



Teenage girls and dropout

Teenage girls drop out of sport at a faster rate than boys. This was first identified by the Wolfenden Report in 1957 and is still the case today. Unless the sport sector takes specific action to address the reasons why girls drop out, it is unlikely to change for another 50 years.

Reasons why teenagers drop out of sport can be very different from the reasons why girls don't play sport in the first place. Our experience has highlighted a number of reasons why some girls who played sport regularly decided to stop. It is important to remember that different girls may have very different reasons for playing and for dropping out. (Direct quotes from girls are in *italics*, the rest are statements from people working in sport. The colours relate to possible solutions on the next page).

Peer group / societal values

1. *"None of my friends play anymore"*
2. *"People think it's weird and tease me when I tell them I play sport"*
3. *"It was fun when I played with girls my age but I don't like playing in the adult team with older women"*
4. *"My parents don't want me to play anymore as its getting in the way of my school work"*
5. Society has told teenage girls that it isn't feminine to play sport
6. There isn't enough women's sport in the press or on TV – girls don't see sport as a normal activity for women
7. Most parents promote sport as a boys activity, and give boys more recognition after success

Enjoyment / other priorities

8. *"I enjoyed playing last season, but I've got other things to do now"*
9. *"Sport is too competitive"*
10. *"The changing rooms are always dirty, why would I want to go there?"*
11. *"They want me to play county, but that's too much traveling"*
12. Some girls don't respond well to traditional coaching styles associated with male coaches
13. For many girls training is too time consuming, boring and repetitive
14. Other leisure choices take precedence

"People think it's weird and tease me when I tell them I play sport"

Confidence

15. *"I don't like wearing the kit they make us play in"*
16. *"I know that I'm not good enough"*
17. Teenage girls become more body conscious and don't feel they are the right shape to play

So what are the solutions to these problems and whose responsibility is it to address them? The answer, as ever, is not straightforward. The ideas overleaf are just some that may help. They won't work for everyone but should help to keep a number of girls in sport for longer.

National Governing Bodies

- Use social networking methods (Bebo, Facebook, YouTube etc) to link girls who play the sport and help them create friends in the sport (and a sense of belonging) even if their closest friends drop out.
- In all promotional material, use positive imagery of girls and women playing the sport as much as boys (remembering that it is ok for images to look feminine).
- Develop advocates of women's sport at all levels of the organisation.
- Ensure that women's international and elite teams get as much recognition and publicity as the men's (at every age group)
- Raise the profile of elite sportswomen within the sport so they can be used as role models for younger women and girls (not only concentrating on the sporting activities)
- Ensure that girls have the opportunity to compete in age group categories at club level, rather than being forced into adult sides (if participant numbers make this hard, consider "super-clubs").
- Ensure that there are opportunities to play and train for the sport in a non-competitive environment. (e.g. turn up and play, social leagues etc)
- Consider introducing adapted, less competitive, even non-contact, versions of the sport (Judo have moved to technical, non-contest gradings for all belts)
- Allow flexibility in clothing regulations so that sensitivities (including religious recommendations) can be catered for.
- Encourage manufacturers to make feminine and flattering versions of sport suitable kit for all sizes
- Ensure that you keep in regular two way contact with members and participants throughout the year through websites, magazines or emails
- Maintain high quality links between schools and clubs to ensure that participants at school find it natural and comfortable to progress to club participation

Clubs

- Run social events alongside the sport so that girls make new friends as well as keeping the existing friends they may have joined with
- Give girls positions of responsibility within the club as they enter their teenage years (e.g. assistant coaches for younger age groups, officiating at events, volunteering)
- Hold a new members night, where everyone is encouraged to bring along a friend
- Don't pressure women and girls into competitive games if they don't want to
- Consider "non-playing – just training" memberships
- Keep in regular contact with players during the close season. For instance through training sessions, other sporting activities and social

events. Even email or social networking sites give clubs the ability to ensure members continue to feel "part of the club" even when they are not playing every week.

- If putting girls into adult teams can't be avoided then do so in a sensitive manner (ensure changing / showering facilities are appropriate, coaching is age appropriate and the scheduling of training and matches are 'teenage friendly')
- Consider female only sessions
- Keep changing rooms and facilities as clean and attractive as possible. If you hire facilities from another provider (e.g. a local authority) apply continuous pressure to ensure they are of consistent high quality

Coaches

- Introduce more fun elements to training – don't always stress the competitive element. Many girls respond well to continuous improvement, rather than winning at all costs
- Allow flexibility in what athletes wear
- Use coaching styles that build up participant's confidence, rather than confrontational approaches
- Provide girls with the opportunities to make decisions and provide their input whenever possible
- Don't allow boys to dominate mixed sessions For example Baseball Softball's "Let the Girls Play" campaign
- Ensure training sessions are mixed and varied and consider using different sports as part of the training
- Allow girls opportunities to give feedback about what they like and what they might want to change about their sport experience
- Don't apply pressure on girls to play at higher levels of competition than they want to
- Speak to parents regularly to re-assure them about ways in which studies can be prioritised alongside sport. Remind them that regular physical activity boosts academic results.

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