



Women's Sports
Foundation®

FROM SIDELINES TO CENTER COURT:

Empowering Women Coaches
& Girls In Youth Sports

Developed in partnership with



RALPH C. WILSON, JR.
FOUNDATION

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Introduction

For more than five decades, the Women's Sports Foundation (WSF) has worked to break down barriers so every girl — no matter her zip code — has the opportunity to play, lead, and thrive through sport. Yet research shows girls in underserved communities still face persistent barriers to participation and women remain underrepresented in the coaching roles that shape their experiences.

When women coach, girls see what's possible. They feel supported, confident, and empowered. But women still make up only about 28%* of coaches on girls' teams — a number that hasn't budged in decades.

"From Sidelines to Center Court: Empowering Women Coaches & Girls in Youth Sports," takes a closer look at what's happening at the community level — who's leading, who's leaving, and what it will take to build a stronger pipeline. Grounded in research across Southeast Michigan and Western New York, the study offers a blueprint for change, revealing how to support women coaches, remove barriers, and strengthen pathways for girls in sport.

Through this hyperlocal lens, the findings reveal universal truths: women coach to give back and grow; respect and belonging drive retention; and girls play to connect — not just to compete. Together, these insights offer a roadmap for building inclusive, sustainable coaching ecosystems where women and girls can thrive.

*Source: Sports & Fitness Industry Association



Photo Credit:
Girls on the Run
New Orleans
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Women Coaches: A Fixable Pipeline

Insights:



Coaching is about giving back and growing personally

Mentoring youth and connecting with community are top motivators.



Respect remains a major barrier

Over 2/3 of women coaches say men don't show enough respect for women coaching; parents often undermine authority.



Isolation and burnout push coaches out

Former coaches report feeling unsupported and alone, driving attrition more than lack of interest.



Training keeps women coaching

Training in mental and physical health, nutrition, safety, injury prevention, and menstrual health increases retention.



Small changes could double the coaching pool

More respect, shared responsibilities, and confidence-building support would encourage former coaches to return.



Photo Credit:
AJ_Watt

Girls in Sport: Connection Over Competition

Insights:



Girls play to belong, not just to win

Connection and friendships are the main reasons they participate.



Encouragement makes or breaks participation

Girls with supportive adults — parents, coaches and mentors — are more likely to stay in sport.



Visibility and celebration are unequal

Boys' teams get more parades, pep rallies, and public recognition, sending subtle messages about value.



Most girls are open to coed play, but supportive environments matter

60% have no strong preference; while 30% prefer girls-only teams for an environment where they feel they can be their authentic selves.



Girls quit due to scheduling and cost

Top reasons for leaving: can't attend practice regularly and the sport being too expensive.

Photo Credit:
High School
Adaptive Sports
Program

Women want to coach, and girls want to play — but they need environments that value connection, respect, inclusion, and belonging as much as competition. Women are ready, willing, and able to coach; we just need to make the pathway more accessible and inclusive so they can do what they love while empowering the next generation to rise.

Take Action:

- **Read the report's key findings:** understand the challenges and motivations for women coaches and girls in sport.
- **Apply insights in your programs:** strengthen support networks, create safe and inclusive environments, offer tailored training, and celebrate all teams equally.
- **Share with your community:** encourage other coaches, leagues, and programs to implement these evidence-based practices.
- **Address systemic barriers:** respect, shared responsibilities, and confidence-building interventions can bring women back into coaching.
- **Promote belonging for girls:** prioritize connection, mentorship, and encouragement alongside competition.

 [Read the full report and share it to make an impact in your community.](#)



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