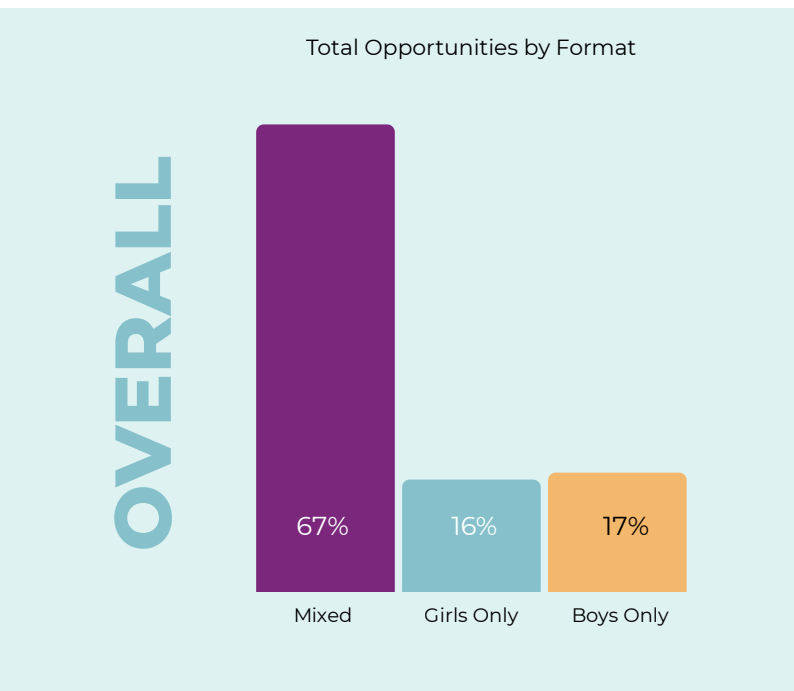
[iii] The Active Lives Children and Young People Survey is the most reliable source of evidence available on children's participation in sport and physical activity in England. Participation data was not available from National Governing Bodies.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GIRLS TO TAKE PART IN SPORT

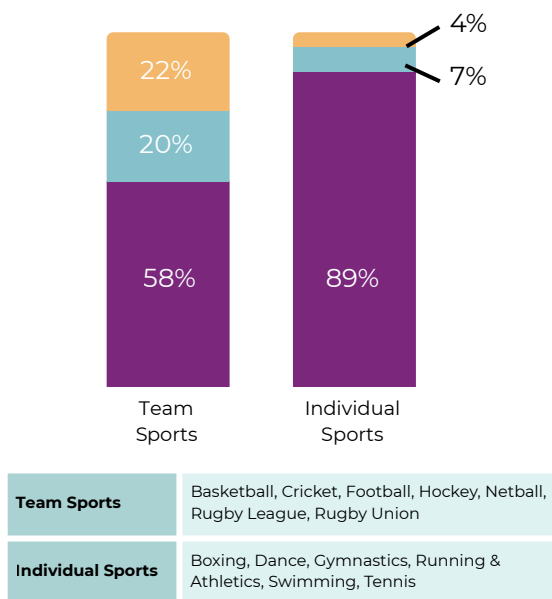
In the 13 sports investigated, we analysed the proportion of opportunities available to children and young people that are mixed, girls only and boys only, and through the lens of different types and formats of sport to better understand the picture of opportunity for girls (Figure 3). Here, we summarise the key findings and discuss the implications for girls in the next section.

Figure 3 – Proportion of opportunities that are mixed, girls only and boys only across different types and formats of the 13 sports analysed [iv]

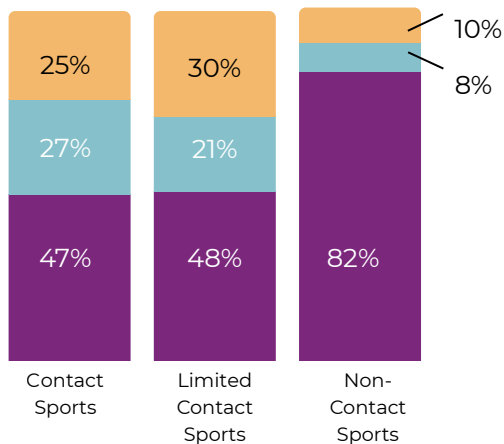
- Mixed
- Girls only
- Boys only



Opportunities within Team vs. Individual Sports

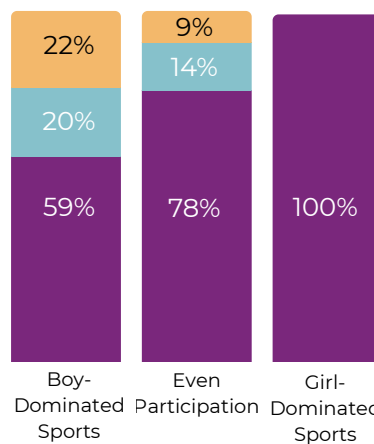


Opportunities within Contact, Limited Contact & Non-Contact Sports [v]



Contact Sports	Boxing, Football, Rugby League, Rugby Union
Limited Contact Sports	Cricket, Dance, Gymnastics, Running & Athletics, Swimming, Tennis
Non-Contact Sports	Basketball, Hockey, Netball

Opportunities within Boy-Dominated, Girl-Dominated & Even-Participation Sports [vi]



Boy-Dominated Sports	Basketball, Cricket, Football, Rugby League, Rugby Union
Even-Participation Sports	Hockey, Running & Athletics, Swimming, Tennis
Girl-Dominated Sports	Dance, Gymnastics, Netball

[iv] Figures may not total 100% exactly due to rounding adjustments.

[v] Sports were categorised according to the intent and intensity of physical contact with others, based on usual gameplay and rules/regulations.

[vi] Girl-dominated or boy-dominated sports are categorised based on participation rates in the 2024 Active Lives Children and Young People Survey. Even-participation sports are defined as all sports with less than a 3% gender gap for girls and boys.

Key Findings

- Across the 13 sports investigated, **the majority of opportunities for children** and young people aged 5-16 **are offered as mixed** (67%), with a far lower proportion being girls only (16%) or boys only (17%).
- **89% of opportunities in individual sports** and 82% of opportunities in non-contact sports are mixed, where participation may not involve physical interaction or play with others. This reduces physical safety concerns but not necessarily fairness or emotional safety issues.
- **Even in contact sports and limited-contact sports, nearly half of opportunities are mixed** (47% and 48% respectively). A number of these sports have policies and regulations that require girls and boys to be segregated due to physical differences after a specific age. But in contact sports there are still relatively few girls-only opportunities (27%).
- **Nearly 6 in 10 (58%) opportunities in team sports are mixed**, with just 20% specified as girls only and 22% boys only. In five of the seven team sports analysed, participation is dominated by boys (basketball, cricket, football, rugby league and rugby union). More girls-only opportunities in boy-dominated team sports could help close the widening gender gap in team sport participation.
- **Three-quarters (74%) of the opportunities in sports where participation is dominated by boys are mixed**, with just 20% specified as girls only. More girls-only opportunities would provide a more accessible and effective entry point for many girls into these sports.
- **All opportunities within girl-dominated sports are mixed**, with no girls or boys-only provision specified. This likely reflects the lack of perceived need for girls-only interventions to increase girls' participation in the past. However, with one in five children playing netball now being boys, times are changing and girls are increasingly having to share space in these settings, rather than having the choice of mixed or girls only. As female-dominated sports become popular to boys and men, the need for girls-only opportunities is more urgent.



Mixed sport doesn't guarantee equal participation, nor positive experiences for girls

As the data shows, most opportunities in sport for children and young people are categorised as mixed, with limited girls-only provision (16%). Whilst mixed sport opportunities may be *open* to both boys and girls, this doesn't mean all girls *experience* them in the same way as boys, or that it will result in equal participation, especially in more male-dominated sports. In 6 out of the 10 entirely mixed sports (up to age 16) analysed in our research, girls' participation rates are lower than boys.

Providing sport in mixed formats has become more popular in recent years and is a growing part of the sporting eco-system, including at school and in community sport settings. The most effective mixed sports and activities have been intentionally designed, such as in the Olympic Games mixed relay events, where they are structured and organised in a way that actively manages issues such as fairness and safety, enabling both sexes to contribute meaningfully. When actively managed, mixed sport can have value in building a mutually supportive environment that fosters communication, teamwork, relationships and respect between girls and boys, with potential to reduce gender stereotyping and inequality. Making women and girls playing sport visible to boys in the right way can also help to normalise female participation and foster more positive attitudes to girls [31].

Research has also shown that for those girls who are the most engaged and skilled in sport, some find mixed sport settings and competitions rewarding. Playing alongside boys can challenge them, help develop their skills, tactical awareness, confidence and resilience [32]. However, such girls are often a minority group and are also not immune to issues such as stereotyping and sexism [33]. There are many more girls for whom being asked to participate with boys detracts from their enjoyment and experience.

The argument is sometimes made that mixed is necessary because there are too few girls to form teams or sustain girls-only sessions and competitions. However, this is a vicious circle. Fewer girls are going to want to participate where they see a session is mixed sex. As the parents in our research identified, we must grow girls-only sport, rather than assume that the lack of enthusiasm to take part (in mixed sport) is somehow normal and inevitable. The risk is that defaulting to mixed sport masks the need for investment in more girls-only opportunities. The cost of poorly designed mixed sport is greatest for girls.

“The club haven't tried to get players. The individual manager has tried to get more players involved and just struggles.”
Dad of girl, aged 14

The Physical Challenges of Mixed Sport

Girls can experience significant challenges when taking part with boys, which are both physical and social in nature. Our research with primary-aged girls and boys shows that due to early gender stereotyping and societal norms, girls are not exposed to sport and physical activity as much as boys [21, 31]. This results in a fundamental movement skills gap at an early age, where boys are generally more proficient in the skills that enable them to take part in sport, especially object-control skills. Though such skills gaps can be reduced with appropriate intervention, in reality these interventions are rarely made. Instead, passive mixed sport or play is offered which creates an unequal playing field for girls with the worst impact on less active or disengaged girls, who start with less experience and physical literacy.

“[Boys were at] an age where they were quite a lot more physical than my daughter was. The skill gap [between girls and boys] had increased considerably.”
Dad of girl, aged 10

“I found being with the boys... most of them had done it from very early on in their lives, I found it quite judgey. Most of them were further on than me.”
Girl, aged 14

Alongside the skills gap, we must also recognise the genuine physical differences between girls and boys which can impact their experiences in mixed sport. There is a widespread view that before puberty, the physical attributes of girls and boys are equal as they relate to athletic performance. However, while the differences are not as pronounced before puberty, there are physical sex differences at this stage, and these begin in the womb. At around eight weeks into gestation male embryos begin to produce testosterone which speeds up their physical growth compared to female embryos. Studies have shown that from this approximate time, male embryos are on average longer than females (head to tail) and develop larger head and abdominal circumferences, meaning male newborns are, on average, slightly longer and heavier than females [34, 35].

This process continues after babies are born. Paediatric endocrinologists describe a “mini-puberty”: from around one to four months of age when transient increases in testosterone levels in male babies speed up their linear growth (length) compared to girls [36]. In males, mini-puberty leads to a peak in testosterone levels between 1 and 3 months of age when testosterone levels can reach 3.5–13.9 nmol/L, comparable to early–mid pubertal levels in boys [37].

This “mini-puberty” not only leads to baby boys being bigger but affects body composition in the first five months of life, so that male babies have a higher fat free body mass compared to females [38]. On average, boys have greater grip strength than girls from birth: girls have, on average, 90% of the grip strength of boys between the ages of 3–10 years [39].

A sex difference in limb strength also exists before puberty. On average in children aged 5–10 years old, boys’ arms are 17% stronger than girls and their legs are 8% stronger [40]. Although by this age gender stereotyping will play a part in sex differences in physical development, as more active children will develop greater strength, it is clear there are innate biological differences in early childhood body size, composition, grip strength and limb strength which will lead to male-female athletic performance gaps even among prepubertal children.

This is demonstrated in a study which examined finalist times from the USA Track and Field National Youth Outdoor Championships and National Junior Olympic Championships during the years 2016–2023 for running distances of 100, 200, 400, 800, and 1500m. In the age group 8 and under, the males were, on average, 4% faster than females over a distance of 100m, 4.7% in 200m, 5.3% in 400m, 6.7% in 800m, and 6.1% in 1500m [41].

There is a brief spell where the physical differences reduce around the age of 11 when girls have (on average) started puberty, but boys (on average) have not. After puberty physical differences become profound. Testosterone levels rise 20–30-fold in males during puberty and are 15 times higher in males than females by age 18 [42]. By 16, girls’ grip strength relative to boys’ grip strength falls to 65%. Aged 14–17 boys’ arms are 50% stronger, and their legs 30% stronger [39,40]. And there are substantial differences in strength, speed, power, endurance, and body size between the average adult male and the average adult female. This means men have 10–12% faster times for most linear swimming and running events; 20% better results in jumping events; 35% greater weightlifting ability in weight-matched males and females; and 50% greater weightlifting ability based on NHS average sizes for males and females [43].

The parents and girls in our research were well aware of these issues, particularly in team and contact sports where differences in physicality and skill were most pronounced. This resulted in some girls leaving mixed sports in search of girls-only opportunities, or leaving the sport entirely.

“She would sometimes encounter rough play from male adult players.”
Mum of girl, aged 12

“[We moved to a girls-only team] because the boys were getting older and the gap in physical abilities was becoming more noticeable.” *Mum of girl, aged 12*

“It doesn't make a difference if it's a mixed team [in a martial arts sport], as there is minimal contact.”
Mum of girl, aged 12

“When we were in the mixed team, it was really difficult to find another club and in the end she just said I don't want to play anymore.”
Mum of girl, aged 14

The Social Challenges of Mixed Sport

Whilst the physical differences between boys and girls may appear small before puberty, they can be meaningful and impact girls' experiences. For example, in flat races on sports day in a large primary school it is unlikely that girls will win races. Physical differences are significantly amplified by societal and environmental factors, which are even more profound in shaping girls' experiences of sport

The role boys play in shaping girls' experiences should not be underestimated or dismissed. Like girls, boys are heavily influenced by the expectations around them and the narrative they hear at home, in school, from peers, media and wider society. The narrative boys hear, often underpinned by gender stereotyping around traditional masculine ideals, elevates boys' status in sport (and life) and devalues girls and their abilities. Boys have been stereotyped and socialised to place excessive value on proving their sporting prowess and to prove they are “better” than girls. This influences boys' negative attitudes to girls in sport, resulting in behaviours that undermine, undervalue and exclude girls from participating and thriving, and especially in mixed settings [31].

Parent Perspective: Top 5 Barriers for Girls Taking Part in Mixed Sport*

33% - Boys dominating the activity

33% - Boys being too aggressive

30% - Fear of physical safety

27% - Managing their physical needs (periods, kit, modesty)

24% - Girls feeling excluded or treated unfairly by boys

*Parents chose a maximum of three from a range of options

Research shows that in shared space, boys will tend to dominate space and often actively exclude girls, sometimes taunting or teasing them at the same time. This was the finding of Women in Sport research into the lives of U11 boys and girls, and into the use of parks by teenage girls [30, 44]. This happens in playgrounds, in PE and in parks [44, 39]. Half of girls (49%) feel pushed out of parks and outdoor spaces, with 59% reporting that boys take over these areas, leaving them feeling unwelcome and excluded [39]. Boys can also be overly critical and judgmental of girls in sport. A third of girls (32%) have experienced being teased or bullied by boys whilst playing sport and 27% said teasing or bullying comments had put them off playing sport altogether [45].



These negative experiences can occur even on the playing field between boys and girls in the same team. Behind these behaviours lie the messages boys hear about sport being an absolute thing, and winning being all important, which boys often feel girls cannot help them achieve [31]. Over a third (36%) of 11-18 year old boys said that boys are better at sport than girls [45]. If “better” is measured in absolute terms in terms of the force with which a ball is hit for example, then they may be right. However, this narrow definition of “better” in sport reinforces exclusionary attitudes. The true value of sport lies in its value to the individual and it is therefore profoundly wrong to use such mindsets to discourage girls from participating in sport and stop them sharing space equally.

As we have discussed, boys have an advantage in absolute terms over girls, a small physical advantage before puberty, and significant thereafter. From an early age, boys are also more likely to be encouraged, supported and given opportunities to develop their skills which creates a compounded advantage [31]. We need to recognise the real differences but to clamp down on socially constructed differences. We should value the experience and skills of girls and boys in sport equally.

“Boys not accepting her, making fun of her and feeling threatened by her better playing, either retaliating with aggression, or losing badly e.g. other boys laughing at them that they lost to a girl.”
Mum of girl, aged 12

“I think boys just want to play and win... whereas I think with girls, there's a lot more to it.”
Dad of girl, aged 15

“The boys didn't pass to her... they weren't inclusive at all. They would say things to her in school, like 'You shouldn't be playing, you're not good enough.’”
Mum of girl, aged 14

“Parents' attitudes were also a problem. From mums and dads saying to sons 'How could they lose to a girl? Why is she on the team anyway?', to swearing at her on the pitch.”
Mum of girl, aged 12

“Boys tackle the ball off of her on the same team or wouldn't pass to her... it was just too aggressive.”
Dad of girl, aged 10



Girls are left feeling unwelcome and unsafe, and as if they don't belong

Against an increasingly hostile backdrop for women and girls in society, where 57% of Gen Z men aged 18-28 believe 'we have gone so far in promoting women's equality that we are discriminating against men' [46], the new visibility afforded to women's sport is hard for some girls to interpret. It is hard to estimate or quantify the impact on girls in sport of the wider societal backdrop of rising misogyny and increased actual and perceived risks to women and girls.

Numerous studies have shown that women and girls suffer disproportionate harassment and abuse in sport [47, 48, 49]. Research from Girlguiding highlights that three in four girls aged 11-16 see or experience sexism in their lives (74%), causing just under half to feel less safe (47%) and less confident (43%). When it comes to sport, over half of girls aged 11-21 have seen or experienced sexism in professional sport (56%), and when taking part in sport and physical activity themselves (54%) [5]. Along with the visibility of the successes of women's sport, there has also been increasing visibility of the horrific online misogynistic abuse that sportswomen suffer. Girls are not blind to all of this and it can put them off taking part, especially with boys.

In this context, girls often look to other women and girls that they can relate to, feel understood by and feel safe with. For example in school, 48% of girls prefer to have a female teacher/coach, compared to just 5% who say a male teacher/coach (47% 'don't mind') [26]. Girls are inspired and empowered by female role models in sport. Yet there is a deficit of women coaches within sport due to the pressures on women's lives outside sport, and the hostile culture women also face within sport [49].

Both male and female coaches can lack the education and awareness to recognise gender stereotyping and excluding behaviours, to challenge boys, and manage mixed sport effectively [31]. When this happens, girls lose out.

Actively managed mixed sport can be a powerful way to unite boys and girls but we must also acknowledge that it can leave too many girls feeling excluded and unsupported on the sidelines. For mixed sport to be truly effective for girls as well as boys, it must be proactively designed, delivered and managed with girls' needs front of mind to ensure it is safe and fair. It must recognise real differences while eliminating gender stereotyping and the barriers so many girls continue to face in sport



“What is even the point in coming if I'm not even going to do anything? They weren't especially horrible, but they just didn't include girls.”

Girl, aged 13

“Because I was being treated like that, not being passed the ball, I would stand on the pitch with my arms crossed, and they took me off for not participating.”

Girl, aged 14

“[Coaches] should have noticed what the problem was, because it wasn't just the girls that were being excluded as [well as] other boys.”

Dad of girl, aged 10

½ of parents

(53%) agree that mixed sport sessions are usually **tailored to boys' needs and interests**

There aren't enough girls-only opportunities, and many girls and parents value them

The challenges girls face in mixed sport highlight the need for more girls-only opportunities to support all girls to thrive, not just the 'sporty' few. Whilst some sports have recognised this and offer girls-only programmes and provision, the playing field remains unequal for girls.

The analysis of the opportunities for children and young people revealed that across all regions in England, only 1 in 6 opportunities are for girls only, with low provision in contexts where they are likely most needed: team sports (20%), boy-dominated sports (20%) and contacts sports (27%). Overall, 71% of parents agree that having girls-only opportunities in team sports is important, and this is felt most strongly among fathers (80%), and Black parents (77%). Similarly, 74% of parents agree that it's important to have girls only in contact sports, with agreement highest again for fathers and Black parents (both 80%).

Our wealth of research with girls shows they face complex barriers to engaging in sport: fear of being watched, fear of being judged on their ability and appearance, not feeling good enough, and not feeling they have the right body for sport, which can all be amplified in the presence of boys [20]. Within school for example, nearly a third of girls (31%) say they don't like taking part in PE, sport and physical activity with boys. Of these girls, some of the key reasons behind this are boys being too critical (48%) and aggressive towards girls (43%) and boys don't play fairly (37%). As a result, girls don't feel they can be themselves in front of boys (43%) and lack the confidence to take part with them (49%) [50].

Girls-only environments can provide a physically and emotionally safe space for girls to feel the joy and freedom of sport. Given the physical and social challenges of mixed sport discussed, girls-only settings can support skill development, confidence, enjoyment and motivation to engage in sport. Being with other girls who share lived experience of the physical and social realities of being a girl in today's world can be empowering and give girls a strong sense of belonging. This is particularly important when considering the significant impact puberty can have on girls and their engagement with sport [20, 51]. Some studies have shown that girls are more physically active in girls-only activities compared to mixed, enabling them to reap better health benefits [52, 53].

A lack of female-only opportunities and spaces is a particular barrier to some girls from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds (some of whom are the least active of all girls) who may want, or need girls-only spaces to observe cultural or religious practices, and to avoid judgement [54, 55]. In our survey, Black and Asian parents generally felt more strongly about the need for girls-only spaces than White parents and those of Mixed heritage.

“We just have one of the best teams. We don't blame each other if it doesn't go right.”
Girl, aged 14

“In the boys' teams, they were sort of, not horrible, but also not inclusive. But in the girls', they just get along with everyone. It was all just a big community. Going out to parties, just all trying together, whether before or after training, so bringing those friendships with them, as well as the involvement in the game.”
Mum of girl, aged 13

“With mixed teams, there's a divide between the boys and girls. In single sex, there's no divide.”
Girl, aged 14

We know from Women in Sport data that 56% of girls aged 13-24 prefer taking part in sport and physical activity with girls only, increasing to 69% for those who say they are not 'sporty'. In fact, 49% of boys of the same age also prefer to take part with boys only [24]. In school, 68% of girls prefer being grouped for sport and physical activity with girls only, compared to only 14% who prefer mixed groups and 18% who 'don't mind' [26]. In our Dream Deficit research with girls aged 13-24, a quarter of girls (24%) agree that more girls-only opportunities would encourage girls to get more involved in sport, rising to 28% for girls who 'don't take part much in sport and exercise but want to do more'. Girls are four times more likely to agree that more girls only-opportunities would encourage participation for girls than boys who say this about boys-only opportunities [24].

Girls-only opportunities and environments can help combat deep-rooted barriers that cause so many girls to fall away from sport. Having the *choice* of girls-only sport is therefore vital to meet the unique needs of different girls and to ensure all girls have the opportunity to thrive.

Most parents also see the value of girls-only opportunities in providing a fairer environment for girls to develop skills and for their physical and emotional safety. Fathers, who often have more experience of playing sport and with other boys/men, felt this even more keenly than mothers.

Overall, two-thirds of parents (68%) said that girls-only sport is important for girls of all ages, with agreement highest among Asian parents (78%) and fathers overall (74%). When asked about different age groups, more parents agree that girls-only sport is important for secondary school-aged girls (66%) than primary (55%), though over half still feel this.

Half of parents agree that girls are better able to thrive in girls-only sport sessions than mixed (52%), increasing to 63% of fathers, and 59% and 58% respectively for Asian and Black parents. Overall, 56% of parents say they would prefer to have the choice of both single-sex and mixed sport for their child, with Black and Asian parents (65%, 62%) showing stronger agreement than White parents and those of Mixed heritage (55%, 53%).

6 in 10 parents

agree that girls-only opportunities:

- Provide a fairer environment for girls to develop their skills
- Are important for girls' physical safety
- Are important for girls' emotional/psychological safety

“Her team of girls are really supportive of each other. There’s no nastiness. If someone makes a mistake, no one goes ‘You shouldn’t have dropped that ball, you did this, you did that’, they just play on. It’s really nice.”

Mum of girl, aged 14

“If we had more opportunities to play with the girls, then I’d be more interested in playing.”

Girl, aged 14



Parents are frustrated by the lack of value placed on girls' sport, which limits their daughters' opportunities and experiences

Half of the parents surveyed agree that girls have fewer opportunities to take part in sport than boys (51%). Parents told us they find it much harder to access sporting opportunities for their daughters, often needing to travel much further and at greater expense and strain compared with their sons. This has clear implications for families with less financial means. When girls become more independent from parents, a lack of local, accessible opportunities also raises significant safety concerns for parents and girls alike [56].

Parents expressed frustration with the consistent lack of value placed on girls' sport, reflected in a lack of funding, female-friendly facilities and infrastructure, poor scheduling of training/competitions for girls, and a lack of quality coaching; all often prioritised for boys' sports. This limits the amount and quality of opportunities available to girls, whether these can be sustained and stifles girls' development.

1/2 of parents

agree that girls have fewer opportunities than boys to take part in sport

"We had to travel 40 minutes to get into a girls' team. It's still quite far, whereas if she was a boy, she'd only have to go 10 minutes down the road."

Mum of girl, aged 13

"The boys have probably got three teams at every age group. The girls have one every two years."

Mum of girl, aged 14

"Local girls' academy doesn't have the same status as the boys' academy... The girls didn't have the same level of funding."

Mum of girl, aged 12

"It was really hard to find a girls' team."

Mum of girl, aged 13

"We need better facilities for girls. Coaching and things like that. Have more girls' teams available."

Girl, aged 14

"Good coaches in football often get transferred to the boys' teams, hindering the progression of girls."

Mum of girl, aged 12

"It had been a struggle to find the right place for her, as her first experience in a mixed team was negative."

Mum of girl, aged 12

"It's been quite disjointed... it's not been a case of she started something and gone all the way through."

Dad of girl, aged 15

Girls feel these inequalities sharply: 41% of girls aged 13-24 say that girls aren't given enough support to reach their dreams in sport, with around a third saying there isn't enough funding for girls' sport (35%) and there are not enough opportunities, clubs and teams to join locally (32%) [23]. In a recent study with girls aged 11-18, 23% reported that boys' teams get more funding and priority when booking pitches and facilities, and 21% said boys' teams were generally treated better than girls' teams [45]. A separate study found that girls aged 11-16 were offered around half the amount of coaching in traditionally 'male' sports, compared to boys of the same age [30]. Half of girls (51%) aged 13-24 want to see girls' and women's teams more supported in the future [24].

The lack of investment, opportunities and pathways in girls' sport compared to boys' sport means girls can have more negative and fragmented journeys, often having to switch between different teams, clubs and locations. Finding the right opportunities that offer choice, meet girls' needs and provide a positive and supportive environment is crucial to keeping girls engaged in sport.



CASE STUDY INSPIRATION

TACKLING THE OPPORTUNITY
GAP IN SPORT FOR GIRLS

TRANSFORMING GIRLS' CRICKET

How the ECB and Metro Bank Partnership is Growing Coaches, Volunteers, and Opportunities Nationwide

Cricket is evolving and whilst there has been growth in the number of women's and girls' sections in clubs in recent years, it was recognised within the game and the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) that many clubs did not have them. Metro Bank, the first-ever Champion of Women's and Girls' Cricket, partnered with the ECB to accelerate growth in the girls' game through the [Metro Bank Girls in Cricket Fund](#).

Recognising the vital role coaches play in the growth of the girls' game, the Metro Bank Girls in Cricket Fund, delivered by 38 Recreational Cricket Boards across England and Wales supports recruitment and training of coaches and volunteers and enables future ECB Coach Developers to turbocharge growth. The Fund aims to triple the number of girls' cricket teams by the end of 2028, breaking down barriers and creating supportive and inclusive spaces to attract and keep more girls in cricket. Seven 'pillars' of activity were set up to achieve this, including recruiting and training coaches and volunteers to better understand girls' needs, and providing tailored support and resources around coaching girls teams and setting up girls' cricket sections in clubs.

Metro Bank and the ECB have also spearheaded a campaign called Seeing is Believing, which aims to address the visibility gap for girls in terms of seeing women and girls represented playing cricket. Their research uncovered that over a one-month period, a fifth (20%) of girls had seen no images of women and girls playing cricket, and just over a third (34%) said they hadn't seen enough or had only seen a small number [vii].

"I'd never had a female coach myself, I knew there'd be young girls coming through, and I understood the value of representation. I wanted to make sure that if a girl wanted to join a club, she wouldn't be turned away."

Amy Jones, Women and Girls' Development Officer, Cheshire Cricket [viii]

"When young girls see players who look like them, it stops being a dream and starts feeling possible. This campaign gives the whole cricketing community the tools to show what women's and girls' cricket really looks like, vibrant, talented, and growing fast."

Ian Martin, Coach Development Manager, Cricket Wales

"Previously, the lack of opportunities meant we would lose girls who felt uncomfortable about playing hardball cricket with boys who were developing faster and stronger. Girls can now build confidence and skills at their own pace... The Metro Bank Girls in Cricket Fund has been vital in all of this. It enables Cumbria Cricket to promote girls' cricket in such a powerful way."

Meg Lewis, Women's and Girls' Development Officer for Cumbria Cricket [viii]

[vii] The Metro Bank research was conducted by Censuswide, among a sample of 2,000 UK females aged 7+ (nationally representative). The data was collected between 27.06.2025 – 04.07.2025.
[viii] Quotes taken from www.ecb.co.uk



To inspire future female cricketers and boost visibility of women's sport, Metro Bank and the ECB partnered with Getty Images to create a new, high quality photography bank of women's and girls' cricket. The collection is free for clubs via the ECB Resource Hub and publicly accessible through Getty Images' [#TheMetroBankCollection](#), to support media and marketing storytelling.

Alongside other investments into the recreational game, the ECB and Metro Bank partnership has contributed to a 32% growth in girls' teams since it launched in 2024. The Fund is helping to transform girls' cricket so every girl can find their team. As of the end of 2025 there are:

- 2,875 girls' teams in clubs (up 9% from 2024)
- 1,160 clubs with girls' sections (up 15% from 2024)
- And in 2025, a record 24,000 women and girls' recreational matches took place (up 20%)

“When girls regularly participate in sport, our research shows this helps them to excel and develop in every aspect of their lives. Together, we are going to help girls fulfil their potential.”

Danielle Lee, Brand and Marketing Director at Metro Bank



RFL RUGBEES PROGRAMME

Challenging Gender Stereotypes and Creating Space for Girls to Discover Rugby

Following the success of the home World Cup in 2022, and the enhanced status and awareness of the women's game in England, the Rugby Football League (RFL) recognised an increasing need and demand for multiple entry points into rugby for young girls that were suited to their experience and confidence in playing team sports. Rugby League is well known as a sport that engages with and supports struggling communities and areas of high deprivation. It's therefore even more crucial that the game is accessible and welcoming for girls, giving them opportunities to be active and a network of support in their community.

Launched in 2023, just three months after the World Cup's conclusion, the RugBees programme provides a space exclusively for young girls aged 7-11 to introduce them to a sport that so many would otherwise not have the chance to try. RugBees aims to tackle stubborn gender stereotypes in sport and redefine what Rugby League means to girls. It provides a dedicated space for young girls to discover rugby, focused on developing new skills, connecting with others and fostering a love of the game in environments that are designed to help young girls thrive. Given the communities Rugby League supports no membership fees are needed, with just a nominal fee payable per session.

Participation in RugBees has grown by 40% since launch, with 19 rugby foundations now driving the programme and delivering sessions across the country, with some delivering at multiple locations within their communities. In 2025, 450 RugBees sessions were delivered across the network, reaching nearly 600 girls. The programme is growing steadily and has reached nearly 1,150 girls and had over 13,200 attendances at sessions.

Growth in the wider girls' game continues too. In 2025, 17 clubs entered girls' teams for the first time, contributing to the creation of 34 new teams. The exposure foundations are giving to girls' rugby through RugBees is driving increased awareness of and interest in the opportunities available for girls. Many of the girls involved in RugBees have gone on to play at their local community club.

"It's a really fun place to go, all the girls are really friendly. We learn lots of skills and always play a game at the end."

Girl, Wigan Warriors Foundation



The Warrington Wolves Foundation, who have the largest RugBees programme in the game, conducted research with parents to understand the impact of the programme. All parents said they would recommend RugBees to another family and many believe the programme has had a positive impact on their daughters' confidence and wellbeing:

- 2 in 3 parents felt that RugBees has led to improvements in their daughters' confidence.
- 4 in 5 parents felt that RugBees has led to increased happiness and social skills for their daughter.
- 4 in 5 parents felt that RugBees contributes to greater female empowerment, and the growth of women and girls' rugby locally.

The wider game has seen a big shift over the last few years, with the female game becoming more and more prominent. RugBees aims to drive this change by bringing girls in early at the very beginning of their sporting journey and proving to them that Rugby League is a space for them to be their authentic and unapologetic selves and that they are welcomed, wanted and valued in the game.

“RugBees provides an amazing opportunity for girls to get involved in playing rugby in a fun and welcoming environment. It has given my daughter the opportunity to learn the game and she has loved it so much she has also joined a community club.”
Parent at Warrington Wolves Foundation

“RugBees is the highlight of my week! It fills me with joy seeing the girls running around happy, safe and with big smiles on their faces. As a more senior player, it has been rewarding seeing young girls, sometimes the only girls on their community team, being encouraged to continue or start playing rugby, develop friendships with other girls and be inspired by the women's players who come down and support the sessions.”
Player and Community Coach, Wigan Warriors

“There is so much evidence to support that playing sport in a mixed gender setting isn't right for all young girls and can be a barrier to participation which is why we introduced RugBees to help tackle this... Rugbees is a place where they can feel comfortable to fail. A safe space to try this new sport which has been seen as a boys' sport. We want to break down those barriers.”

Jodie Cunningham, Former RFL National Women's and Girls Development Manager, now Head of Women's Pathways and Performance at St. Helens

“Since joining RugBees my daughter has increased in her confidence and emotional wellbeing. She loves taking part in team activities and is generally much happier in her day to day life.”
Parent at Warrington Wolves Foundation



THE PRIME VIDEO LTA YOUTH GIRLS PROGRAMME

A Girls-Only Initiative to Engage and Inspire the Next Generation of Female Tennis Players

LTA research identified that girls wanted to play tennis with friends in a fun and pressure-free setting, with relatable coaches who could build confidence and drive enjoyment. The research revealed several barriers for girls, such as a lack of visible female coaches and role models, societal pressures and gender stereotypes around what it means to be 'sporty', and girls not being equipped with the right skills and capability to enjoy sport, which impacts their confidence and self-belief compared to boys of the same age.

“The barriers for girls are complex. Girls are turning up to tennis and they have this baggage, which comes from societal pressures and gender stereotypes. What we’re trying to do is create an environment where girls can be authentic – whatever that means to them. They can come and be who they are with other girls. Alongside that, we have to give them skills. If you can build success, that increases confidence. The more confident you are, the more you’re going to want to keep coming back.”

Jo-Anne Downing, LTA Programme Strategy Manager

To address these barriers the LTA developed the ‘Prime Video LTA Youth Girls’ programme, a dedicated girls-only initiative for girls aged 4-16. The multi-year partnership was born out of Prime Video reinvesting the funds from the shared broadcast of Emma Raducanu’s historic US Open title into growing women’s tennis in Britain. The programme aimed to encourage and inspire the next generation of girls to start their journey playing and loving the sport.

Over 10,000 girls took part, and over 500 tennis coaches were trained to better understand the complex and unique barriers faced by girls when playing sport. The six-week introductory course was packed with games and exercises to build skills and confidence on court while having fun with friends, creating an environment that was motivating for girls and young women to play and stay in tennis. The programme delivered measurable improvements for girls: 90% of coaches believed confidence, sense of belonging, friendship development and desire to continue coaching were stronger in girls-only groups compared to mixed sessions. Coaches consistently reported that girls thrived in a girls-only environment, particularly in the early stages of their tennis journey.



The programme ran for two years between 2022-2024 and formed part of the LTA's wider 'She Rallies' ambition, to encourage more female involvement in tennis at all levels. The programme has had a wide-reaching and sustained impact in the game increasing both participation and retention among girls:

- 4 out of 5 coaches report that girls who took part in sessions are still playing regularly with many coaches continuing the sessions
- Half of girls who took part signed up for further LTA courses
- In 2025, half of junior players aged 4-15 are female
- 44% of children in LTA Youth recreational competitions are now female
- To date, there has been a 22% year on year increase in girls' weekly play

There has also been a clear pathway impact in terms of girls signing up to the Tennis Leaders programme, taking their first steps into leadership roles, and a high proportion of girls progressing into Team Challenge and other competition formats.

The programme has also supported significant structural progress across the sport, influencing coaching pathways, leadership representation, and long-term workforce diversity. For example, since 2022, accredited female coaches have increased by 33%, 2,050 new female activators have been trained to deliver community tennis and 1,000+ coaches have completed the *Coaching Females: Princess or Athlete* online course, designed to positively address barriers for young girls.

“When I advertised an all-girls group, 40 girls came forward. These sessions are hugely beneficial for getting girls into the sport.”
Sam Mills, Coach



“Tennis is really good for skill and body movement and being in a girl only group has been so great for me.”
Girl player, Preston Lawn Tennis Centre

“My daughter has improved more in six weeks playing in an all-girls programme than she did in two years at another club.”
Parent, Hollingbury Park Club

Create more girls-only opportunities in sport at all ages

Understand the “why”

- Early gender stereotyping and biological differences combine to mean even at a young age, mixed sport can disadvantage girls, excluding the least active, skilled and engaged girls, preventing the majority from thriving. Even exceptional or ‘sporty’ girls can face hostility and limiting assumptions.
- All girls deserve the choice to play sport where they feel most comfortable. Dedicated girls-only environments can reduce barriers, allowing girls to build their skills and self-belief and create a safe community of shared experience and belonging.
- A lack of girls-only opportunities can stop girls from taking part in sport and also limits the pipeline of female talent coming up through the pathways to elite sport.



Offer girls-only opportunities from a young age

- Girls and parents want more girls-only opportunities. In ethnically diverse communities an even higher proportion support this.
- Girls-only opportunities need to start young to avoid girls’ sporting self-belief and enjoyment crashing even before puberty.
- Targeted programmes for young and older girls are needed at club and community levels across all sports.
- To narrow the 24% team sport gap, we need more girls-only opportunities in all our major team sports, whether male-dominated or female-dominated.

Re-imagine mixed sport to allow girls to thrive

Understand the “why”

- Fairness, safety (physical and emotional) and positive experiences matter at every level and every age in sport.
- Assuming mixed sport provides an equal experience for children and young people can negatively affect girls. Girls and boys do not go into sporting environments on an equal level, either biologically or socially.
- A wealth of insight from girls and parents shows that passive mixed sport can create negative experiences for girls, impacting their self-belief and ability to play ‘freely’ and grow, affecting their long-term engagement.
- Most mixed sporting opportunities will not work for girls without intervention.

Proactively design and deliver mixed sport and programmes to ensure girls don’t lose out

- To make mixed sport equal requires those designing and leading it to be aware of their own gender stereotyping and actively work to counter this.
- Recognise the early skills gap between girls and boys in younger years and dedicate time to help close this.
- Firmly challenge negative attitudes and behaviours towards girls on and off the pitch and reward joint endeavour and respect.
- Each sport should develop best practice guidance of what ‘good’ mixed sport should look like to ensure girls can thrive as much as boys.



COACHES TOOLKIT

Coaching for Gender Equality in Sport:
Tackling Gender Stereotypes

[Read more](#)



Ensure the wider sporting culture and environment show girls they are valued

Understand the “why”

- We live in a society that is unequal, and gender inequality in sport is long-standing with sexism and misogyny widespread. Girls are aware of this, and club culture needs to actively counter this.
- Girls and women face multiple challenges in their everyday lives meaning that before girls even arrive at a club or session, they are likely to have had to battle through barriers often invisible to boys and men.
- The whole sporting environment matters if women and girls are to feel welcome and that they belong. Limiting stereotypes and negative attitudes to girls should be challenged whenever experienced.

Give girls' sport equal priority to boys

- Invest more time and resource into growing girls-only sport, ensuring equal effort is put into securing sponsorship, funding and publicity as boys to make it fair and sustainable.
- Recruit and retain more female coaches. Girls benefit from leaders with shared lived experience and boys and girls benefit from witnessing female leadership in sport.
- Ensure girls have equal access to suitable kit/equipment, pitches and playing times, high-quality coaching, and female-friendly facilities that meet their basic needs, and their achievements are celebrated equally to boys.



Improve the collection of data about sporting opportunities

Understand the “why”

Despite undertaking this research and analysing the data of some National Governing Bodies with substantial national datasets, our research showed that not all organisations hold opportunity data and the quality of the data that exists can vary. This makes it difficult to truly understand what opportunities exist where, who they are open to, and who is actually taking part.

Better data collection and analysis will allow National Governing Bodies and their stakeholders to:

- Demonstrate impact by identifying what opportunities are being created and who is benefiting from the provision.
- Track progress in increasing opportunities for children and young people.
- Identify how investment is translating to outcomes for women and girls, something that gender impact reporting requires.
- Make targeted interventions to increase opportunity and reduce gender inequality.



Reform sector data collection

- Use the best technology to increase accountability through effective data collection and management (recognising sport is a vast, diverse and community-based sector).
- Consider making affiliation with a national governing body and / or grants conditional upon minimum standards for data collection and submission around participation and opportunity.
- All data collected should specify sex, age, ethnicity, and disability of participants as a minimum.
- More support should be given to governing bodies to ensure the right data is captured and that the analysis is shared with the right people.

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