

3 Designing a Quality Girls' Sports Program

There is a multitude of research that demonstrates the power of sports in girls' lives. Current research shows that for school-age girls, playing sports is directly related to decreased rates of unintended pregnancy, delinquency, obesity, truancy and use of drugs and alcohol. Additional benefits include increased sense of self and the development of leadership, teamwork, coping and goal setting skills. We know that physical activity also improves long-term health and reduces stress and depression. We need to get all girls in the game so they can enjoy these life-changing benefits.

“The power of the human will to compete and the drive to excel beyond the body's normal capabilities is most beautifully demonstrated in the arena of sport.” — Aimee Mullins
Paralympic Gold Medalist, Track and Field

Commitment to Girls' Sports

Quality sports programming can have an incredible impact on girls' development, but it takes a true champion at an organization to make girls' sports a priority. Starting and running a quality girls' sport program takes dedication and hard work. With passion and commitment you can get girls in your community in the game if you:

- **Believe that serving girls well is not negotiable.**
- **Recognize there are challenges, but excuses are not accepted.**
- **Make a strong commitment to finding experienced female coaches.**
- **Dedicate one experienced staff person to oversee girls' sports.**

Whether you identify with just one or all of the above characteristics, the most important factor in serving girls in sports is being committed to making it happen. If you have the passion we have the tools to help you.

What Does a Successful Girls' Sports Program Look Like?

The following are indicators of a program that can successfully serve the whole girl – including the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual aspects of her being:

Get Girls Involved Early

The earlier you get girls in the game, the more likely it is that they will stick with it through adolescence and into adulthood.

Expose Girls to a Range of Sports

Offer girls a wide range of non-traditional and traditional sports such as martial arts, capoeira, flag football, and soccer. When girls are supported to try a wide range of sports, girls get the chance to discover that physical activity and sports are fun. We can all play a role in helping girls break out of limiting gender

Adolescent girls who participate in higher levels of physical activity are less likely to smoke.²

Female athletes are less likely to be sexually active, in part because they tend to be more concerned about getting pregnant than female non-athletes.³

Female high school athletes, especially those participating on three or more teams, have lower odds of considering suicide.⁴



²Rodriguez, D. & Audrain-McGovern, J. (2004). Team sport participation and smoking: Analysis with general growth mixture modeling. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology* 29(4), 299-308.

³Dodge, T., & Jaccard, J. (2002). Participation in athletics and female sexual risk behavior: The evaluation of four causal structures. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 17: 42-67.

⁴Sabo, D., Miller, K.E., Melnick, M.J., Farrell, M.P., & Barnes, G.M. (2005). High school athletic participation and adolescent suicide: A nationwide study. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 40(1): 5-23.



norms, and expose them to the idea that girls can play any sport they choose. They don't have to be limited by "girls don't play football" statements. Girls need the opportunity to learn that they can run fast, scrape their knees, sweat, be assertive, get muddy, and be athletes. When choosing what sports to offer, program designers might consider introducing a new unfamiliar sport. This tends to level the playing field for all participants, as everyone is learning from scratch.

Help Her Find the Right Sport

Find out what type of sports interest a girl. Does she want to play a team sport or an individual sport? Does she prefer soccer or rock climbing? What goals does she have for her sports experience? Finding out what girls are really looking for can help you design appropriate programming. Sedentary girls need opportunities for quick success. Weight bearing physical activity and sports that allow a girl to compete with herself or reach benchmarks are ideal.

Tip: Be mindful that girls with limited experience in sports might appear to be disinterested. But they may just be unsure, so take the time to talk to girls individually to get a better sense of where they are coming from.

Give it Time

Because many girls are new to sports, after-school providers often will offer a different sport or activity each week. The advantage to this approach is exposure to a variety of new sports and for sedentary girls it can lead to quick successes. When programs switch up sports every week or two, however, girls are often unable to develop their skills and become competent at any one activity. If we want to do more than just get girls to try something new – if we want them to develop a lifelong love of physical activity – we need to provide them with opportunities for consistent engagement in a specific sport over time and with increasing challenge. If you decide that you want to expose girls to a variety of sports (a good idea when girls are younger) then plan to stick with each sport for a five-week period so girls get enough time to develop skills and figure out if they like the sport.

Get the Right Numbers

We suggest that sports programs meet three times a week for at least an hour. Strive for an adult-to-youth ratio of 1:10. This will help girls develop skills, remain motivated, and develop meaningful relationships with their coaches and teammates.

Hire Female Coaches

Girls find positive and empowering role models in their coaches. Having a female coach helps girls realize that women can overcome various barriers to participation and be successful in sports. Additionally, girls are often more comfortable talking to women about sensitive issues that arise around sexuality, health issues and family pressures.



Offer Girls Only Teams

Have you run a co-ed sports program that by the end of the season had 18 boys and 2 girls? You're not alone. At a fairly young age boys start to get territorial about their sports spaces and girls start getting pushed to the sidelines. Single-sex teams offer girls an emotionally safe environment and a level playing field in which to push themselves physically and mentally and to develop their skills and self-confidence. We recommend that single sex programming begins no later than 6th grade.

Remember Fun

There are many reasons girls play sports, but research has shown the number one reason is because it's fun. Not having fun is the number one reason girls drop out of sports. *Tip – To make your programs more fun, turn your drills into games (e.g. instead of working on dribbling by having players run back and forth between cones, incorporate a game in which players must keep possession of their ball while trying to knock their teammates' basketballs out of the grid). Keep girls engaged and having fun by making sure everyone gets plenty of playing time.*

Showtime Opportunities

For any sports experience to be meaningful, girls need to have the opportunity to test their skills in games against other teams or in an end-of-season performance. Regardless of whether you are coaching a soccer team, teaching martial arts or hip-hop dance, you can create tournaments, leagues, or public performances to showcase learning and skill. This gives the girls something to work towards. It also gives them an opportunity to learn to manage the stress and anxiety that having to perform in a competition can bring up. This will give them valuable experience they can draw on later in life when they are called upon to perform.

Recruiting Girls into Your Sports Program

Recruiting girls is the biggest challenge for many after-school girls' sports programs. We have found that a variety of strategies are necessary to get girls in the game.

Don't rely on only one or two recruitment strategies. Use a wide range of techniques to increase your chances of reaching the right audience. Girls tend to respond to more active recruitment, so run a sports demo at recess, follow up with phone calls to each girl and actively engage current team members in recruiting new girls. These strategies can all catch girls' interest. This will take more time and effort on your part, but will likely prove much more successful.



Girls Sports Recruiting Tips

Flyers Alone are not Enough

We hear many stories of coaches who post flyers for a girls' sports program but no one shows up. Many girls need extra encouragement, especially if they haven't played the sport before. Go around and talk to the girls, throw or kick a ball with them, share with them what the program will be like, what fun they will have, and what skills they will learn. You can also use older girls to promote the program – have them talk about their experiences and distribute flyers.

Use Girl Networks

One of the best ways to get more girls involved is to have players ask their friends. Girls often feel more comfortable trying something new if they have the support of their friends. This will take time, but it's one of the most effective ways to build a team.

Conduct a Demonstration or Clinic

Connect with local schools to get permission to set up a volleyball net at recess and invite the girls to play. Once you have a captive audience, hand out flyers about your volleyball program, provide a signup sheet, and follow up with phone calls.

Get to Know the Parents

Find the parents and get to know them. Sharing all the potential benefits their daughters can experience through sports participation sometimes gives parents

The Jamestown Community Center in San Francisco uses a wide variety of recruitment techniques to enroll girls in their sports programs. Jamestown uses flyers but is very intentional about what information the flyers contain and how they are distributed. The flyers contain not only logistical information about the program but also list some important benefits girls can gain from sports participation. Also, the flyers are not simply posted around their community. Jamestown builds relationships with schools in order to place flyers in students' homework packets, which go straight to parents. Jamestown has enjoyed great success engaging girls in sports by using a variety of recruitment strategies and by educating parents on how their daughters can benefit from sports.



the extra incentive they need to sign their daughters up. Make sure you leave them a flyer with your contact information. Parents want to know who is running the team. Once they meet the coaches and get to know them, they may be more willing to let their daughter participate.

Be Persistent

It usually takes patience and perseverance to create a successful girls' sports program. Don't assume three girls at your first practice means your team will be a failure. It does, however, mean you will have to continue actively recruiting players after the season has begun.

Engaging Girls in Program Development

If the goal of your sports program is truly to empower girls, why not let them help in the design of the program? Girls are more likely to be engaged when they have participated in the creation of the program. Give girls opportunities to shape the activities that will ultimately shape them. The experience can be incredible for building trust and bonding within the group.

Invite girls to help:

- **Pick the sport or activity**
- **Weigh in on practice times, length of practice and frequency of games**
- **Decide on team names and colors**
- **Design, paint or care for physical space that is being used**
- **Create code of conduct, expectations or team rules**
- **Choose the captains or leaders**

Recruiting Coaches

Role of the Coach

Sports can be a powerful vehicle to help girls reach their potential. But without skilled and caring coaches, sports can only do so much to help girls grow and develop. Coaches have the power to change lives. A great coach not only develops a young person's athletic skills, but also teaches perseverance, selflessness, loyalty, cooperation, and tolerance. A challenging yet supportive coach can help girls take risks, develop self-confidence, teach them to speak up and stand up for themselves, and support them through the rocky road of adolescence. These are qualities that foster success well beyond the playing field – in school, work and family life. We believe that a skilled and committed coach can be a child's most powerful teacher.



Finding Qualified Coaches

A quality girls' sports program is only as strong as its coaching staff. Finding coaches can be the most challenging aspect of youth sports programming. Your ideal candidates should have playing experience and, hopefully, some coaching experience in the sport. They should have a command of the activity that enables them to teach skills and strategy to their players and they must be passionate about working with girls and have high expectations for what can be achieved by all the girls in the program.

Part of what defines a great coach is that they compliment the program. Do you need them to bring their own coaching curriculum and design their own practices? If so, do the people you are considering have the skill set? They also need to be great with people. Your coaches have to make connections with parents, families and other coaches. They have to be sensitive to team chemistry and promote positive interaction between teammates. The relationships coaches develop with their players are often the most lasting and beneficial results of any sports program.

Like recruiting players, there are two main kinds of coach recruitment strategies – passive and active. Passive recruitment, such as posting flyers, allows you to get the word out about your coaching needs to a large number of people. Passive recruitment success, however, depends upon eager and qualified adults seeing your flyers and following up with you to coach one of your teams. Active recruitment strategies consist of you going out into the community and finding these individuals and inviting them to join your coaching staff. Active recruiting is time and labor intensive, but because of its face-to-face nature, it tends to draw in coaches who are a great fit for your program. A thoughtful combination of both passive and active strategies will be the most effective.

Pay Specific Attention to Recruiting Female Coaches

There are thousands of youth sports coaches but the reality is that only 6 to 13 percent are women.⁵ As you strategize about where and how you will recruit, keep in mind that qualified female coaches can be pivotal in a girl's development.

Tips for Getting Female Coaches in the Game

- Recruit from local women's sports leagues.
- Connect with local women's college teams to see if any players are interested in coaching.
- Often fathers are the ones who are asked to coach the team, invite mothers too.
- Encourage former players to assistant coach with you and support their development by training them and giving them tasks that are appropriate for their abilities.

Supporting Coaches

Once you have female coaches on your sidelines it is essential to support them and offer training opportunities so they can continue to grow and develop. Michael Messner, Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies at the University of Southern California gives tips for female coaches in his book, "It's all for the kids: Gender, families and youth sports." We hope these tips are helpful in understanding the unique barriers female coaches face and how best to support their success.

Strategies of Successful Female Coaches: How to Support Female Coaches and Keep Them in Your Program

Volunteer (assertively).

The pipeline to becoming a head coach runs through assistant coaching. Nearly every head coach I interviewed started as an assistant coach, a much lower-key and lower-pressure position. But women who wanted to assistant coach often had to be extra-assertive about it – going beyond simply signing up on the volunteer sheet, making a follow-up phone call, or advocating for herself at an initial team meeting. A year or two as an assistant helps to build experience and confidence. Next year: Head Coach!

Take coaching classes.

Even if you have playing experience, coaching classes can be very helpful in learning how to run a good practice. Women coaches were sometimes critical of the "Old Boys" tone of these classes, but did not allow themselves to be put off by it. Knowledge is important, especially for those who know they are going to be subjected to an additional layer of scrutiny from other adults.

Find a mentor.

Several women coaches told me that they were recruited into coaching and then mentored by a more experienced coach. Often (though not always) this mentor was a man. Though the general culture of youth sports coaching is still not fully supportive of women coaches, there are individual men who see women's involvement as a good thing, and are actively mentoring newer women coaches. Many successful women coaches have benefited from these guys.



Look the part.

When people hear “coach,” they often implicitly think “man.” So a woman coach is often not even recognized as the coach by kids, other adults, umpires or referees. Therefore, like women in professional fields of employment, women coaches are often very conscious of the importance of looking the part of a coach. One soccer coach, for instance, told me that she wears a whistle around her neck. Not that she ever used it, however, she just wore it: “It makes me look like the coach.”

Speak your mind.

Women coaches tell me that they sometimes feel drowned out or intimidated by the “yellers” – loud men coaches and fathers on the sidelines. One coach said, “I don’t put up with that. I just don’t. There’s no reason why I should, so I don’t. I’m sure that when it comes to your business or whatever career you are in, you’re not like that. You know, it’s the same type of thing [in coaching]. I mean, why should you feel inferior to a man? There’s no reason for it. And I [am] well known... I speak my mind.”

Help build a network.

A woman soccer coach told me (with an ironic chuckle) that she was helping to build an “old girls’ network” that aimed to recruit and support more women coaches. Newer coaches told me that having this network in place had made a huge difference. Numbers do matter: In AYSO, women coaches were up to 19 percent in the final year of my study, creating the possibility of such a network. Little League is still dominated by men, leaving the handful of women coaches as isolated tokens. Build a network —It’s lonely being the only female coach. Suggest other female coaches your director can hire, bring in collegiate players to assist you and put them on the coaching track, form a female coaches group that meets every month.

Strategies of Successful Female Coaches contributed by Michael Messner, Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies at the University of Southern California

Coaching Corps® is a Team-Up for Youth program that engages college students and community members in volunteering in after-school youth sports programs. For more information visit www.joincoachingcorps.org

Positive Coaching Alliance and **Team-Up for Youth** both offer coach trainings that focus on teaching sports skills and life skills. For more information, visit www.positivecoach.org and www.teamupforyouth.org

Tips to Support Male Coaches

Girls deserve high quality trained coaches. Men can play a key role in girls’ development and can be powerful allies in promoting girls’ sports. Coaching a sex different from your own can present challenges. Here are some tips to help you be a great coach for girls and to contribute to their overall development.

Don’t be afraid to push girls

Sometimes male coaches think girls can’t be pushed as hard as boys. Girls can and do want you to challenge them physically and mentally with age and skill-appropriate activities. For example, include some fitness exercises in your practices to build girls’ endurance.

The Jamestown Community Center prioritizes having women involved with all their girls’ teams. If a girls’ team has male coaches, Jamestown will enlist the support of a team mother who believes in the importance of sports for girls. For example a team mom for their Under 15 team provides key support to the girls and coaches. She is physically active during practice - she doesn’t practice with them but jogs around the field for her own workout during their practice time, supports the girls on a variety of topics such as working together as a team, and mediates behavior issues. Having a female role model really strengthens Jamestown’s girls’ sports teams.



Appropriate Feedback Delivery

Don't be afraid that giving specific skills-based feedback will hurt girls' feelings. In actuality it's the delivery not the feedback, which affects a girls' self-esteem. Give them skills-based feedback with a positive delivery. For example encourage girls with "great try, keep taking on the defender" but also include "next time, once the defender has committed to you, pass to your open teammate." Also, when giving a girl constructive feedback, pull her to the side so she doesn't feel singled out in front of the group.

Include a Female Role Model

Co-coach with a woman, hire a female assistant coach, or have a mother participate in the program. As great as it is that you're out there coaching, girls benefit greatly from female role models. *Tip: Make sure you give a female coach a specific role that values her skills, so your players see a coaching relationship that values both genders as coaches.*

Support Girls off the Field

Girls may need to talk about off-the-field issues. Make sure they know you are willing to talk with them, or be prepared to recommend someone else they can talk to. Depending on what the issues are you can recommend a school counselor, athletic director, or a school health center.

Be Professional and Responsible

All male coaches, especially young men whose players are close to their age, need to be highly aware of maintaining clear and professional boundaries at all times. Dress appropriately (shorts, sweats), use gender inclusive language (try not to say "guys come over here"), have one-on-one meetings with players off to the side but visible to others. Don't use inappropriate language or host dinners at your house without other adults/parents present.

Be Self-Aware

Look at and challenge your own assumptions about female athletes, the more you can see the girls as capable and strong, the more they will benefit from your coaching. For example, outline your expectations at the beginning of the program and encourage the girls to work hard to reach them. Motivate your players to give 100 percent against their teammates at practices.



“ I coach middle school girls and I pride myself on teaching them skills and developing their fitness. I had a blind spot around aggressiveness. Some of my players were failing to challenge hard on defense and fight for the ball. I think I subconsciously associated that with boys' behavior and let it slide. I never realized this until my mom came to watch one of the games, and asked me, "Why are you letting them be passive on defense? Are you being soft because they're girls?" I started encouraging and teaching more aggressive play and the girls soon rose to the challenge. Not only did it improve our play, but they loved when we worked on fighting for the ball! All players – boys and girls – will meet your expectations, whether they are low or high.”

– Coach Ed Center (San Francisco, CA)

