



October 2008

## Go Out and Play

Youth Sports in America

Executive Summary



## Authorship and Acknowledgments

This report was co-authored by Don Sabo, Ph.D., and Phil Veliz, M.A. The study was developed through a collaboration between the Women's Sports Foundation and the Center for Research on Physical Activity, Sport & Health at D'Youville College, and conducted for them by Harris Interactive, Inc. Special thanks to Marjorie A. Snyder, Ph.D., for guiding the project, to Deana Monahan for her editorial expertise and to George DelGiorno for graphic assistance with the many tables in this report. The dedication and skills of Harris Interactive's youth research team—Dana Markow, Ph.D., Chris Moessner and Jay Oppenheim—are much appreciated. Thanks go to David Olson, Ph.D., for allowing use of the Family Adaptability & Cohesion Scale.

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Sport and American Families

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This study measures the nationwide participation rates of girls and boys in exercise and organized team sports. The central focus is on how the intersections among families, schools and communities are related to children's involvement and interest in athletics and physical activity. Some of the personal and social benefits associated with children's athletic participation are also identified and discussed. The athletic interests and involvements of girls and boys are examined from childhood through late adolescence, including entry into sport as well as drop-out patterns.

American families display a wide array of cultural, economic, racial and ethnic characteristics. Despite this diversity, all families have two things in common. First, they nurture children from infancy through young adulthood. Second, parents do not raise their children in isolation. Family life unfolds within an institutional web that includes schools, churches, community organizations, after-school programs, government, economic forces and—central to this study—sports. It is within this wider social matrix that children's athletic ability and interest in physical activity take shape and either blossom or dwindle.

The findings and conclusions in this report are based on two nationwide surveys. The Women's Sports Foundation commissioned Harris Interactive to complete a school-based survey of youth drawn from a random selection of approximately 100,000 public, private and parochial schools in the United States. The school-based survey method yields highly reliable results. The nationwide sample consists of 2,185 third- through 12th-grade girls and boys. In addition, phone interviews were conducted with a national cross-section of 863 randomly selected parents of children in grades 3 through 12. Parents were asked how they think and feel about their children's interest and involvement in sports and physical activity. African-American and Hispanic parents were over-sampled in order to deepen understanding of the needs and experiences of underserved girls, boys and their families.

This report confirms that sports are a resource for U.S. children as well as their families. Children's athletic participation was associated with higher levels of family satisfaction. Sports and physical activity were also linked with improved physical and emotional health, academic achievement and quality of life for children.

A complex picture of gender differences in athletic opportunities and physical activity emerges from this study. There is a nationwide gender gap in physical activity and sports involvement between girls and boys. The size of the gender gap, however, does not stretch uniformly across the country and all age brackets. In many communities, girls show similar levels of athletic participation and interest as boys. In other communities, however, access to sport and physical activity for girls appears to be thwarted by economic disadvantages and inadequate school resources. Young urban girls, especially, have a narrower window of opportunity

for becoming involved with sports than their male counterparts and girls from suburban and rural communities. One in four ninth- to 12th-grade girls has never participated in organized or team sports in urban schools, compared to about one in six urban boys. In short, progress on the gender front in U.S. sports has been made, but it remains uneven, and it is often poor and mainly urban girls who are being left behind.

Some of the major findings documented by this study are summarized below within four main themes.

## Participation In Sports And Physical Activity: The Gender Gap

### **1. A Gender Gap Exists in Sports and Physical Activity—But It Is Uneven**

Girls generally are not as involved with sports and physical activity as boys. However, the gender gap is wide in some areas and narrow in others. Whereas similar rates of sports participation between girls and boys exist in suburban communities, urban and rural girls are less involved than their male peers. Variations in the gender gap in athletic participation often appear to be driven by economic disparities, race and ethnicity, and family characteristics. These variations strongly suggest that the girls' and boys' participation in sports and exercise is primarily shaped by access and opportunity.

### **2. Interest in Sports and Exercise Among Girls and Boys Is About Opportunity and Encouragement, Not Biology**

Girls' and boys' interest in sports and exercise varies by grade level, school location and income level. In some communities boys and girls show similar levels of interest in sport, while in other communities, boys' interest levels are higher than those of girls. Parents very often feel that their daughters and sons have similar interest in sports, especially when their children are younger (third through eighth grades). In short, interest in sports can often vary more within genders than it does across genders. And finally, boys tend to overestimate their interest in sports, while girls lean toward underestimating their athletic interests. For example, 42% of third- to eighth-grade boys who are non-athletes said that "sports are a big part of who they are," compared to 16% of non-athletic girls. Female athletes, moreover, are often involved with several clubs and organizations outside sport, whereas male athletes focus more singly on sports.

### **3. The Gender Gap in Physical Education**

Urban girls are the "have-nots" of physical education in the United States, with 84% report having no PE classes at all in the 11th and 12th grades. Rural girls in the same grades are not far behind with 68% reporting no PE classes. Across the country, young low-income children—both girls and boys—are underserved with regard to school-based physical education. Generally, more boys attend PE classes than girls, especially in urban and rural schools.

#### **4. Girls Now Take Part in a Wider Array of Sports and Exercise Activities than Boys**

Girls explore a wider array of sports and exercise activities than boys do, including traditional, recreational and newly emerging sports such as cheerleading, dance, double Dutch and volleyball. Boys focus more on traditional sports and exercise activities, which, most often, take the form of organized school and community sports.

#### **5. Girls Have a Narrower Window of Opportunity in Sports**

Girls enter sports at a later age than boys (7.4 years old, compared to 6.8 years old). The widest gap between the age girls and boys enter sport appears in urban communities (7.8 and 6.9 years old, respectively). Girls also drop out sooner and in greater numbers than boys. Girls' late start may set them up for failure in sports during the middle-school years (sixth through eighth grades).

### Sports And Family Life

#### **1. Sports Are an Asset for U.S. Families, and Families Are a Resource for Young Athletes**

Children's involvement with sports is associated with higher levels of family satisfaction. Youth sports can help build communication and trust between parents and children. Sports help parents and children spend more time together. These positive connections are particularly evident in dual-parent families, but they also resonate in single-parent families.

#### **2. Many Parents Say Their Daughters Are Being Shortchanged**

While a majority of parents say they want similar levels of athletic opportunity for their daughters and sons, many believe that their schools and communities are failing to deliver the goods. Many parents are aware that girls are getting fewer opportunities in sports and physical activity than boys are. More African-American and Hispanic parents feel schools and communities are failing their daughters.

#### **3. More Dads Need to "Step Up to the Plate" to Mentor Young Female Athletes**

Non-family members are the top two people girls mentioned as their mentors in exercise and sports—coaches and physical education teachers. For boys, in contrast, dads and coaches top the list of main mentors. Forty-six percent of boys and 28% of girls credit their father for teaching them "the most" about sports and exercise. While mothers and fathers provide similar levels of encouragement and support for both their daughters and sons, many girls may be shortchanged by dads who channel more energy into mentoring sons than daughters.

## Children's Well-Being and Development

### **1. Sports Help Create Healthy, Well-Adjusted Children**

Sports are a health and educational asset for U.S. girls and boys. Organized sports are associated with children's general health and body esteem, healthy weight, popularity, quality of life and educational achievement. Female athletes often derive greater benefits from athletic participation than their male peers.

### **2. Participating in Organized or Team Sports Helps Enhance Girls' Quality of Life**

Girls who do not currently participate in a team sport are less content with their lives than girls involved with sports. Sports involvement enhances the quality of life for girls.

### **3. The Benefits of Athletic Participation Unfold Long Before High School**

Many of the social, educational and health benefits linked to sports participation begin during the elementary school years. The positive contributions of athletic involvement to youth development are especially visible among sixth- to eighth-grade girls and boys.

## Diverse and Unrecognized Populations

### **1. Sports are Racially and Ethnically Diverse, but Inequities Are Very Real**

Youth sports are racially and ethnically diverse. Fifteen percent of all girls and 16% of all boys who participate in sports are African-American. Seventeen percent of female athletes and 15% of male athletes are Hispanic, while Asian girls and boys comprise 8% and 12%, respectively, of children who play sports. And yet, proportionally fewer girls of color are involved with sports than white girls. Girls of color are also much more likely than their male counterparts to be non-athletes. The same discrepancies across racial and ethnic groups do not exist among boys. Girls of color are doubly hit by both gender and race discrimination in sport.

### **2. Children with Disabilities**

About nine out of every 100 U.S. families have a child who has a disability that can interfere with sports and exercise. Most sports and physical activity programs are currently designed to meet the interests and needs of children without disabilities. Some sport leaders and educators assume that children with some kind of disability are not capable of being physically active or just not interested in sports. The findings in this study, however, show that children with special needs are interested in sports and exercise, and many of their parents want to see more programs offered in schools and communities. A gender gap in sports and exercise activity does exist among children with disabilities, and it is the boys who are less physically active than the girls. Finally, the exercise frequency of both girls and boys with disabilities declines more sharply than their counterparts without disabilities from the elementary through middle school and high school years.



### **3. Boys in Immigrant Families Are More Likely than Girls to Play Sports**

This is the first study to gather some basic facts about athletic participation among children in immigrant families. Nearly a quarter (23%) of children have at least one parent born outside the United States. Compared to boys, girls in immigrant families report lower rates of athletic participation. Many immigrant parents also hold more traditional attitudes toward girls' and boys' interest in sports.

#### Policy Recommendations

This research report is designed to foster public discussion and policy debate over the state of girls' sports and physical activity in the United States. In order to fulfill its strategic research initiative, the Women's Sports Foundation seeks to unite and educate local and national nonprofit organizations, government agencies, schools and sport organizations that serve the interest of girls' health and empowerment through physical activity. A National Policy Advisory Board was created to review the findings of this study and to identify key policy recommendations. The members are recognized leaders from academic research, education, health and sport. See Appendix A of the full report for a list of their names and affiliations.

The findings in this study form an evidence-based foundation to help policymakers assess the current state of U.S. girls' and boys' physical activity and sports. The Center for Research on Physical Activity, Sport & Health has worked with the Women's Sports Foundation to develop nine clusters of policy recommendations to advance the health and well-being of both girls and boys through sports and physical activity. See the final section of the complete report.



## About the Women's Sports Foundation

The Women's Sports Foundation—the leading authority on the participation of women and girls in sports—advocates for equality, educates the public, conducts research and offers grants to promote sports and physical activity for girls and women.

Founded by Billie Jean King in 1974, the Women's Sports Foundation builds on her legacy as a champion athlete, advocate of social justice and agent of change. We strive for gender equity and fight discrimination in all aspects of athletics.

Our work shapes public attitude about women's sports and athletes, builds capacities for organizations that get girls active, provides equal opportunities for girls and women, and supports physically and emotionally healthy lifestyles.

The Women's Sports Foundation is recognized worldwide for its leadership, vision, strength, expertise and influence.

For more information, please call the Women's Sports Foundation at 800.227.3988 or visit [www.WomensSportsFoundation.org](http://www.WomensSportsFoundation.org).



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