



# The Women's Sports Foundation Report Brief: The Power of Parents for Engaging Girls in Sports

## Overview

Parents play a major role in promoting girls' initial and continued participation and skill development in sport. This brief discusses the various ways parents can support their daughters' participation. Findings from a 2019 Women's Sports Foundation (WSF) national study, *Coaching Through a Gender Lens: Maximizing Girls' Play and Potential*, highlight present-day trends in the types of support girls are currently receiving from parents and areas that girls can benefit from greater parent support/provisions.

## Background

Previous research and theory have identified three mechanisms by which parents influence their children's sports participation: direct provision of sports-related experiences, role modeling, and their own sports-related beliefs. Parents' direct provision of sports-related experiences involves both tangible and emotional types of support. Effective forms of tangible support include providing transportation to games and practices; paying for equipment, players' fees, and other associated costs; and seeking out a number of formal and informal opportunities to play the sport. Emotional support includes watching their adolescent participate in the activity (be a "cheerleader"), participating with their child in the sport (coaching or involvement in another supporting role on the team, practicing and teaching their child new skills outside of practice), providing performance feedback, and exposing their children to other events and experiences related to their sport (e.g., going to a women's sports event, reading about a famous female athlete). Parents act as role models by participating in their own sports-related activities, which has been shown to predict children's subsequent participation all the way through adolescence. Parents' sports-related beliefs, such as the degree to which parents view sports as important for their daughters and believe their child is competent in sports, actively shape children's perceptions and future expectations/motivations in sport. Parents can also impart or actively confront gendered stereotypes/expectations



about sport. These three parenting mechanisms are often conceptualized in terms of two more general concepts presented in this brief: parents as providers of sport experiences and parents as interpreters of their children's sport experience.

## Current Trends In Parental Support

As part of the *Coaching Through a Gender Lens* study, the Women's Sports Foundation commissioned a national survey of 1,129 girls between the ages of 7-13 who currently participate in sports and their parents (N=1,129). Results from this survey identified several ways that parents are functioning/operating as active providers and interpreters of their daughters' experiences in sport.

### Parents as Providers of Experience

Most parents report having opportunities to play some role in the direct provision of their daughters' sports-related experiences. Recent findings from the WSF study indicate that the more ways in which a parent is actively involved in supporting their daughters' sports experiences, the more likely it is that their daughter loves their sport, wants to play in high school or beyond, and thinks playing sports is extremely/very important. The majority of this support is in the form of tangible/instrumental support including driving their daughters to games and practices, buying equipment/extra gear, providing food for the games, paying for their daughter to play throughout the year.

However, issues around girls' sport access for low-income families are a major concern. Compared to low-income families, parents from high-income households are more likely to buy equipment/extra gear and pay for multiple opportunities to play throughout the year, as well as more frequently attend practice and games/competitions.

Among the multiple forms of emotional support measured in the recent WSF study, the primary emotional support parents provide to their daughters is in the form of being a spectator at games and practices (76% and 72%, respectively), and most parents who serve in this “cheerleading” role report doing so on a weekly basis. There is less indication that parents are providing other important features of emotional support. Specifically, findings indicate:

1. Few parents serve as coaches or are involved in other supporting roles such as serving as “team moms” or “team dads.”
2. Only about 50% of parents practice with their daughters outside of team practices.
3. Less than 25% of parents take their daughters to watch women’s sporting events, buy her books about women athletes, or encourage her to follow women sports figures in the media.

(See Figure 1 for all the ways parents support their daughters’ participation.)

Through role modeling of the sport, parents can further relay messages to their daughters of the relative importance of the sport. Although the majority of parents

of girl athletes have played sports sometime during their childhoods (only 19% report no personal sport experiences), very few parents currently play in an adult recreational sport league (17%). Reflective of historical gender gaps in sports, dads are more likely to have been personally involved with sports when younger or be currently involved and, in turn, are twice as likely to have coached any girls’ sports team than moms, perpetuating the underrepresentation of female role models on the coaching staff and limiting mothers’ involvement to supplemental roles (e.g., team mom, supplying food).

### Parents as Interpreters of Experience

Parents help interpret their daughters’ experiences by relaying messages to their girls about the value/ importance of sports and their likelihood of being successful in the sport. Parents’ sports-related goals for their daughters directly influence girls’ perceptions of what they are capable of achieving. Recent findings from the WSF study indicate:

- The vast majority of parents of female athletes (97%) highly endorse that sports are as important for girls as they are for boys, actively confronting culturally laden gender stereotypic beliefs/expectations about sport.

**Figure 1. Ways Parents Support Their Daughters’ Sports Participation**

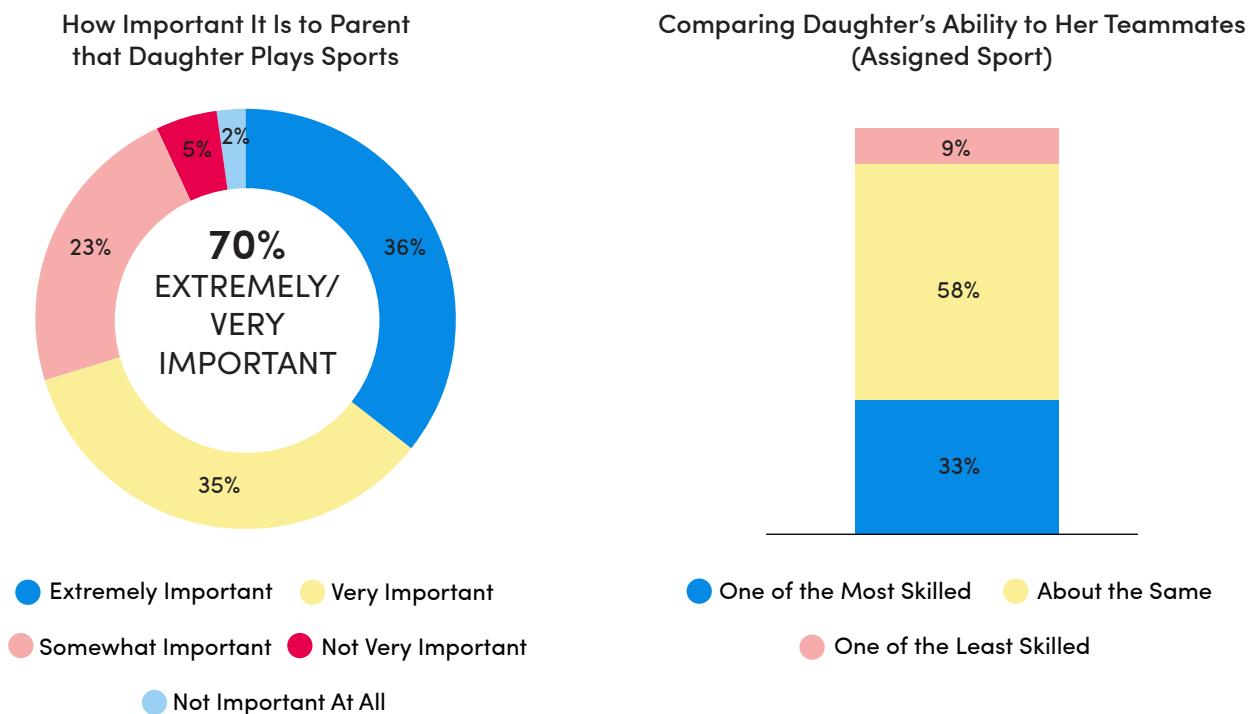
*P7a. Now we’d like to talk about the ways in which you might participate in [child] [sport]. Which of the following do you do?*



- Most parents of female athletes also believe that it is extremely or very important that their daughters play sports (70%) and that their daughters are equally or more skilled than other teammates (91%). In turn, parents who think it is very important that their daughters play sports and say their daughters are among the most skilled have daughters who love their sport and who plan to play sport in high school or beyond. (See Figure 2.)
- The primary goals parents want their girls to acquire from their participation are “to have fun” and “to be physically fit/healthy.” However, less than a quarter of parents reported having sport-specific goals for their daughters, like “learning sport-specific skills,” “experiencing a competitive environment” or “to have the ability to play at a higher level.” (See Figure 3 on following page for all parent goals.)



**Figure 2. Parents’ Perceptions of the Importance of Sports and Their Daughters’ Ability**



**Figure 3. Most Important Goals Parents Report for Their Daughters' Sports Participation**

*P3. What are the top five most important benefits that you want [child] to get from playing sports? I want [child] to...*



## Implications

There are several ways that parents are functioning as active providers and interpreters of their daughters' experiences in sport. However, this brief also highlights critical supports still needed for promoting girls' initial and continued engagement in sport. Community leaders can help facilitate parents' support in important ways:

1. Getting to know players' parents and building a shared goal of surrounding girls with supportive relationships for engaging in sport;
2. Providing ample opportunities for parents to get involved and tutorials/guidance on ways they can help their daughters to practice outside of practices and games;
3. Educating parents about the value of sports for their daughters, and encouraging parents to find ways to actively demonstrate this importance/value to their daughters;
4. Helping parents work with their daughters to set competitive, yet achievable sport-specific goals;
5. Encouraging parents to serve as role models and educational resources, including a particular focus on helping mothers and other important women in girls' lives develop active roles in their daughters' sport development;

6. Developing programs and sponsorships to ensure girls' access to equipment and opportunities to play; and
7. Developing strategies to highlight and reinforce positive ways in which parents support their daughters' sport participation.

(See Table 1 on following page.)





**Table 1. Parents’ Provision of Sports Experience and Interpretation of that Experience**

Parents’ Provision of Experience	Parents As Interpreters of Experience
Tangible Support (e.g., transportation to games)	Parents’ Value of Sports (e.g., view sports as important for their daughters)
Emotional Support (e.g., participating with their child in the sport)	Parents’ Ability Perceptions (e.g., believe their child is competent in sports)
Role Model (e.g., parents participating in their own sports-related activities)	Parents’ Gendered Expectations/Stereotypes (e.g., endorse or actively confront culturally-laden gender stereotype)

Adapted from Zarrett, N., Cooky, C., & Veliz, P.T. (2019). *Coaching through a Gender Lens: Maximizing Girls’ Play and Potential*. Women’s Sports Foundation.

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The full report can be accessed online at:  
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