RECRUITING & RETAINING
GIRLS IN SPORT
DESIGNING SUPPORTIVE PROGRAMS

INTRODUCTION

Despite the recent increase in focus on women's and girls' sport, girls continue to drop out of sport at alarming rates. By adolescence, half of girls aren't participating in sport of any kind (Rally Report, 2022). In fact, by age 14, girls drop out of sport at twice the rate of boys (She Belongs Report, 2020). In addition to this, girls who are in sport report that sport leaders are not equipped to address their needs: less than half of coaches receive training on how to create quality sport experiences for girls and 37% of sport administrators do not consider gender when allocating resources (Rally Report, 2022). These statistics demonstrate that all in all, we have a lot of work to do to ensure girls are supported to continue participating in sport.

This document is intended to help you as a coach, program leader, or administrator, in designing sport programs that support girls and ensure they continue participating. To set the scene, we'll first take a look at what causes girls to drop out of sport.

What keeps girls on the sidelines?

To understand why girls drop out of sport, we have to ask: what barriers keep them on the sidelines? Girls don't drop out of sport because they don't enjoy the key components of sport (competition, team-building, reaching goals, etc.). Girls drop out because they have to overcome several challenges to become and stay involved. Girls often receive conflicting messages about what it means to be a girl and what it means to be an athlete, which often results in feelings of not belonging in certain sporting environments. The most commonly reported barriers that girls experience include:

- Lack of quality experiences
- Limited access (transportation, lack of programs available in their area, etc.) and knowledge
- Alternative interests and responsibilities
- Lack of confidence
- Lack of perceived competence
- Lack of social belonging
- Negative body image
- Lack of support (from family, peers, coaches, etc.)
- Injuries
- Cost
- Gender discrimination/ expectations
- Religious/spiritual discrimination and pressure
- Racial/ethnic concerns

It is important to note that the more barriers girls face, the less likely they are to participate in sport. Therefore, as coaches, program leaders, and administrators, it is our collective responsibility to limit the number of barriers girls face – this document will help you do so.

Why should girls participate in sport and recreation?

The benefits of positive sport participation for girls are clear: sport helps girls develop physical, mental, social, and emotional skills. However, participation in sport alone does not guarantee benefits; sport experiences must be designed to meet girls' needs so that they reap the benefits.

The benefits of positive sport participation for girls include:

- Mental health and well-being
- Physical health
- Confidence
- Positive body image
- Building social connections
- Cognitive development

- Moral development
- Leadership development
- Development of sport and physical skills
- Increased academic achievement
- Development of time management skills

These benefits underlie the rest of this document: all of our recommendations and strategies look to ensure girls experience these benefits.

Recruitment and Retention

The overall goal of this document is to help you recruit and retain girls in your sport. There are many ways you can recruit girls, but the number one thing to remember is that you must intentionally target them through a range of techniques and strategies.

Typically, girls respond better to active recruitment techniques like demos or clinics. Additionally, girls often need to be asked to participate - making phone calls, sending emails, and speaking with parents and potential participants will likely bring the most success. When speaking with parents and potential participants, make sure you provide details about the program so that they know what to expect – things like what they will learn, time commitment, and travel expectations. Also, don't underestimate the power of peer recruitment – provide opportunities for girls to recruit their friends!

Targeted recruitment is especially important in sports that weren't traditionally designed for girls (think baseball, hockey, boxing, etc.). If you're involved in one of these sports, you will likely need to focus even more time on active recruitment techniques like speaking with girls or parents directly. Sometimes all it takes is for a girl to be invited to participate to pique their interest!

Once you have successfully recruited girls, you can then shift your focus to retaining them in your sport/program. To retain girls, you must make intentional efforts to ensure they have positive experiences and have opportunities to experience the benefits of sport. Simply put, positive experiences that support girls' needs and allow them to experience benefits are key to ensuring they stay in sport. Now let's talk about how you can build a program that does so!

PROGRAM DESIGN

The number one thing to remember when designing and offering sport programs for girls is that the program environment must be intentionally created. Successful programs don't just happen by chance – you have to ensure the environment works for girls!

The first step in building a program involves engaging girls in the design process. Who better to provide input on the structure of the program than the girls themselves? Of course, you won't be able to get input on all aspects of the program, but there are many areas you can collect feedback on, including practice times/lengths, team name/colours, team code of conduct/expectations of behaviour, and team captains.

Beyond engaging girls in the design process, there are five areas that we recommend you focus on when designing a program that works for girls: Skill Building, Belonging and Connection, Support, Enjoyment, and Evaluation. Each of these are discussed in detail below:

Skill Development

Positive sport participation allows girls to develop numerous skills: physical, mental, social, and emotional. As a coach/program leader, you must prioritize the development of all of these skills; sport is not just about developing physical skills! Firstly, make sure that your program follows the Long-Term Development in Sport

and Physical Activity (LTD) principles. Check out Sport for Life's general LTD resource, as well as your sport's edition to learn more. Aligning your program with long-term development principles will help you determine which aspect of skill development to prioritize and when. For the purpose of this document, we have split skill development into two sections: Sport Skills and Life Skills.

Sport Skills

Sport programs should provide opportunities for girls to develop a wide range of sport, or physical, skills. Here are a number of ways you can support this development:

Let girls compete: Girls want to be challenged and have opportunities to showcase their skills in games and competitions. Provide opportunities for them to do so, but make sure you are following the appropriate LTD competition-to-training ratio for the age group.

Focus on progress, not outcomes: Constructive feedback is very important in the development of sport skills. Make sure that your feedback is specific to individual participants and focuses on how they can improve. Make an effort to reward and celebrate progress, not results or wins.

Redefine girls' relationships with risk-taking: The potential to fail or make mistakes can be a major barrier for girls and may even prevent them from trying a new skill or activity. Teach your participants that making mistakes is part of sport – what we learn from our mistakes is what's important!

Develop achievement motivation: Girls who are motivated to develop are more

likely to continue in sport. One great way to support the development of achievement motivation is by engaging your participants in goal-setting activities. Start by leading a goal-setting activity at the beginning of the season and meet with each participant to learn about their goals and how you can best support them. Then, throughout the season, consistently check in on their progress.

Help girls develop their athlete identity: Girls who believe sport is a part of their identities are more likely to stick with it. Support them to understand that being an athlete can be a positive aspect of their identity.

Life Skills

Beyond sport skills, there are many other "life" skills that you should support girls to develop. Life skills go beyond sport and can benefit girls in many aspects of their lives. Here are some of the life skills you should focus on:

Leadership and mentorship: When girls reach adolescence, some lose their inclination towards leadership because of self-esteem and confidence issues. For this reason, it's important to provide opportunities for your athletes to develop leadership skills. Leadership positions within your team (captains, designated roles, etc.) are a great way to do this, but it's also important to note that every girl can have a leadership role within your team, regardless of title. Girls don't need an official title to be a leader – some girls may show leadership in big and bold ways, while others may show it in smaller and quieter ways. Celebrate all forms of leadership on your team, big and small, because all team members have an important role to play. Looking to help your participants develop their leadership

skills? Check out the Lean In Girls Leadership Program – it's free and easy to integrate into your program!

Self-esteem and confidence: As we know, lack of self-esteem and confidence is a major barrier for girls, especially during adolescence. This is where you come in: when done right, positive sport participation is incredibly impactful in supporting girls to develop confidence and self-esteem. As a coach or leader, you should support your athletes to understand that they are strong and capable individuals. Looking for ways to help boost your participants' confidence and self-esteem? Check out She is Active NB's Positive Affirmation Worksheet and Dove x Nike's Body Confident Sport program!

Time management: As girls age and their responsibilities increase, they often have to make the difficult decision to prioritize certain aspects of their lives (sport, school, friends, part-time jobs, obligations at home, etc.) - this can be a major barrier to sport participation. Some girls choose to prioritize other activities or obligations over sport, while others may not have enough time to dedicate to sport. To mitigate this challenge, make sure you allow for feedback about practice and game times, and support girls in the development of time management skills.

Teamwork and building relationships: Sport, especially team sports, provide great opportunities for girls to develop social skills, including working in a team and building relationships. It is important to offer ample opportunities for girls to connect and build relationships on and off the playing field – don't underestimate the importance of belonging and connection. The importance of belonging and connection is discussed further in the following section.

Belonging & Connection

Creating an environment that intentionally fosters a sense of belonging is crucial to retaining girls in sport and recreation. Simply put, girls engage in sport and recreation environments differently than boys. While boys engage in sport first through effort, which leads to performance, then social acceptance, and a positive sport experience, it is the opposite for girls. For girls to put in effort in a sporting environment, they must first feel they belong; this is why social acceptance is so important for girls. Once social acceptance is in place, girls can then focus on putting in effort, which leads to performance and a positive sport experience.

GIRLS	BOYS
SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE	EFFORT
EFFORT	PERFORMANCE
PERFORMANCE	SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE
POSITIVE SPORT EXPERIENCE	POSITIVE SPORT EXPERIENCE
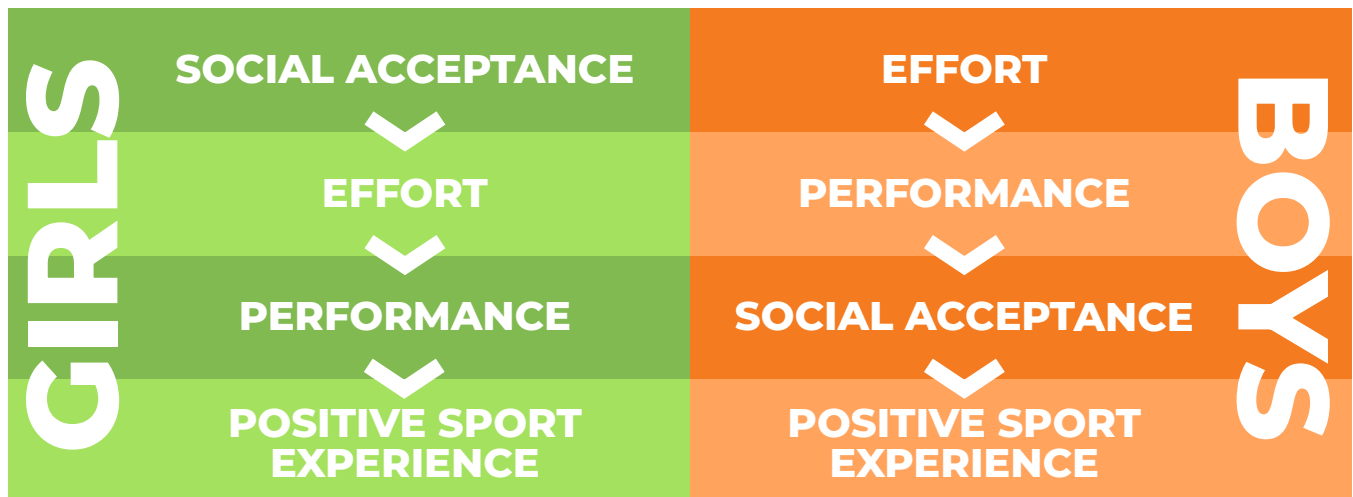
Adapted from *She Belongs* – Canadian Women & Sport

This graphic demonstrates that before you can focus on skill development in your program, you must ensure girls feel like they belong as part of the team/group. Here are some ways to foster social acceptance on your team:

Focus on creating a safe and inclusive environment: 1 in 3 girls report that coaches and organizations are not addressing important safety issues (bullying,

physical safety, social safety, etc.; Rally Report, 2022). It is your job, as a coach, program leader, or administrator, to ensure girls' safety needs are met. The first aspect of creating a safe and inclusive environment is meeting girls' emotional and physical safety needs. For physical safety, make sure girls have the proper equipment and participate in a space where they feel secure (good lighting in the parking lot, personal hygiene items available in the washroom, etc.). As for emotional safety, ensure you provide a predictable environment where participants know what to expect (similar practice structure, practice plan explained at the beginning of each practice, etc.); a predictable environment will help girls feel comfortable when they arrive to practice.

Introduce your team/group culture: As a coach or program leader, your team/ group culture is something that you have great control over – make sure you lay the foundation for a positive culture from the get-go. During one of your first practices, provide your vision for the season and establish team values and expectations for behaviour. Getting feedback from participants on your culture is also important; engage the girls in an activity where they can provide input on your team values and code of conduct (or expectations of behaviour). You may even write them down on a poster board to hang up during each practice – this serves as a great reminder!

Make sure you are also "walking the talk" when it comes to your expectations of behaviour and team values – make sure your decisions align with your established team culture and that you are displaying the behaviour you expect from the girls.

Looking for ideas on team values? Consider implementing the True Sport principles into your program!

Recognize and support diversity: When supporting diversity, it is important to get to know each participant's needs and understand how you can best support them. Some of the ways you can integrate the diverse needs of your team into your program are by using brief explanations and a variety of strategies to explain skills and activities, and by inviting questions and exploration. Another important factor in recognizing and supporting diversity is using inclusive language. Although many of us have ingrained the usage of gendered language (think "you guys"), try to refrain from using it as much as possible. Instead of using gendered language when addressing the group, consider using "folks" or "everyone" instead.

Focus on building positive relationships: Building relationships is one of the best ways to create belonging and social acceptance on your team. Make sure you allow time for girls to connect - girls want to get to know each other and need time to do so. Icebreaker and team-building activities are a great way to do this; we recommend that you begin each practice with an activity or game that allows girls to connect and get to know each other beyond the sport. Make sure you also switch up groups and partners throughout the year so that everyone gets to know each other. It's also important that participants develop a positive relationship with you as their coach; actively listen and show interest in their lives, be someone they can talk to, respect their individuality and boundaries, and always be supportive.

Support

Just as belonging and connection are crucial to girls' continued participation, so is support. Girls are more likely to continue participating in sport if they have supportive groups around them, specifically, support from coaches, peers, parents, and role models. Each of these important groups is discussed below:

Coaches: As mentioned, coaches play a critical role in creating positive experiences for girls. It's important for girls to have positive, supportive, and relatable coaches. A supportive coach takes the time to get to know their participants and shows interest in their lives, while also understanding the needs of each participant. Remember, your job as a coach goes well beyond teaching sport skills – make sure you are a supportive figure in their lives!

Peers: Peers or teammates also play an integral role in supporting girls in sport. Belonging and connection are very important for girls and having supportive teammates fosters a sense of belonging. Remember the role you have in creating a positive team culture, and always encourage girls to be supportive of one another.

Parents and Guardians: Parents and guardians can "make or break" a child's participation in sport; if a girl's parents or guardians do not value of sport participation and do not support her involvement, she is much less likely to participate. Further, if parents or guardians do not support the positive environment that a coach is trying to establish, their children won't either – this is why parent and guardian support is so crucial.

Parents and guardians provide two types of support in sport contexts: tangible and emotional. Tangible support includes things like transportation, paying program fees, and seeking opportunities for their children to play. Emotional support includes watching their child play, participating with their child (either in the program as a coach or volunteer or outside of the program through practice time at home), providing positive feedback, and exposing their children to role models and sporting events.

In essence, the more support (tangible and emotional) a girl's parents or guardians provide, the more likely she is to have positive experiences in sport and continue participating. So… how can you as a coach help facilitate parent support? Here are a few tips:

1. Get to know the parents and create the shared goal of providing a positive sport environment
2. Set parent expectations at the beginning of the season
3. Provide opportunities for parents to be involved outside of practices and games
4. Share resources and education opportunities about girls' experiences in sport

Other Role Models: Role models show girls what they can be if they continue participating in sport (supports the idea of needing to "see it to be it"). Historically, women athletes have been underrepresented in the media, resulting in girls having little to no visible role models. Although this is starting to change with the growth of women's sport in mainstream media, there is still a lot of work to be done.

In your program, consistently watch, discuss, and celebrate women athletes – this

is an exciting time in women's professional sport, so leverage the momentum! You may choose to attend a local game as a team or invite local coaches, athletes, or mentors to share their skills (presentations, workshops, etc.) – there are many ways you can introduce role models to your team. In addition to exposing girls to high-profile role models, encourage them to recognize role models in their own lives (family members, peers, teachers, community members, etc.) – role models can come from anywhere! Finally, make sure to prioritize the inclusion of women coaches. Typically, girls have an easier time relating to women coaches because they have similar lived experiences. It's also important to note that women coaches also face barriers to participation - read more about this in our resource Keeping Women & Girls in Sport: Recruiting, Retaining & Supporting Women Coaches.

Enjoyment

When you think about the number one reason why we participate in sport and physical activity, what comes to mind? Maybe because it's fun? When we boil it down, we choose to participate in certain sports or physical activity pursuits because we enjoy them; enjoyment is one of the most important motivating factors for participation. For this reason, make sure that you prioritize fun and enjoyment in your girls' programs, even at the higher, more competitive levels. This might mean you incorporate fun warm-up games, create a team cheer, or participate in team-building activities outside of the sport context – there are so many ways you can incorporate fun into your program, so be creative!

Evaluation

The final aspect to consider when building a successful program for girls is evaluation. Participating in regular evaluation is always important, especially for new programs. The easiest way to evaluate your program is through surveys. All program stakeholders should be surveyed – participants, coaches, parents, and administrators/other leaders – to develop a full understanding. It is also recommended that your club or association establish a committee or task force committed to the development of girls' sport. This committee should help support and advocate for the participation of women and girls in all areas of your club or association. Check out this resource from Canadian Women & Sport for terms of reference you can use for your committee!

EDUCATION

Unfortunately, most generic coach training programs do not specifically address girls' unique needs and the soft skills (forming positive relationships, fostering belonging, etc.) needed to coach girls, which means that many coaches who work with girls are ill-equipped to fully support their needs. Canadian Women & Sport reports that less than half of coaches receive training on how to create quality sport experiences for girls (Rally Report, 2022).

To improve this alarming statistic, coaches, administrators, and other leaders must commit to learning – here are some of the training opportunities and

resources that we recommend:

Keeping Girls in Sport

This e-learning module, developed by Canadian Women & Sport, the Coaching Association of Canada, and Respect Group Inc., helps coaches and program leaders create a safe and positive environment to ensure girls stay engaged in sport and physical activity.

Gender Equity LENS

The Gender Equity LENS framework is a four-step process designed to help sport leaders make more equitable decisions. The module equips leaders with information and tools to make policy and program decisions that better serve women and girls in sport.

Body Confident Sport

This program, developed by Nike and Dove, equips coaches and program leaders with the knowledge, tools, and inspiration to support athletes to become body confident. Take the training and download the free tools through the link above!

Lean in Girls

Lean in Girls is a leadership program that helps girls see themselves as leaders in a world that often tells them they are not. Designed for girls ages 11-15, the program curriculum includes strength-building activities and real talk on important topics like bias and allyship. And the curriculum is free to download!

Values-Based Coaching: A True Sport Approach

This e-learning, designed for coaches at all levels, introduces the concepts of values-based coaching and integrating True Sport principles into practice.

Now that you have a good understanding of how to build supportive programs for girls, it's time to put this knowledge into action! The following pages include a checklist – each item should be carefully considered when developing a program for girls. Use the checklist to assess your progress and identify any areas that may need improvement to ensure your program fully supports girls' needs.

Recruitment

☐ Coaches and administrators intentionally recruit girls for their program

☐ Program advertisements include pictures of diverse girls

Skill Development

☐ Girls are provided with activity choices to focus on their own skill development

☐ Girls have the opportunity to develop their skills during age and skill-level-appropriate activities

☐ Coaches provide clear instruction

☐ Girls have the opportunity to establish personal goals

☐ Girls are encouraged to be brave, not perfect

☐ Girls are challenged to improve

☐ Girls have the opportunity to compete in appropriate environments

☐ Girls have the opportunity to develop skills beyond sport-specific skills (time management, leadership, etc.)

☐ Girls have access to resources and development opportunities to build their confidence

☐ Girls are celebrated for their individual qualities and progress

Belonging and Connection

- ☐ Girls feel physically and emotionally safe in the program environment
- ☐ Girls' bathrooms are accessible and appropriately stocked (hygiene products, etc.)
- ☐ Girls have access to equipment that works for them
- ☐ Coaches provide a supportive environment where girls can take risks
- ☐ Girls have the opportunity to build positive relationships with their peers and coaches
- ☐ Coaches establish the group/team culture (values, expectations of behaviour, etc.), asking for input from participants
- ☐ Coaches do not shy away from discussing "challenging" topics with girls (body image, puberty, eating habits, etc.)
- ☐ Girls see women like them when they are participating
- ☐ Girls are referred to using inclusive terms ("everyone" or "folks")
- ☐ Girls have the opportunity to participate in girl-centred programs

Support

- ☐ Coaches role model the expected behaviour
- ☐ Coaches make an effort to get to know each participant and understand their diverse needs
- ☐ Coaches learn names and preferred pronouns
- ☐ Coaches refer to and showcase women role models
- ☐ Girls recognize role models in their own lives
- ☐ Coaches meet with parents to explain their role in supporting the team culture and the expectations for their behaviour
- ☐ Parents and guardians provide emotional and tangible support

Enjoyment

- ☐ Girls are having fun!

Education

- ☐ Coaches understand the barriers girls face in sport and make consistent efforts to limit them
- ☐ Coaches reflect on their biases surrounding women and girls in sport
- ☐ Coaches commit to continuing their education surrounding supporting women and girls in sport

Evaluation

- ☐ Girls have the opportunity to provide feedback to coaches and other program leaders about their experiences in the program
- ☐ Girls are engaged in the program design process
- ☐ Program administrators engage in consistent program evaluation, gathering feedback from important stakeholders (participants, parents, program leaders/coaches)

REFERENCES

Nike – Made to Play

- **Coaching for Belonging**
- **Coaching Girls Guide**

Canadian Women & Sport

- **She Belongs**
- **Rally Report**

Women's Sports Foundation

- **The Game Plan**
- **The Power of Parents for Engaging Girls in Sports**
- **Coaching through Gender Lens**

viaSport British Columbia

- **She Plays Final Report**

National Recreation and Park Association

- **Making Community Youth Sports Fair and Accessible for Girls, Once and for All**

Accelerate Sport

- **The importance of inclusive and welcoming environments for girls in sport**

Sport for Life

- **Long-Term Development in Sport and Physical Activity (3.0)**