



October 2009

Get It Going, Keep It Going:

A Resource for Sports & Exercise
Programs for Urban Girls



This booklet provides program heads and staff with basic information and strategies for creating and growing sports and physical activity programs that meet the needs and interests of urban girls.

Authorship and Acknowledgments

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Section 1: Why Sports and Physical Activity Programs for Urban Girls?

There are lots of great reasons for increasing urban girls' participation in sports and physical activity. You already know why you are working with a girls' program (or want to create one), but you also need to tell others why it's important to get more girls involved. Some people may need to be inspired, while others may need to be convinced. Potential funders need to understand the importance of your program in girls' lives. Explaining your mission or, in some cases, justifying your program, is part of the job of keeping the program running. Here are some evidence-based arguments for providing these activities in your community.

1. Girls Deserve a Fair Share of Opportunities. In many cities, girls just don't have as many opportunities to participate in sports or exercise programs as boys do. This is especially the case with low-income and working-class urban girls and girls of color.

- A recent nationwide study found that in urban communities, only 59% of third-through fifth-grade girls are involved with sports, compared to 80% of boys.¹
- A nationwide telephone survey of parents of third- through 12th-grade children found that the largest gender gap in athletic participation exists in urban areas. Fifty-five percent of daughters did not play any sports during the past year compared to 26% of sons.² In Boston MA, for example, girls have only one opportunity to play sports for every two opportunities that boys have.³
- As girls get older they are less likely to engage in heavy physical activity, while larger percentages of boys remain heavily involved with physical activity from childhood through the high school years. Among high school students, for example, 19% of girls were frequent exercisers compared with 38% of boys.⁴
- For urban girls in Massachusetts, only 37% of African-American high school girls and 28% of Hispanic girls participated in sports teams in 2001, while 54% of white high school girls played on a team.⁵

2. Physical Activity Promotes the Public Health, and This Means Urban Girls' Health Too. There has been increasing research that shows sports and physical activity are a health asset for girls.

- Regular exercise decreases young women's chances of becoming overweight and developing obesity-related diseases, and higher rates of physical inactivity and obesity have been associated with urban girls—particularly black and Latina girls.⁶
- Research shows that female athletes and girls who exercise regularly are less likely to be sexually active and to get pregnant than those who do not.⁷
- Physically active girls tend to suffer lower rates of depression than inactive girls.⁸

“Without sports after school, you would just go home and watch TV... Having the same routine over and over is boring... Soccer is something positive to do, and it's a good excuse—I don't have to go home and babysit my little brother.”

— GoGirlGo! program participant

- Young female athletes are less likely to smoke and to do drugs because sport and physical activity has decreased boredom. Boredom can increase curiosity and negative behaviors.⁹
- Female athletes have lower odds of considering or planning a suicide attempt than female non-athletes.¹⁰
- Girls of color need more physical activity in their daily lives. African-American girls tend to become less physically active over time.¹¹ They are also twice as likely to be overweight as white girls.¹²

3. Sports Involvement Can Yield Educational Gains. Many community-based sports programs work closely with area schools. But girls' interest and involvement with sports and exercise in the community can spill over into their lives at school.

- Some positive impacts of sport for girls include higher grades, higher educational aspirations, increased school attendance and higher graduation rates.¹³
- A growing body of research shows that girls who participate in organized sports do better at math and science.¹⁴
- One study found that African-American female athletes had a 15% higher college graduation rate than their non-athlete counterparts.¹⁵
- Black and Hispanic/Latina female athletes reported better grades in high school and greater involvement with extracurricular activities than female non-athletes.¹⁶
- Some after-school or community-based sport programs include tutoring and study groups, which help girls succeed at school.

4. Sports and Physical Activity Programs Can Be an Asset to Families. You've heard the African saying, "It takes a village to raise a child." Community-based programs that include sports and exercise can contribute to bringing up healthy and capable girls. Parents with children who participate in sports report higher levels of family satisfaction than parents of non-athletes—and this link is found in both dual-parent and single-parent families.¹⁷

- Because many urban communities face high levels of violence and crime, parents often worry about their daughters moving around the city. Sports and physical activity programs can give girls a safe place to meet, have fun and make friends.
- Single parents often need the support of church, extended family, neighbors, the school and community-based programs to teach, coach and care for their children. Sports and activity programs can offer families additional needed support.

I think girls who play sports are strong, healthy, smart, intelligent, caring, and kind. I think girls should be in sports because they get to use their bodies and strength. They make muscles and become healthy.

— GoGirlGo! program participant

- In dual-parent families, family satisfaction increases as children’s participation in sports increases—especially for daughters. Daughters’ involvement with sports is also related to higher levels of satisfaction in single-parent families.¹⁸
- Many urban parents work long hours or two jobs, so an after-school sports program can supply them with a healthy and safe environment for their daughters.
- Many urban girls need or choose to work. Others may take care of siblings, which prevents girls from joining and participating in sports. However, some sports and exercise programs are specifically designed to meet the needs of these busy girls by creating weekend hours, special programs or summer leagues.
- Unlike for boys, families may not see the value of sports for their girls. Coaches or program leaders can draw parents into some activities that can help educate parents or grandparents to see the many benefits of girls’ participation in physical activity.

5. Your Program Helps Girls to Overcome Personal and Social Barriers. Many urban girls don’t get enough encouragement to participate in sports and physical activities. Your program provides encouragement.

- The reduction of recess and physical education in schools means fewer opportunities for healthful physical activity for girls. Your program supplies physical activity that isn’t available elsewhere.
- Your program provides a safe place for girls to socially connect, make friends, feel accepted and avoid behaviors that are linked with drug use, skipping school, gangs or pregnancy risk.
- There is a wide array of sports now available for girls and their families that were previously “for boys only.” Dance, basketball, softball, gymnastics and swimming are well-known to girls. However, in the last 10 years, ice hockey, lacrosse, rowing, soccer and double Dutch programs for girls are growing in popularity. Your program may be part of this trend.

6. Your Program Is an Asset to the Whole Community.

- Hit hard by the economic downturn and often faced with less financial resources to begin with, some urban school systems have cut back or slashed their sports budget. This means fewer sports and physical activity opportunities for girls in the entire community. The pattern can start in elementary and middle school and continue into high school. You can argue that your program is helping to stem the tide of waning resources elsewhere in the community.

“Economic inequalities exert powerful influences on health and illness. Not all girls have the same sports and fitness opportunities due to the economic circumstances of their families, schools, and communities.”

— GoGirlGo! program leader

- Your program creates a safe space in the community for girls to go to and grow within. There is limited space for exercise and athletics in many urban neighborhoods. And the competition (with boys' sports programs) for available gyms, courts, swimming pools and fields makes it tough for city girls to regularly participate in sports. Your program supplies and fights for a space for girls to move and compete.
- A successful sports and physical activity program boosts community pride!
- Your program is a welcoming place for different ethnic groups and immigrant families. Research shows that, nationwide, 23% of children have at least one parent who was born outside the United States. Compared to boys, girls in immigrant families report lower rates of athletic participation. Sons in immigrant families mirrored the high athletic participation rates of their fathers, whereas daughters reported lower rates of involvement with sport (75% versus 43%). For some ethnic groups, parents may not support their daughters' involvement with sports and exercise.¹⁹ Your program can help educate parents about the positive impacts of sports and, also, bring people together.
- Your program increases girls' physical activity while it may be decreasing elsewhere in the community. Urban girls are the "left-behinds" of U.S. physical education. One student survey found that 84% of urban girls in the United States 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.²⁰
- It is important to teach girls to enjoy and value sport and physical activity at younger ages. The physical education gender gap increases as children get older, especially among urban girls, but also for rural girls. The declines during adolescence are not as marked for boys.²¹
- In many urban areas, elementary and middle-schools offer only a few organized sports programs for girls. Your community program may be filling this gap.

"Knowing I can get support if I need it is something that makes me feel good."

— GoGirlGo! program participant

In the next section, we look at how sports and physical activity programs for girls can be structured in ways that pay attention to girls' strengths and interests and acknowledge that girls may think about and play sports differently than boys.

Section 2: Recruitment Best Practices

Recruiting participants for any youth program can be a challenge. And recruitment never really stops, in that each season or year means that new girls need to be brought into the program.

What the Program Heads Say: The “Dos”

Our interviews with program heads of urban girls’ sports and physical activity programs revealed the following “top 10” best practices for recruitment.

1. Work with the girls already in the program to recruit friends, schoolmates and relatives.
2. Talk with girls one-on-one, through informal discussion groups or in planned discussion sessions about bringing other girls to the program. Go to where the girls are. Find out where they hang out after school; meet girls on their turf. For some girls the “turf” may revolve around school, but for others who are disconnected from educational institutions, they might be more interested if the program is based in the neighborhood.
3. Train and utilize older girls as peer recruiters. Older girls can also be role models for recruitment excursions into the community.
4. Develop relationships with local schools, after-school programs, community organizations, summer camps, church-based organizations and parents. It is particularly effective to work with someone from inside the organization; e.g., a teacher or coach in a school or a staff member in an after-school program.
5. Try to get parents involved in your program as volunteers, coaches, counselors or tutors. Parental involvement can help enhance program quality and also spread the word throughout the community.
6. Advertise your program in a wide range of community locations. Fliers are somewhat effective, but work much better if tied to an onsite visit or a demonstration of the activities the program has to offer.
7. Stage open houses for your program. Invite people from various groups or organizations in the community to visit your program. Try to get them involved as a volunteer. Ask for their help in locating parents and girls who would be interested in the program. The Women’s Sports Foundation can provide materials that will assist you in hosting an open house. They may be downloaded for free at WomensSportsFoundation.org. Click on National GoGirlGo! Under the GoGirlGo! tab.
8. In the words of one program leader, “If you feed them, they will come.” We’re not endorsing “junk food” days at your program, but offering healthy, tasty snacks can be a positive way to attract new recruits.

9. Network with people from other programs and organizations in the community in order to locate and recruit new girls for your program. For example, in our research of urban girls' sports programs, the head of a summer soccer program made arrangements with a coach of a team in a spring league to refer some of his players to her, and a basketball coach in an after-school program and a high school basketball coach developed enough trust and respect to agree to share their athletes so the girls could play more during the year.
10. If you can, talk with parents. Some families are reluctant to enroll their daughters when the program ends after dark. It's usually best for program heads to acknowledge a parent's concerns and to communicate the specifics about what time the program begins and ends. When possible, try to help families make specific plans about how girls will get home from the program safely.

What the Program Heads Say: The "Don'ts"

The program heads also revealed some of the "don'ts" for program recruitment.

- Don't completely depend on fliers. Also advertise through developing professional relationships with community members.
- Don't assume that all girls know something about the sport or activity you are offering.
- Don't assume what works for preteens will work for teens. Preteens look mainly for fun in sport and physical activity, while teenage girls value social relationships, building physical confidence and competition.
- Don't ignore cultural differences in terms of language, customs and concerns about girls' safety.

What Urban Girls Say

What do girls themselves say about how best to attract girls to a sport or physical activity program? A focus group of preteen and teenage girls revealed some key recommendations for recruitment.

- Emphasize the "fun" of the program, things like the opportunity to travel or to meet new people.
- Ask the girls to tell their friends about the program (word-of-mouth recruitment).
- Invite former players to talk about what they got out of the program.
- Play exhibition games or invite potential players to a game and then talk about what the program is like.

- Emphasize that anyone can play, even if she doesn't feel she's good at the sport or doesn't know much about it.
- Convey the message that the program is about more than playing sports; for example, making good friends, learning something new or getting help with homework.
- Locate the program in a "good, central location" where a lot of the girls live. Find a place where there are not many programs offered or a place that already offers many different kinds of services but doesn't include sports and physical activity for girls.
- Make the program affordable to families, either through scholarships or free participation.

One final comment. Our research suggests that it is often more difficult to recruit older girls into sports programs. A general strategy is to get girls involved when they are younger. At the same time, training and utilizing older girls as peer recruiters and role models is one way to get both younger girls and older girls involved. Older girls can also be trained to serve as peer mentors or junior coaches for the younger girls in the program.

"We planned a discussion group with the girls that focused on the meaning of family. They decided that family is not necessarily just about biology but who they could depend on to give emotional support, sometimes financial support, someone you could confide in and trust, someone who gives good advice, and someone who spends time and helps you to be the best that you can be."

— GoGirlGo! program leader

"It's important to be encouraged by your teammates."

— GoGirlGo! program participant

Section 3: Retaining Girls in Your Program

Here, again, we create a list of best practices for retaining girls in your program.

Each of the programs that we talked with has its own history of working with girls, so not all the retention guidelines listed below will fit your needs. While some programs are just venturing into girls' programming for the first time, others have been successfully serving urban girls for nearly a decade.

Some Best Practices of Retention

Keeping in mind that there is no "one size fits all" formula for increasing retention rates and that differences exist between enrollment and developmental programs, we laid out some of the best retention practices that have been identified by program heads and staff.

1. Make the program curriculum fun and meaningful. Provide girls with a diverse array of activities.
2. Develop a balance between physical activities and social or educational activities. Set up ways for girls to aspire to and attain goals that are reasonable.
3. Most girls want to look cool and socially belong to a group when they are playing their sport. If your budget can afford it, invest in uniforms. Coordinated uniforms, with numbers on them are great, but often a simple T-shirt with the program name or logo will earn their loyalty. It also builds team identity and commitment to the program if the staff talks with the girls about the kinds of uniforms they'd like to wear.
4. Help girls feel important, included, nurtured and safe within the program. Girls need to develop a sense of belonging and bonding within the program. Creating and emphasizing a "family" or "community" identity and atmosphere helps to increase girls' commitment. Girls often want or need "to talk," and well-trained and trustworthy adults who are accessible and ready to listen make a big difference in program quality and retention.
5. Even though it means more work, be sure to keep some records about attendance. This can help staff early on to identify girls who have not been coming to the program. Staff can follow up with the girl or her parents and, perhaps, identify a problem and fix it. Get basic contact information from the girls: name, address, phone numbers, parents' names. Follow up when a girl doesn't show up. Make a phone call to the girl and say, "We missed you at practice today. I hope you are well. Will you be able to make it to the next practice?" This will show them someone in their life cares and will make a strong connection. Keep your paperwork updated.
6. Facilitate girls' participation in programs. Get girls to take some responsibility for aspects of the program. Discussion groups or focus groups can provide girls with opportunities to discuss what they like best and least about the programs and the kinds of activities that are offered.

"Being included and having a sense of belonging, along with a sense of physical and emotional safety, keeps children and youth coming back."

— Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

"The program should be somewhere there's not a lot of gangs so kids won't get hurt."

— GoGirlGo! program leader

7. In addition to main activities, plan unique occasions for girls to bond with one another; e.g., watch a movie, go to a local college game or visit another program.
8. Provide older girls with opportunities and responsibilities for leadership and mentoring younger girls. Involve them in coaching and being role models. Give them specific tasks, such as setting up games, refereeing, leading exercise sessions or facilitating discussion groups.
9. Don't beat yourself up when a girl leaves the program. Remind yourself that girls often quit playing sports or stop coming to an exercise program for reasons that have little to do with the program. Some girls may switch sports because their interest changes or they feel confident enough about their athletic skills to go out for a school team. A girl may want to focus more on studying and her grades at school, while another may have been forced to quit the program in order to work and help her family financially. Let the girls know that, should they decide to come back, they are always welcome.
10. Move girls away from "body talk." Foster healthy body image by discouraging girls from making disparaging comments about their own bodies or other girls' bodies. Try to get girls away from focusing on what their bodies look like and towards interacting with one another in ways that refer to the whole self.

"We cheer each other on, especially if you're having a hard time. People help each other on the team if you fall."

— GoGirlGo! program participant

Different Approaches to Retention: Enrollment Programs and Developmental Programs

Differences also exist between "enrollment programs" (that recruit girls to participate in specific activities for shorter time periods) and "developmental programs" (that design program activities across longer time periods in order to meet a variety of girls' emotional, educational or social needs in addition to providing athletic or fitness participation opportunities). A typical enrollment program would be a YMCA or YWCA setting up an eight-week swimming module and, later in the year, an eight-week volleyball module followed by an eight-week hip-hop dance module. While some girls will participate in all the modules, others will choose one or two modules. It may or may not make sense for program heads to try to retain the same girls throughout all of the modules.

A typical developmental program unfolds across a longer time span. These programs tend to focus on one or a few types of sports activities. The program is designed to give girls many opportunities for girl-to-girl communication and self-expression in addition to the physical activity or sport experience itself. There is often an effort to develop meaningful relationships with peers and adults. The program might also include educational experiences, such as tutoring, homework time, nutrition instruction or positive decision-making. Staff who work at developmental programs are usually committed to bringing their girls back year after year, and so retention is likely to be a major goal.

Section 4: What Makes A Girl-Friendly Program?

When girls who participate in sports and physical activity programs are asked what they like about their programs, they most often talk about the friendships they make and the sport or physical activity in which they are engaged. Here are some girl-friendly program features we have observed. (You might create a discussion group in your program for the girls to talk about what they like best.)

1. **Safe Space:** Girls say that their ideal sports program should be located where they feel safe, “somewhere there’s not a lot of gangs so kids won’t get hurt” and they “don’t have to worry about being shot.”
2. **Time for Talk:** Girls want to talk and to be heard. They enjoy discussion groups in which they can discuss what is happening in their lives, share experiences and hear guest speakers.
3. **Communication with Staff:** Girls often want to share their views and experiences with staff. Staff can set up regular discussion groups. Some programs use focus groups in order to give girls an opportunity to express themselves. You can also schedule one-on-one conversations with staff or coaches. It is important to remember that if you are not qualified to help with a situation, you should refer them to the best person (i.e., medical, mental or crisis counseling).
4. **Snacks:** Snacks give girls energy for physical activity. They can also give staff an opportunity to educate girls about nutrition and healthy eating. For example, girls like to have fresh fruit, granola bars and sports drinks at their programs, and snack time can give them time to interact with friends and teammates.
5. **Activities Other than Sports:** Girls enjoy other kinds of activities in addition to the sports or physical activity part of the program. Your program might include discussion groups, guest speakers, academic support, field trips and movies.
6. **Social Support:** Girls are drawn to many sports and physical activity programs not only for the athletic experience or exercise, but also because of the relationships they create with other girls. These friendships provide much-needed encouragement and support.

Talk Up “Youth Development” in Your Girl-Friendly Program

The extent of involvement and influence with the girls will depend a lot on whether you run an enrollment or developmental program. There are usually more opportunities and time to shape girls’ lives and identities in developmental programs. Whether you offer an enrollment program or developmental program (defined in Section 3), you will probably talk about “youth development” with parents, donors and other stakeholders. Many people who work with young girls and boys use the term “youth development,” but just what do we really mean by the term? How does youth development shape sports and physical activity programs for urban girls?

I think it’s cool. It’s healthy, and it’s good for girls. You grow faster.

— GoGirlGo! program participant

Sports' programs for urban girls are "youth development programs" when they are designed to develop girls' skills, improve their self-image and sense of competency, and move girls toward positive outcomes, such as increased physical health and social supports.

Youth development can occur across the interactions girls have with other girls and with program staff, through what girls are taught by others and what they personally aspire to accomplish, and across networks of urban sports and physical activity programs.

So it often helps to talk about the connections between your program and other sports and physical activity programs, families, schools and the wider community; you give the girls who participate in your program the opportunity to experience the benefits of youth development on many levels.

The easiest way to increase self-esteem and avoid peer pressure is to play a sport. Being physically fit helps girls to realize that they are active and healthy members of society. I also have found from personal experience that being part of a team makes having strong and trusting friendships easier. Even when your other friends are mad at you, your team will stand behind you. I love watching groups of middle-school-age girls after they have just finished a game. They are excited about life, happy, self-confident, and not worried about who is watching.

— GoGirlGo! program participant

Section 5: What’s a “Girl-Centered” or “Gender-Sensitive” Program?

You sometimes hear the terms “girl-centered” or “gender-sensitive” to describe youth programming for girls. But just what is girl-centered or gender-sensitive programming? What does it look like?

A “girl-centered” or “gender-sensitive” program recognizes that girls and boys sometimes have different needs, interests and strengths, and thus, what works best in a boys’ program will not necessarily work best in a girls’ program. Girl-centered programs are not just concerned about if girls are included in a program but how girls are included.²³

Here are some characteristics of “gender sensitivity” in youth programs from around the country:

- Efforts are made to assess girls’ needs, interests and strengths.
- Practices and games are scheduled at safe and convenient times. Coaches attend practices and games. Parents and extended family are encouraged to attend.
- The girls and program are the center of attention and recognition. This can be done through the creation of banners to place on walls and buildings or girls-only poster boards with photos, articles and inspirational mottoes. .
- Girls are given opportunities to learn and do things that traditionally have been available mainly to boys. The word “empowerment” is often used to discuss this kind of goal.
- Girls are encouraged to love their bodies for their strength, flexibility and grace, not just for how they look.²⁴
- Girls’ ideas are valued and incorporated into program design and implementation.
- Efforts are made to understand and address barriers to participation that may be specific to gender and/or culture.
- There is gender-sensitivity and diversity training for program staff.
- Efforts are made to collaborate and network with other gender-sensitive programs.

Gender-Sensitive Approaches in Girls' Sports Programs

The following examples show ways that your program staff can integrate gender-sensitive approaches into your programs.

1. Give girls an opportunity to play their favorite sport at a competitive level in a multi-racial environment.

The “Fair Players” basketball team is composed mainly of African-American urban girls and two white girls. Their coach explained that the two white girls traveled into the city from the suburbs in order to play on the team. They wanted to step up their game by learning to “play at a more competitive and aggressive level” that was not being offered at their schools. Their coach mentored the girls in ways that helped them to explore racial and city/suburb differences, build an appreciation for racial diversity and build team spirit and unity. The girls also learned to integrate competition and athleticism with their self-images as young women.

2. Listen to what girls have to say and incorporate their ideas into program design.

When two male coaches created a hockey team for pre-adolescent girls they had no idea what “girl-sensitive” programming was all about. They learned from female coaches and women administrators that, more so than male athletes, female athletes like to have an opportunity to discuss some of what is happening on a team. With this guideline in mind, they decided to consult the girls and have them vote on the design and color of new team uniforms. The girls had differing opinions—some wanted the same color as the boys’ team to show they were equally serious hockey players, some wanted pink in their uniforms to assert their femininity, some wanted pink because they simply liked the color, and some felt strongly against having pink. In the end, the discussion became a vehicle for the coaches and girls to learn to listen to different viewpoints, talk through some interesting gender issues—like what it means to be seen as both a girl and an athlete—and reach an important decision affecting their team together.

3. Negotiate gender- and culture-based barriers to participation.

The coach of a girls’ soccer program reported learning about how to effectively communicate with parents in a largely Cape Verdean community. Previously when coaching boys’ teams, he sometimes would recommend that a male soccer player move “up” to another club team, go on a field trip or attend a special event. He would send word home with the boy and begin to make arrangements. With girls, however, he learned his coaching required a different strategy. This meant that he learned to speak to the parents first in order to describe the situation and assure them that their daughter would be safe and accompanied by an adult that they know and trust.

4. Help girls to feel special.

In addition to staging an awards program each year, a program director for a girls' basketball team in Buffalo, N.Y., took team members to a local university women's game. These experiences helped grow the girls' interest in sport and to celebrate women's athletic achievements. A program head in Los Angeles sets up a "team picture day" at the end of each season, which added value to the girls' experience in the program.

Section 6: How Families Benefit from Girls' Sports Programs

Research on urban girls' sports programs suggests that family attitudes toward girls' involvement with sports vary a lot. In some cultures, sports and femininity don't mix. Sometimes parents in immigrant families may believe that only boys are interested in sports. Poor and working-class urban families often don't have money to invest in sport programs, equipment or sign-up fees. Single parents may need their older daughters to contribute to housework or childcare.

Some urban parents do not own automobiles and cannot provide their own transportation the way that suburban "soccer moms" do. Urban parents often face traffic jams, and getting around in the city can be a challenge. Some parents work two or more jobs and cannot transport their children during work hours. Other parents worry about their girls' safety on the street and forego involvement with sports in favor of security. Some families are afraid of change or something new because they are trying to protect their children, so be understanding of their fears and communicate your intentions with your program.

Given that some parents are reluctant to encourage their daughters' involvement in sports or to be involved once their daughter is participating in a program, it is important for program staff to acknowledge parents' concerns and find ways to make programs more accommodating to the realities of urban families (e.g., provide transportation to and from the program, provide childcare for younger siblings, etc).

Overcoming the above obstacles is worth the effort because youth sports involvement can enhance family life. Sports can be an asset for U.S. families, and parents can be 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. The positive connections are particularly evident in dual-parent families, but they also resonate in single-parent families.²⁵

It is also important for program staff to discuss the many benefits families can experience within a sports program, including the potential to:

- Increase families' social support network (e.g., parents make connections with other parents, with coaches and with community resources).
- Foster conversation and communication between moms, dads and daughters.
- Provide parents with a safe place for their daughters after school.
- Offer an opportunity for parents to coach, mentor and/or be actively involved in their daughters' program.
- Give parents the satisfaction of knowing that their daughter is getting exercise, learning new skills, making new friends and engaging in a healthy activity.

Section 7: Why Program Evaluation Is Important

Program leaders and staff often dread the thought of evaluating their programs. They wonder if it's worth all the effort, time and resources it takes to do an evaluation and worry that the results will have serious consequences for their program. Here we outline the basics on evaluation, give you some tips on how to get started and, we hope, convince you of the many benefits the program evaluation has to offer.

What Is Program Evaluation?

Program evaluation is a systematic assessment of how your program is operating and/or what it is accomplishing in order to contribute to its improvement. Program evaluations begin by looking at the process of how the program is implemented, asking questions like “What is the program doing day to day and week to week?” “Who is the program serving?” and “What are the program participants learning?” Eventually, when a program has had enough time to develop, an evaluation can look at program outcomes or the effects of the program, positive or negative, intended or unintended. Questions to ask when evaluating outcomes include “What do the participants say they got out of the program?” “Did the program reach some of its goals?” and “What changes, if any, took place as a result of the program?”

Why You Need to Do Program Evaluation

There are many reasons program evaluation is important. Here are some of the top ways your program can benefit from evaluation:

- You will have a better sense of your program—who you are (and aren't) serving, what you are (and aren't) accomplishing, what is working well and what needs to improve.
- Funders like program evaluation—many programs get funding as a result of showing evaluation reports to potential funders.
- You may learn you have a model program that others can learn from or that could be replicated to other places.
- You will have the opportunity to reflect upon and rethink if necessary your program's structure, mission and goals.

Basic Methods for Evaluating Your Program

The first step in program evaluation is data collection. Data can range from basic types of information about your program (e.g., number and ages of participants) to more complex information (e.g., participation rates by age, participants' perceived outcomes). You will learn the most about your program if you look at several different types of data, for example, data related to numbers and percentages, and data related to words, from what participants have to say about what they like or don't like about the program. Funders will often designate what types of data they want you to track and send to them in reports.

After the data is collected, you (or someone you hire) will need to do some data analysis to determine just what the data is telling you. Perhaps your attendance data shows you that attendance was higher in the fall than in the spring or that mostly middle school girls participated even though your program was also open to high school girls. These types of results may then lead you to work with your staff to create different ways of enhancing your spring programming or recruiting older girls.

It is strongly recommended that you begin collecting data as early as possible so that you can track changes over time and learn how to improve your program even as it develops. If, for whatever reason, you do not collect data until close to the end of your program, you can still have participants fill out a survey or engage in a focus-group discussion (see evaluation tools below) to describe their experiences in the program and share recommendations for improvement.

While you and your staff can collect and analyze much of the data from your program, you may want an outside evaluator to help you with certain types of data collection, analysis and even evaluation report writing. For example, it is recommended that you have an evaluator from outside your program run any focus groups so that participants feel they can be honest, even critical of the program, which they may be hesitant to do if you're running the group. Also, if you don't have the statistical training, you may need to find someone who does in order to analyze data from participant surveys. See evaluation resources below for how to find experienced program evaluators in your area.

Evaluation Tools

One basic evaluation tool you may want to use is a paper survey, or questionnaire, that participants complete at different times. Some programs will have participants fill out a survey before the program officially begins or in the first week and then after a program ends or in the last week (called pre-program and post-program surveys) and then compare answers to see what changes have taken place. Surveys can include questions about participants' age, race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, as well as questions about what participants like about the program and what they hope to learn. Making sense of survey answers may include some statistical analysis as well as looking for themes that emerge (e.g., the majority of the younger girls said their mothers were the reason they joined the program while the majority of older girls said their friends were the reason).

Another evaluation tool is the focus group, a group discussion that allows many voices and opinions about the program to be shared. Questions in focus groups can include "Why do you come to this program?" "What can be done to get more girls to join sports' programs?" and "What would the ideal sports' program for girls look like?" Making sense of focus group answers may include looking for themes that emerge (e.g., friendship, the need for safe space, the importance of having fun).

Evaluation Resources

Local universities often have professors and graduate students who are experienced in program evaluation. You may want to start by networking with some faculty members to see if they can assist you or refer you to someone experienced in program evaluations. Sometimes there will be graduate students who will enjoy and benefit from working with you and your program. The Women's Sports Foundation (www.WomensSportsFoundation.org) can also assist you in finding evaluation resources in your area.

Finally, one of the authors of this guide has developed a basic, somewhat-easy-to-use evaluation tool that you can review and possibly use in your program. The Youth Athletics/Fitness Survey (known as the YAFS) was developed through the Center for Research on Physical Activity, Sport & Health at D'Youville College. The tool is designed to provide program heads, coaches or instructors with basic information about the girls in their programs. The YAFS is a practical, four-page questionnaire that contains 27 distinct measures of girls' backgrounds, behaviors, interests, attitudes and identities. It is available in both English and Spanish. There is no fee for the use of the YAFS. The instructions and survey may be downloaded for free at WomensSportsFoundation.org. Click on the GoGirlGo! tab and Resources. Or contact Don Sabo, Ph.D. at D'Youville College, sabod@dyc.edu

Section 8: Resources for You and Your Program

Selected Readings

- Sabo, D. & Veliz, P. (2008). *Go Out and Play: Youth Sports in America*. East Meadow, NY: Women's Sports Foundation. Available at www.WomensSportsFoundation.org/GoOutandPlay

An exhaustive study of children's participation in sports and exercise, this is the first to document the benefit of sports to the wellness of families.

- Sabo, D. (1997). Introduction, *The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, Physical Activity & Sport in the Lives of Girls: Physical & Mental Health Dimensions from an Interdisciplinary Approach*. Washington, DC: Department of Health and Human Services, p. xxi. (www.fitness.gov/girlssports.pdf)

This introduction explores the benefits and risks of girls' participation in sports, including the physical, psychological, social and educational effects.

- Sabo, D., Miller, K., Melnick, M. J. & Heywood, L. (2004). *Her Life Depends On It: Sport, Physical Activity, and the Health and Well-Being of American Girls*. East Meadow, NY: Women's Sports Foundation.
- Staurowsky, E. J., DeSousa, M. J., Gentner, N., Miller, K. E., Shakib, S., Theberge, N., & Williams, N. (2009). *Her Life Depends On It II: Sport, Physical Activity, and the Health and Well-Being of American Girls and Women*. East Meadow, NY: Women's Sports Foundation.

This comprehensive report contains decades of research on the contributions of physical activity to the physical, psychological and cultural health of girls and women.

- Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport (2007). *The 2007 Tucker Center Research Report, Developing physically active girls: An evidence-based multidisciplinary approach*. University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN: Author. See also <http://www.tuckercenter.org/projects/tcrr/default.html>.
- Ward, J. V. & Benjamin, B. C. (2004). "Women, Girls, and the Unfinished Work of Connection: A Critical Review of American Girls' Studies," in *All about the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, ed. Anita Harris (New York: Routledge, 2004), 15-27.

This essay describes how the women's movement and girls' liberation has become disconnected, with girls' problems increasingly seen as individualized rather than as problems of society and culture.

- Wheeler, K. A., Oliveri, R., Towery, I. D., & Mead, M. (2004). *Where are the girls? The state of girls programming in greater Boston*. Boston, MA: Girls Coalition of Greater Boston.

This report calls for increased programming, funding, and research to meet the diverse needs of girls.

Films and Videos

For a detailed listing of sports-related films and videos for girls (such as “Bend It Like Beckham,” “Love and Basketball” and “Dare to Compete: History of Women in Sports”), go to www.WomensSportsFoundation.org, search for “movies” and then select “Sports Movies for Girls.”

For a solid history of efforts to give girls and women equal opportunities in sports, ask your librarian to secure the three-disc set “TITLE IX: Implications for Women in Sport and Education,” produced by Bowling Green State University, WBGU and the National Association for Girls and Women in Sports. Go to www.wbgu.org/titleIX

Online Resources

Women’s Sports Foundation www.WomensSportsFoundation.org
and www.GoGirlWorld.org

The Women’s Sports Foundation has a number of resources for girl-serving programs, of which the most relevant is GoGirlGo!

This unique, free, award-winning education program is designed for two age groups of girls. The first is designed for preteen girls ages 8-12, utilizing champion athletes and four GoGirl cartoon characters to educate girls about health-risk behaviors and life lessons on topics such as body image, bullying, family issues and smoking. All materials come in a GoGirlGo! kit, containing a GoGirls! Guide to Life, a GoGirls! Scrapbook, a Parents’ Guide and an instructional guide for adult leaders.

The GoGirlGo! program designed specifically for teen girls ages 13-18 has two components: the Ambassador Program and the Educational Program. The Ambassador Program encourages girls to be leaders in their schools and communities by getting inactive girls involved in physical activity, and is primarily a Web-based program girls can engage in at www.GoGirlWorld.org/Ambassador. The Educational Program for teen girls includes an instructional guide for adult leaders to help girls navigate through such difficult topics as self-esteem, drugs, diversity and accepting differences. The 14 sessions included in the Leaders’ Guide—each of which features a champion female athlete story and accompanying educational information—are available for girls to access online and can be printed for group sessions. Leaders’ Guides are available in print and can be ordered from the Web site.

GoGirlWorld.org is a place your girls can go online to experience an atmosphere that fosters their interest in physical activity and connects them to others with the same interests. At www.GoGirlWorld.org, the girls can enter the world of GoGirl characters Alex, Rosa, Tee and Uni. Divided into four sections—Gym, Lounge, School and Action Center—this site provides a fabulous resource and community for girls to feel good about who they are and who they can become.

Melpomene Institute for Women’s Health Research www.melpomene.org

National Association for Girls and Women in Sport www.aahperd.org/nagws

Title IX: I Exercise My Rights Campaign www.titleix.info

Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sport www.tuckercenter.org

Endnotes

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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.



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