

**REFRAMING  
SPORT FOR  
TEENAGE GIRLS:  
BUILDING STRONG  
FOUNDATIONS  
FOR THEIR  
FUTURES**



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## FOREWORD

**There are key stages in a woman's and girl's life when she is more likely to drop out of sport.**

Women in Sport's work has an impact at all of these, however, the most important and our focus for this study, is around teenage years and the transition to adulthood, as habits and attitudes formed then, have a critical long-term impact on future engagement in sport and physical activity and form deep-rooted barriers which inhibit participation through life. This fundamentally needs to change.

Our latest insight puts the spotlight on the wider world of teenage girls. We have put them at the heart of this research, through online ethnographic work, co-creation sessions and discussions, letting them lead our understanding. We also reviewed over 30 reports, shared knowledge and developed thinking together with 25 other organisations both from inside and outside the sports sector. This has helped us to start the journey of reframing how sport and physical activity can have both relevance and appeal during this time.

Progress to get more girls physically active has been slow and women in sport want to be the driving force to change the landscape for girls. Through this work we look to inspire others to think differently about girls so that as a sector, we can work better together to address the challenge of girls disengaging with sport. We believe that by reframing sport for girls, we can help them build strong foundations to become healthy, happy, active women of the future.



**Kate Nicholson**

*Head of Insight & Innovation  
Women in Sport*

# GIRLS ARE MISSING OUT ON THE LIFELONG REWARDS OF SPORT

**Women in Sport exists so that every women and girl in the UK can experience the transformational lifelong rewards of sport. We are the only organisation in the UK that researches sport purely from the perspective of women and girls and we use this insight to drive change.**

Too many girls are dropping out of sport and physical activity during teenage years and developing deep-rooted negative attitudes towards it, which act as barriers throughout life.

Being physically active is positively associated with a variety of physical, mental and social health outcomes and research highlights that physically active children are more likely to be active and healthy adults.<sup>1</sup>

It has been repeatedly shown, that girls are less physically active than boys and that this worsens with age. It is estimated there are over 2.1 million girls aged 11-16 in the UK<sup>2</sup> and shockingly, the vast majority are missing out on the benefits of sport and physical activity in their transition into adulthood.

By age 13-16 only 10% of girls achieve the Chief Medical Officer’s recommended levels of 60 mins of physical activity every day, compared to 16% of boys. Furthermore, girls from low socioeconomic and BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) backgrounds are even more likely to be less active than their peers.<sup>3</sup>

Too many girls at this life-stage, are also developing negative attitudes towards sport and physical activity and they stop enjoying taking part.<sup>4,5</sup> These become increasingly difficult to change and act as barriers throughout their lives.

## DROPPING OUT

**ONLY 14% OF GIRLS AGE 5-16 ACHIEVE RECOMMENDED LEVELS OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

**DROPPING TO 10% OF GIRLS AGED 13-16<sup>3</sup>**

## NEGATIVE ATTITUDES

BY AGE 14-16



**78%**  
**UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF AN ACTIVE LIFESTYLE**

YET ONLY

**28%**  
**REALLY ENJOY TAKING PART IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY<sup>5</sup>**

# A NATION OF INACTIVE AND UNHAPPY GIRLS

**The need to engage girls in sport has never been more urgent. Teenage girls of today are experiencing troubling issues, which have become increasingly worse over the last 10-15 years.**

Girls are facing more mental health problems and report being less confident, less happy and increasingly concerned with their appearance. Girls' health and wellbeing is deteriorating and unless we take action now, these negative issues will have a significant impact on them and the women they will become. Sport can be a powerful force to support girls on their journey to being happy, healthy and self-assured young women but to do so, we must start to challenge our thinking in this area to create solutions that will have a long-lasting and sustainable impact on girls' lives.

## WHY DO WE NEED TO GET GIRLS MORE ACTIVE?

**60%**

**OF GIRLS AGED 11-16 KNOW A GIRL OR YOUNG WOMEN WHO HAS EXPERIENCED A MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM <sup>6</sup>**

**1/3**

**OF GIRLS AGED 14-16 ARE UNHAPPY WITH THEIR BODY IMAGE <sup>5</sup>**

**ONLY**

**18%**

**OF GIRLS AGED 11-16 SAY THEY ARE 'VERY HAPPY', COMPARED TO 38% IN 2011 <sup>6</sup>**

**62%**

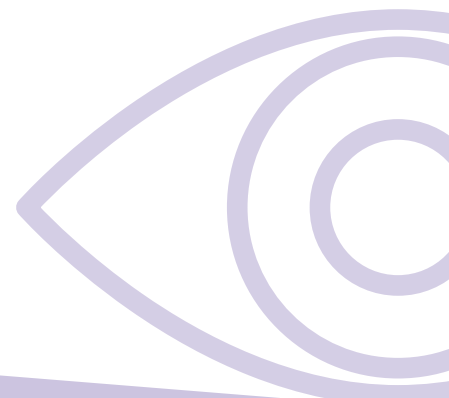
**OF GIRLS REPORT HAVING THE LOWEST WELLBEING COMPARED TO 38% OF BOYS AGED 14 <sup>11</sup>**

**7/10**

**GIRLS WHO DON'T FEEL GOOD ABOUT THE WAY THEY LOOK WILL STOP THEMSELVES FROM EATING OR OTHERWISE PUT THEIR HEALTH AT RISK <sup>12</sup>**

**44%**

**OF GIRLS AGED 13-15 ARE OVERWEIGHT/OBESE, COMPARED TO 36% OF BOYS <sup>10</sup>**



# WHY AREN'T GIRLS ENGAGING WITH SPORT? CONSIDERATIONS AND BARRIERS

Girls' attitudes towards sport and physical activity varies considerably and are influenced by their previous experiences of sport and social influences such as peers, parents and the media.

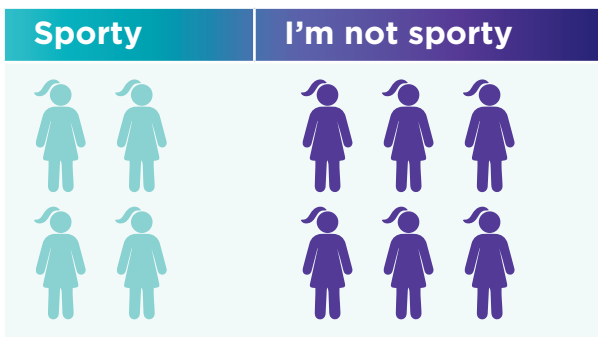
Before we take a closer look into the world of girls, we outline the barriers that girls face to taking part in sport, including their perceptions of it and the influence of puberty in their transition to adulthood.

## PERCEPTIONS OF SPORT

**Girls start to label themselves rigidly as 'sporty' or 'not sporty' which continues to affect their predisposition towards physical activity throughout life.**

Only 4 in 10 girls define themselves as 'sporty' compared to more than 6 out of 10 boys.<sup>13</sup> However, this is often based on limited experience of school PE, when girls effectively rule themselves out, before exploring the many ways they could participate in and enjoy physical activity. It is important to note that, even amongst the 'non-sporty girls', there is a broad spectrum in their levels of engagement ranging from those who have had no positive experiences of sport at all, to others have previously enjoyed the benefits of sport but disengaged as they have got older.

### Girls' perceptions of being 'sporty'



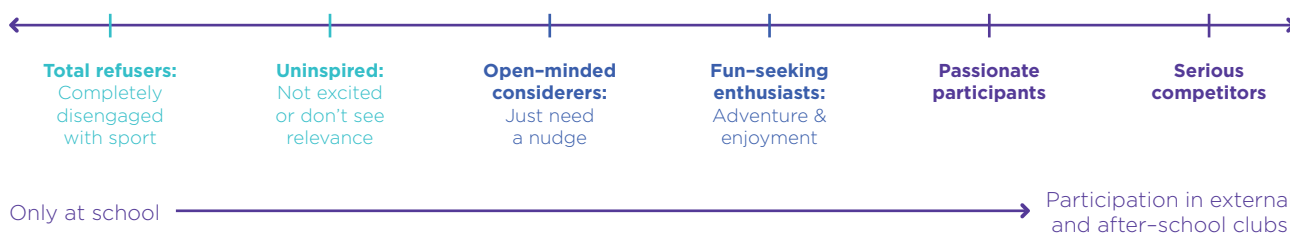
(Chance to Shine, 2018)



Girls' perceptions of sport from our online community



# A SPECTRUM OF ENGAGEMENT



## I am 'sporty'...

These girls have already developed a strong sense of enjoyment in relation to sport, are often the most naturally talented in traditional school sports, which fuel their sense of achievement and success. They are also more likely to choose to take part in sport outside of school lessons in after-school or outside clubs, where the opportunities for 'sporty' girls, appear much better defined and more widely catered for than those for 'non-sporty' girls.

## I was 'sporty' but not anymore...

Worryingly, we see evidence of girls who previously enjoyed sport at primary school, had more positive attitudes toward it and an understanding of what they can gain from taking part, start to disengage once their teenage years set in. Sports activities which they used to enjoy either feel childish and no longer fit with how they want to be perceived, or become more competitive with mounting pressure to be talented, leaving them fearing failure and feeling they can no longer take part for fun. As a result, sport starts to lack relevance and gets deprioritised as schoolwork pressures kick in.

## I am not 'sporty'

Long-term disengaged girls have never identified with sport and it is too often an alien and loaded concept, which they associate with negative feelings and outcomes. They base this on very narrow views of what sport is and can be, with school PE often their only frame of reference where, more often than not, their experiences are negative ones. This underlines the need to intervene earlier, to open these girls' eyes to the different ways in which they can enjoy being physically active, before attitudes and behaviours become deeply entrenched.

## NARROW EXPERIENCE

**28%**

**DO NO OTHER EXERCISE EXCEPT SCHOOL PE**

AND

**ONLY 23%**

**REALLY ENJOY IT**



The girls we focused on in our research were both long-term disengaged girls, as well as girls who have fallen out of love with sport during their teenage years. For these girls there appears to be a gap, not only in provision of appropriate activities, but also around relevant messaging. We need to re-examine what is on offer to discover new ways in which they will enjoy being physically active.

## THE IMPACT OF PUBERTY ON GIRLS

**Puberty influences drop-out and reinforces long-term disengagement as girls look to project a 'perfect' version of themselves.**

Puberty is a time of great change and upheaval for girls. From as early as age 9 or 10 years, girls are having to manage the physical, psychological and emotional changes that puberty brings and this happens over several years and can present significant barriers to sport.<sup>14</sup>

There is a distinct lack of support and advice, particularly in relation to sport and exercise and girls often feel unprepared and vulnerable. One bad experience can have a long-lasting effect on confidence and we saw examples of this relating to everything from wearing the wrong bra, anti-perspirants, inappropriate sports clothing to problems during monthly periods and many other ways of 'getting it wrong' which was embarrassing and elicited teasing from others.

As well as managing the emotional and physical effects of puberty on their developing mind and body, socially, girls also experience other big life transitions such as moving to secondary school and establishing new friendships. Being 'sporty' can compromise their need for acceptance in new friendship circles and highlight their insecurities at a time when they feel increased pressure to project a 'perfect' version of themselves.

However, as puberty involves major transitional and developmental changes, it also presents opportunities for us to shape the way girls feel about themselves and sport to instil more positive attitudes and behaviours.

## BARRIERS TO SPORT

**There are a series of complex deep-rooted barriers for girls that influence and reinforce negative perceptions and experiences of sport.**

We know that early experiences of sport can have a powerful and long-lasting influence on how active girls will be in adulthood. It is our responsibility to tackle these barriers and reframe sport to broaden its appeal for all teenage girls so that it can have a meaningful role in their lives.

6/10

**SAID THAT FAILING DURING PUBERTY MADE THEM WANT TO QUIT**<sup>15</sup>

7/10

**GIRLS AVOID TRYING NEW THINGS DURING PUBERTY BECAUSE THEY ARE TOO AFRAID TO FAIL**<sup>15</sup>

64%

**OF GIRLS WILL HAVE QUIT SPORTS BY THE AGE OF FINISHING PUBERTY (16-17)**<sup>16</sup>

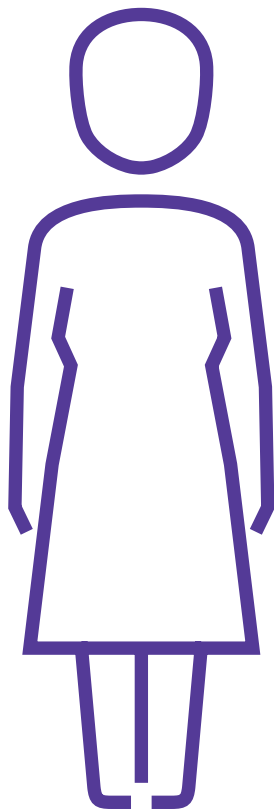


# GIRLS' PERSONAL, SOCIAL AND CONTEXTUAL BARRIERS TO SPORT



## PERSONAL:

Barriers centred around how girls feel in themselves



### BARRIERS

**FEELING LIKE SHE'S NOT GOOD ENOUGH TO TAKE PART AND ONLY THE TALENTED ARE VALUED**

**LOW SELF-WORTH AND A PREDETERMINED SENSE OF FAILURE**

**LACK OF CONFIDENCE OVER BODY IMAGE AND APPEARANCE**

**PRESSURE TO PRIORITISE FUTURE GOALS FROM SCHOOL, FAMILY AND THEMSELVES**

**FEELING PHYSICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY VULNERABLE DURING PUBERTY**

### HOW GIRLS FEEL

29% of girls aged 14-16 say not being good at sport stops them from taking part in school sport <sup>5</sup>

50% of girls feel paralysed by the fear of failure at puberty which stops them trying new things <sup>15</sup>

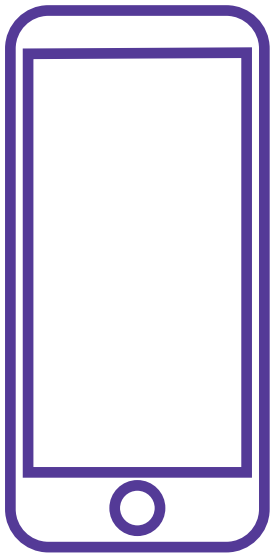
8 out of 10 girls with low body esteem avoid seeing friends and family or trying out for a team or club <sup>12</sup>

Only 29% of girls 14-16 say the skills they learn in PE are relevant to their day to day life <sup>5</sup>

42% of 14-16 year olds say their period stops them taking part in physical activity inside school <sup>5</sup>

**SOCIAL:**

Barriers centred around how girls interact with others, and the social pressures and insecurities they face



**BARRIERS**

**FEAR OF MISSING OUT ON ANY TIME WITH FRIENDS**

**PERCEPTION THAT IT'S FOR BOYS, NOT FOR GIRLS**

**LACK OF ACTIVE FEMALE ROLE MODELS**

**FEAR OF HAVING TO GO ALONE AND MEET NEW PEOPLE**

**HOW GIRLS FEEL**

63% of young women would shun sport or physical activity if their friends were not involved<sup>17</sup>

80% of girls feel they do not belong in sport<sup>16</sup>

72% of girls 11-21 years old say a lack of media coverage of women's sport leads them to being treated unfairly<sup>6</sup>

42% of girls aged 11-21 prefer to communicate on social media than face-to-face<sup>25</sup>

“ I USED TO GO TO FOOTBALL BUT I STOPPED BECAUSE I DIDN'T KNOW ANYONE THERE ”

**CONTEXTUAL:**

Barriers centred around external, contextual factors



**SCHOOL SPORT IS THEIR ONLY FRAME OF REFERENCE**

Only 49% of girls aged 11-16 say they enjoy PE <sup>6</sup>



**PERCEIVED LACK OF TIME MEANS SPORT IS DEPRIORITISED**

37% of girls 14-16 say they don't have time to do sport outside of school due to school work <sup>5</sup>



**LACK OF SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE ON MANAGING PUBERTY AND SPORT**

1 in 4 girls and young women feel unprepared for the start of their period, with 1 in 7 saying they didn't know what was happening <sup>19</sup>



**DISENGAGED ATTITUDE OF PARENTS**

67% of girls 14-16 say their parents encourage them to take part in sport <sup>5</sup>



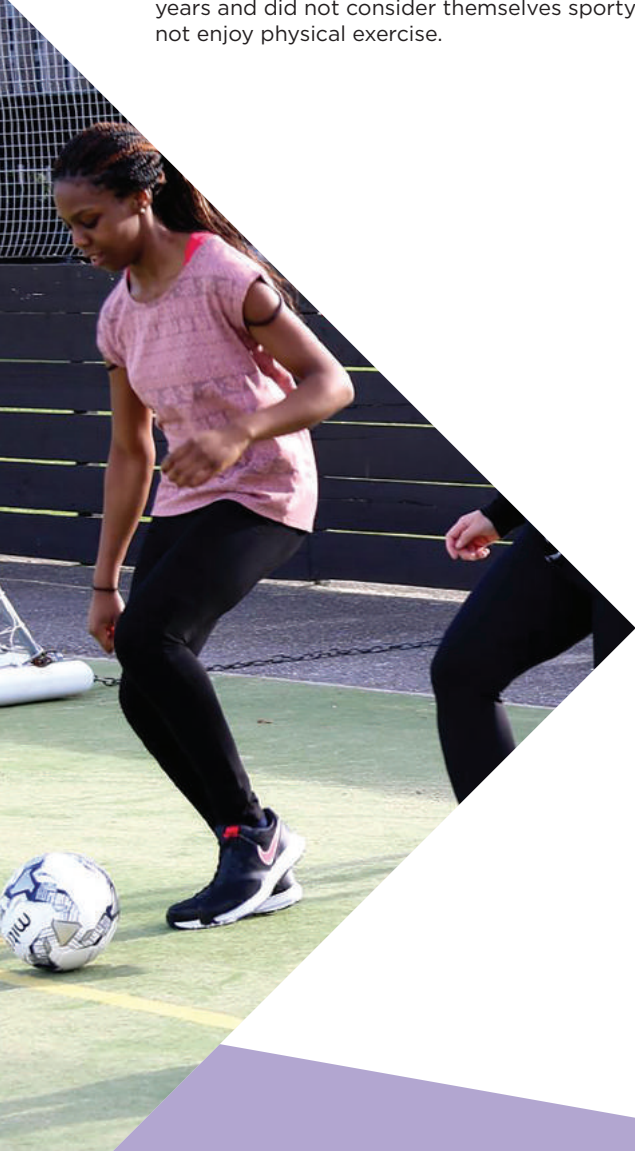
“ I DO NOT PLAY OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL AS THERE IS NO CLUB I KNOW OF AROUND MY AREA ”

## OUR RESEARCH... CHALLENGING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF GIRLS

To really understand why girls don't engage with and turn away from sport during their teenage years, we need to broaden our knowledge to gain a more holistic understanding of what really matters in teenage girls' lives.

We put girls at the heart of our approach and immersed ourselves in their world to look beyond their engagement with sport. In doing so, we sought to uncover, explore and bring to life the most powerful opportunities to change the status quo, to inspire and equip organisations to develop innovative ways to engage and keep girls involved in sport as they transition into adulthood.

We engaged with 33 girls in London and Manchester across the study, all from state schools with a mix of household income. They were all between the ages 11-16 years and did not consider themselves sporty and/or did not enjoy physical exercise.



## OUR JOURNEY (AUGUST 2018 – JANUARY 2019)

### INSIGHT GATHERING

#### Fact finding and insight

- ▶ Desk research, trend watching and social media trawl
- ▶ Review of over 30 reports on teenage girls' habits, behaviours and attitudes both in relation to sport and physical activity and more widely about their lives

### ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY WITH GIRLS

#### Immersing ourselves in their world

- ▶ Online panel of 16 girls posting thoughts, photos to reflect their lives over 10 days
- ▶ Multiple activities including diaries, videos, photo uploads and blogs

### SHARE, DEBATE & INNOVATE WITH OTHER EXPERTS

#### 2x Immersion & inspiration days

- ▶ Harnessed collective knowledge of 25 organisations from within and outside the sports sector through 2x facilitated days to build new thinking and ideas.

### GIRLS CO-CREATION & ASSESSMENT

#### 6x Co-creation sessions

- ▶ Six co-creation sessions involving 18 inactive girls in friendship triads in the North and South of England to understand motivations and explore initial ideas





# WHAT REALLY MATTERS IN GIRLS' LIVES?

If we can align sport with what girls really want and need, it can have a more relevant and meaningful role in their lives. In this section we discuss these areas of opportunity and the implications of these for sport.

Girls interests and maturity differ between the ages of 11-16, which makes understanding what they value and have in common all the more important and has implications for how we communicate and design the sports and physical activities we offer during their teenage years.

We uncovered five important anchors which reflect what girls today value and build the foundations of who they will become. Through examining these, we uncovered valuable parallels where girls were motivated, committed and engaged, displaying behaviours which could be adapted and applied to sport and physical activity.

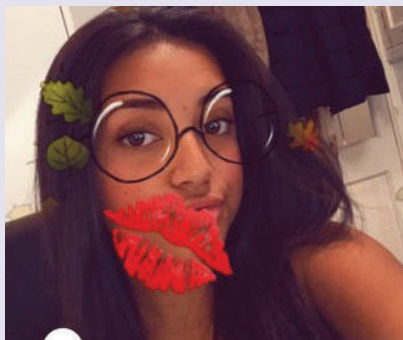


## 1. Support Network



A sense of place in the world

## 2. Socially Connected



Validation

## 3. Independence & New Experiences



Making formative memories

## 4. Moments of Pride



Fuelling self-worth

## 5. Keeping on top of it all



Time well spent (Re-prioritisation)

EACH ANCHOR IN THEIR LIVES BUILDS THE FOUNDATION OF WHO THEY WILL BECOME

images uploaded by girls in our online community'

## A SUPPORT NETWORK TO RELY ON

We know that for teenage girls, their peers are important influencers, but we should not underestimate the importance of mum's role and that of the wider family at this life-stage.

A strong support network is vital to give girls a sense of place and identity and people within their network can be powerful influencers that help shape what they do and who they will become. Girls place huge importance on having supportive people, trusted relationships and 'safe' spaces in which they feel able to be themselves and 'fit in', in a non-judgemental environment. The two key relationships that girls value most are their family and their mum in particular, and their friends.

“MY MUM HAS A BIG IMPRESSION ON MY LIFE BECAUSE I LIKE TO SPEND TIME WITH HER AND GO OUT TOGETHER”

### Family and in particular, mums

Despite growing independence, a girls' family is still an important source of support, advice and influence during their teenage years. Familial relationships are real and authentic and less likely to be played out online. This is important, as the family unit is where girls feel most free to express themselves without fear of judgement. The relationship dynamic between this generation of children and parents appears to have strengthened over recent years.<sup>9,20</sup>

Mothers hold significant importance, with 'Mum and daughter time' emerging as something girls cherish. Numerous surveys have found that girls report their mum to be their no. 1 role model<sup>13,21</sup> and key influencers for sport and exercise.<sup>22</sup> A recent poll suggested that just over 1 in 4 young women would be more likely to join a sport if their mum played.<sup>22</sup>

**We need more targeted efforts to influence mothers to engage their daughters and wider families with sport as well as activities and initiatives that offer a family appeal for girls to be active.**

**IN 2002 JUST OVER HALF OF 11-15 YEAR OLDS TALKED TO THEIR MUMS ABOUT THINGS THAT MATTERED AT LEAST ONCE A WEEK COMPARED TO TWO THIRDS OF TEENAGERS IN 2015<sup>20</sup>**

### Friends

Friendships can have both positive and negative impact on girls' behaviours and attitudes.


Friends are increasingly important as girls move into secondary school, becoming a vital source of emotional support as well as powerful influencers of behaviour, as girls strive for a sense of belonging beyond their immediate family. Several initiatives and studies advocate the power of using peers to change physical activity behaviour.<sup>23,24</sup>

However, they can also be a negative force, as girls become increasingly competitive and judgemental of one another. School PE or sports activities, unfortunately, are often prime breeding grounds for gossip and shaming between girls.<sup>14</sup> Increasingly, friendships are also played out and maintained on social media, with peer-to-peer pressure also adding to girls finding them more stressful to manage.

**We need to consider how sporting environments can better nurture friendships and help girls manage them and offer a safe 'non-judgemental' space.**

**63%**  **OF YOUNG WOMEN WOULDN'T PLAY SPORT OR EXERCISE WITHOUT A FRIEND BY THEIR SIDE<sup>17</sup>**

BUT

**54%**  **OF GIRLS AGED 11-16 SAY RELATIONSHIPS WITH FRIENDS ARE A MAIN CAUSE OF STRESS IN THEIR LIFE<sup>6</sup>**



## THE NEED TO FEEL SOCIALLY CONNECTED

Social media use is a significant and all-consuming part of girls' lives providing important validation of who they are, their friendships, popularity, and success.

The amount of time 12-15-year-olds spend online has more than doubled in the last 10 years, from 8 hours a week in 2005 to 18.9 hours a week in 2015 putting massive pressure on time available to do other things.<sup>26</sup>

Social media becomes even more important to girls when they move into secondary school and become increasingly dependent on 'likes' for social validation when constant comparisons of their lives with others, can lead to a real fear of missing out and a 'compare and despair' attitude.<sup>27, 28</sup>

We observed a tendency to 'layer' their social media, with numerous apps and multiple social media profiles; those which are a more honest reflection of who they are and only accessible to trusted friends and family, and other profiles for their wider circle of friends which they carefully curate to ensure they are worthy of 'likes' and comments.

This illustrates that girls are very mindful that what they share online, portrays the best version of themselves and many don't typically view participation in sport as a worthwhile currency to share with others.

**How can we make sport and physical activity shareable and positive in an online environment?**

2/5 GIRLS ARE ON SOCIAL MEDIA AT LEAST **3 HOURS A DAY** COMPARED TO 1/5 BOYS<sup>30</sup>

“ I’VE STOPPED DOING A LOT OF SPORT AND NOW I’M MORE INTO GAMING AND YOUTUBE.”

**Can sport become a more socially connected environment that extends beyond the activity itself and provide opportunities for girls to make those important real-life connections?**

The amount of time devoted to social media and online activities limits time to spend on other things and girls ruthlessly deprioritise anything deemed not relevant in their lives. This can have a negative impact on their well-being.

Given the way girls use social media, it is perhaps unsurprising that prolonged use of social media has been associated with poorer wellbeing amongst girls, and significantly more so than boys.<sup>28, 30</sup> Snapchat and Instagram, the most popular apps amongst teenage girls, are also perceived as the most harmful to their mental health and wellbeing, due to being largely appearance (image) based.<sup>31</sup> Evidence has shown that girls who are heavy social media users are more likely to experience low mood, low self-esteem, negative body image, reduced sleep, cyberbullying and poorer wellbeing.<sup>28, 30, 33</sup>

**59%** OF GIRLS 11-21 REPORT PRESSURE FROM SOCIAL MEDIA IS A MAIN CAUSE OF STRESS FOR THEM<sup>6</sup>

**35%** OF GIRLS 11-16 WORRY ABOUT COMPARING THEMSELVES AND THEIR LIVES TO OTHERS<sup>25</sup>

**43%** OF GIRLS 11-16 WOULD LIKE TO LOOK MORE LIKE THE PICTURES OF GIRLS AND WOMEN THEY SEE IN THE MEDIA<sup>6</sup>

**Despite the emerging risks of prolonged social media use, it can also have a positive impact, which can be leveraged:**

- ▶ To help them to feel connected to their peers and the wider world, give a sense of belonging to certain communities and feel accepted.
- ▶ To provide a platform for them to maintain relationships and keep updated, to express themselves.
- ▶ To help them to relax, lift their mood and distract them from stressful situations in other areas of life
- ▶ To learn and develop new skills and can give them access to the valuable experiences of others and expert information and advice.<sup>31, 33</sup>

Social media influencers, or ‘YouTubers’ and ‘Vloggers’, have become overwhelmingly popular, having millions of online followers, and a huge influence on the aspirations, attitudes and behaviours of teenage girls.

Many social media influencers are self-made, every day people and some are young teenagers themselves, so girls feel able to relate to them with younger girls in particular being more likely to aspire to be like their favourite Vlogger or YouTuber when they are older.<sup>32</sup> This opens up opportunities to inspire and influence girls to be more active through their online icons.

“ A TREND THAT IS GOING ON FOR MOST GIRLS MY AGE IS WATCHING VLOGGERS AND YOUTUBERS... MOST GIRLS MY AGE ALSO HAVE PHONES AND GO ON SOCIAL MEDIA A LOT. ”

**How can sport be normalised through more realistic content with ‘girls like them’ to give a better reflection of what sport can offer them and their lives?**

We also saw here examples of behaviours online such as following YouTubers and high levels of competitiveness in ‘Snapchat streaks’ which have clearly captured their imagination.

This raises an interesting question of what we can learn from these behaviours and how we can tap into the emotions they generate so that girls can be similarly engaged and committed to sport. It is also important to recognise that the digital skills that girls possess are far more advanced than any previous generations and that connections are increasingly made online, which presents opportunities for effective targeting and communication.<sup>20</sup>

**Can we learn from these online behaviours, social connectivity, validation and competitiveness when it comes to sport and being active?**

62%

**OF GIRLS AGED 11-16 SAY YOUTUBERS ARE GOOD ROLE MODELS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE**<sup>25</sup>



## THE DESIRE FOR INDEPENDENCE & NEW EXPERIENCES

This life-stage is all about discovery and new experiences as their growing independence allows them the freedom to make choices for themselves.

During early adolescence, girls are more likely to seek out novel experiences and take risks, as they figure out who they are and what they enjoy.<sup>34</sup> We observed that new and exciting experiences become formative memories that help shape future behaviours and attitudes.

Experiences ranged from sleepovers, parties and going to theme parks for younger teens, to engaging in more mature activities such as music events and festivals, meals out, 'mocktails', relationships and going on holiday. Some of these are small moments of independence that we typically take for granted as adults, such as getting their first bus pass, their first job and going places without their parents. Girls found a sense of adventure and discovery in these experiences and they became treasured memories which they were proud to share and that bonded them with key people in their lives.

Social media contributes to girls' feelings of independence by allowing them to connect with new people outside their immediate friendship groups and broadening their horizons beyond that they are exposed to at home and school. It is a form of escapism which is very aspirational and opens their eyes to the possibilities of new and exciting experiences for the future, gives them the opportunity to learn new things and proactively explore new interests.<sup>27, 31, 32</sup>

“ I NEED TO TRY DIFFERENT THINGS TO SEE IF I LIKE THEM, BUT SOMETIMES FEEL LIKE I WON'T ENJOY THINGS BEFORE I'VE EVEN TRIED THEM ”

**Sport is more appealing to girls when they have the freedom to choose what they do and when and co-creating activities or offering a broader exploration of sports and activities, is important.**

“ I CAN NOW GO OUT WITH MY FRIENDS ALL BY MYSELF, I LIKE THIS BECAUSE IT GIVES ME MORE INDEPENDENCE ”

Many girls don't view sport as something that can give them independence or offer adventures that could compete with the other exciting opportunities on offer.

In our research, sport did not feature as positive formative memories for many of the girls we spoke to; at best they did not appear at all and at worst, girls had largely negative memories of PE as something they were no longer interested in. This tended to mean girls ruled out taking part in physical activity before even trying. Instead, teenage girls found independence and new experiences in other ways.

**We need to consider how sport and organised activities can become part of these formative memories and become adventures that they carry with them for life.**

## MOMENTS OF PRIDE

Girls live in a world of great pressure to achieve and to be good at everything they do and moments of pride help to build girls confidence and realise their best. We need to consider how sport and activity contribute to moments of pride, particularly for those girls who are 'not sporty'.

In our research, we found that girls don't want to be defined just by their achievements at school and are motivated by developing personal skills and being their OWN best, irrespective of others.

They gain personal reward and pride in everyday activities and social media gives them an avenue to share these moments with others. For example, baking a cake with their mum, re-decorating their room, and practising make-up techniques.

Although some of these examples may appear simple, moments of pride, both big and small, are an important form of self-expression for girls. They are signifiers of becoming more grown up and provide emotional feedback which enhances their confidence and feelings of self-worth.

“MY MOST POPULAR MAKE UP LOOK THAT I HAVE POSTED ON MY SOCIAL MEDIA GOT 500+ LIKES AND I'M REALLY PROUD OF IT.”

**Sporting environments should foster and celebrate feelings of pride and personal growth, as well as giving girls the freedom to play for fun and enjoy sport for its own sake.**

Sport is rooted in traditional notions of achievement and success which are largely binary in nature: you win or lose, you're 'sporty' or 'not sporty' and you're talented or not talented enough. We need to contest notions of achievement and competitiveness as they are currently defined. Rigid ideas of achievement and competitiveness in sport might be causing them to turn away from it and makes it difficult for 'not sporty' girls to feel proud of their efforts and good about themselves.

However, it is not necessarily that girls don't like being competitive and there is a common misconception that this applies to most girls. In fact, competitiveness is important to a significant number of girls with half of those aged 11-16 saying they like it when their PE lessons are competitive.<sup>5</sup>

**We should consider how sport can be more inclusive to cater for all girls, so that each and every one has the opportunity to feel good about themselves and experience moments of pride.**



## KEEPING ON TOP OF IT ALL

This is a time when girls are having to set their own priorities and juggle what they 'must do' with what they 'want to do'. Sport and physical activity need to deliver more for some to become part of their 'want to do' list.

This generation of teenage girls have a number of competing demands placed on them and life is an on-going juggling act of prioritising and re-prioritising how they spend their time.

A constant tension exists for girls between wanting to do well and pleasing others and their desire for greater autonomy and freedom to do what they want. It can be hard for girls to prioritise it all and get the balance right.<sup>35</sup>

This can create stress and anxiety. In a recent Girlguiding survey, the three main causes of stress in the lives of girls 11-16 years were exams and tests (74%), pressure from social media (54%) and relationships with friends (54%). Furthermore, girls feel that adults are out of touch with their needs, as 74% of girls aged 11-16 say adults don't recognise the pressure young people are under.<sup>6</sup>

As we have learnt, social media plays a big role in girls lives and the immediate nature of it means girls feel the need to be constantly 'plugged in' and react at a moment's notice for fear of missing out. Girls deprioritise sport with age as the pressures of school and social norms intensify because it is not considered as 'time well spent' in their busy lives and does not compete in the 'enjoyment stakes' with the other things girls want to do.

Yet sport could be the key to greater attainment at school, greater success in the future and crucially, to helping girls better manage and cope with their lives today. Only 56% of girls aged 11-16 are happy with the amount of physical activity they do.<sup>5</sup>

“ IF I SAY NO TO SOMETHING AS I'M DOING SPORT INSTEAD, THEY (FRIENDS) MIGHT NOT INVITE ME NEXT TIME ”

**We need to close the relevance gap for girls and sport and reinforce the wider benefits that girls can gain from taking part.**

**37%**

**OF GIRLS 14-16 SAY THEY DON'T HAVE ENOUGH TIME TO PARTICIPATE IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL DUE TO SCHOOL WORK COMPARED TO 16% OF BOYS<sup>5</sup>**

**45%**

**OF GIRLS 11-16 DO NOT SEE THE RELEVANCE OF THE SKILLS THEY LEARN IN PE TO THEIR LIVES COMPARED TO 60% OF BOYS<sup>5</sup>**

**56%**

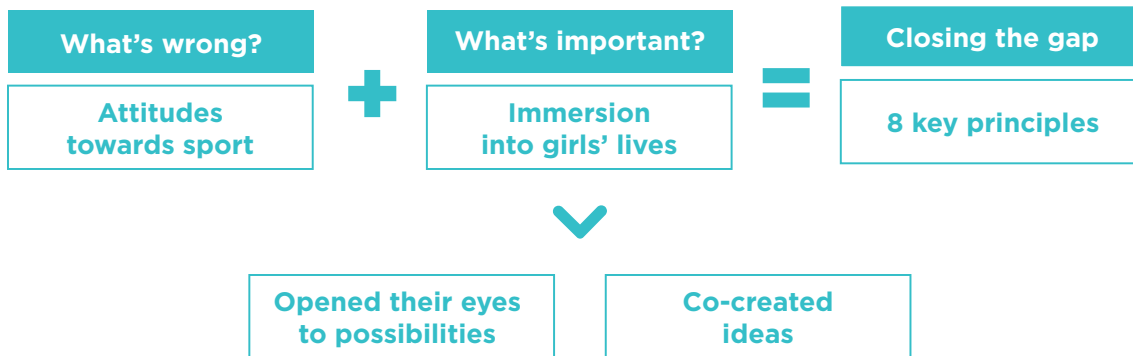
**OF GIRLS 11-16 SAY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF THEIR LIVES COMPARED TO 72% OF BOYS<sup>5</sup>**

“ I WORRY ABOUT LOTS OF THINGS LIKE LOSING FRIENDS, MAKING SURE MY HOMEWORK IS IN ON TIME AND PUTTING ON WEIGHT ”



# HOW CAN SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY BETTER MEET GIRLS' NEEDS?

We listened to what's wrong with sport and physical activity, why they dropped out and why it is not relevant to them now. By combining this with our ethnographic understanding of the girls' broader lives, exploring what's important to them, what they enjoy and spend their time on, we were able to look at some of the important principles to bridge the 'relevance gap' in sport for these girls.



## 8 PRINCIPLES OF SUCCESS

We need to re-imagine sport and physical activity as something that girls value and perceive to enhance their lives, to become something that will help them on their journey to being self-assured, independent and feeling good about themselves and what they can achieve. To do this, we have developed 8 Principles of Success which will guide organisations to...

<p><b>REFRAME</b></p> <p>sport in the mind of these girls as something that inspires and motivates</p>	<p><b>REDEFINE</b></p> <p>their experience, to be broader and better than what they've ever experienced at school</p>	<p><b>REINFORCE</b></p> <p>the enjoyment of physical activity and sport, and how it adds real value to their lives</p>
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Although our research focused on inactive girls and those who had recently disengaged from sport, we believe these principles can be applied to better engage all teenage girls.

We have created an online toolkit of resources to support organisations in their understanding of teenage girls and to apply the 8 Principles of Success in practice: **visit [www.womeninsport.org](http://www.womeninsport.org)** and visit our research and advice service pages for further information.



## 8 PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESS

1

### NO JUDGEMENT

Take pressure off performance and give freedom simply to play.

2

### INVOKE EXCITEMENT

Bring a sense of adventure and discovery.

3

### CLEAR EMOTIONAL REWARD

Reframe achievement as 'moments of pride', not winning.

4

### OPEN EYES TO WHAT'S THERE

Redefine sport as more than school sport.

5

### BUILD INTO EXISTING HABITS

Tap into existing behaviours in other spheres.

6

### GIVE GIRLS A VOICE & CHOICE

Allow girls choice and control to feel empowered.

7

### CHAMPION WHAT'S IN IT FOR THEM

Make it much more than just about health.

8

### EXPAND IMAGE OF WHAT 'SPORTY' LOOKS LIKE

Create truly relatable role models which inspire.

## 1. NO JUDGEMENT

Take pressure off performance and give freedom simply to play

- ▶ **Girls crave a safe space to let their hair down and mess around with their friends.**  
This could be anything from singing, dancing, running around a playground or swimming with inflatables – activities that are more light hearted and freer from too many rules and regulations – and that give girls permission to be silly and spontaneous.
- ▶ **Think carefully about the way sport is talked about,** for example the language around ‘play’ is liberating and moves away from the pressured and serious language around competitiveness, commitment, trials, skill and winning.
- ▶ **Provide more opportunities away from the school environment** where girls are encouraged to take part without fear of judgement, removing the pressure to show they are the best, and with a stronger emphasis on enjoyment and letting off steam.

## 2. INVOKE EXCITEMENT

Bring a sense of adventure and discovery

- ▶ **Girls get much more excited when it comes to the unusual and the unexpected,** whether it’s unusual sports, unusual venues, or brand new ways of playing a traditional sport.
- ▶ **Girls view adventurous activities through a different lens;** they are ‘experiences’, where no one is really an expert, shifting them away from judgement and pressure to ‘be the best’.
- ▶ **Sometimes it is variety in its own right they seek,** rather than having to choose one sport or activity to have as ‘their thing’ to pursue. Taking part in lots of different activities removes the pressure of commitment and progression as the clear pathway and can prevent boredom.
- ▶ **This could broaden perceptions of sport,** which often revolve around what girls have done in PE and heavily skewed towards a few traditional sports.
- ▶ **Traditional ‘male sports’ sparked an interest among some girls.** Sports such as boxing and rugby offered a new challenge and created interest for some girls.
- ▶ **These more unusual activities are a form of social currency,** something to talk about and something interesting to share (the Instagram factor!).

## 3. CLEAR EMOTIONAL REWARD

Reframe achievement as ‘moments of pride’, not winning

- ▶ **There is a desire for purpose and personal reward in whatever they do** and physical activity is no exception. If physical activity becomes simply something ‘you must do’ because its good for you, then it does not connect emotionally and becomes a chore.
- ▶ **There’s a need to reinvigorate and add credibility to the idea that ‘it’s the taking part that matters’** but reinforcing what girls can achieve beyond winning (i.e. enjoyment, personal development, building relationships).
- ▶ **We should be celebrating the behaviour girls can be proud of,** that goes above and beyond winning but make sure this does not become trite or condescending.
- ▶ **By shifting achievement away from win/lose, it levels the playing field for girls,** and can enable all girls to succeed, and to feel proud of themselves.



## 4. OPEN THEIR EYES TO WHAT'S THERE

Redefine sport as more than just school sport

- ▶ **Typically, non 'sporty' girls have had negative or neutral experiences of PE** at school which have clouded their perceptions of what to expect and what they will enjoy.
- ▶ **To engage girls in sports, we need to take 'school' out of the picture**, with new ways to experience sport that feels a million miles away from the stress, rules, and lack of freedom and flexibility that they associate with school sports.
- ▶ **Language is powerful** - avoid language that implies it will mirror their experience of sport at school e.g. 'club', 'teacher', 'trials'.

## 5. BUILD INTO EXISTING HABITS

Tap into existing behaviours in other spheres

- ▶ **Tap into what is fun and exciting for them**, which can then act as the Trojan Horse, with physical activity secondary and 'hidden' inside what they enjoy.
- ▶ **Recognise and reinforce the physical activity in their existing behaviours**, which they won't perceive as 'sport', with their more traditional understanding of what sport can be.
- ▶ **There are clear opportunities to learn from the digital worlds of social media and online gaming** that play such a big role in girls' lives, and to build elements of these into future initiatives i.e. apps, levels, streaks, collecting points, shareable content.

## 6. GIVE GIRLS A VOICE AND CHOICE

Allow girls choice and control to feel empowered

- ▶ **Girls are in a world that's dominated by rules and authority figures**, especially when it comes to school sport.
- ▶ **There's a significant opportunity to hand over the reins, giving girls more ownership of their experiences** of sport and physical activity, helping them to feel more comfortable and in control.
- ▶ **Girls organising girls, as well as mentoring and buddying from peers**, can help to change the authority dynamic.
- ▶ **But** it's important to open their eyes to the possibilities otherwise the choice will seem narrow and unmotivating.



## 7. CHAMPION WHAT'S IN IT FOR THEM

Make it much more than just about health

- ▶ **Girls don't need to be educated about the positive benefits of sport, they know that it's 'good for them'.** However, if they're simply not motivated by the direct benefits of sport, there's a clear need to reinforce what else they can 'get out of it'.
- ▶ **There's an opportunity to motivate girls by using the power of incentives and rewards** such as freebies, discounts from popular brands and exclusive experiences.
- ▶ **But it's not just about 'stuff', we can also motivate girls with personal development** that will help them succeed in the future, including recognised awards and skills that can bolster their CVs.

## 8. EXPAND THE IMAGE OF WHAT 'SPORTY' LOOKS LIKE

Create truly relatable role models which inspire

- ▶ **Girls like to hear and learn from other people's experiences,** especially when it's friends, family or people they can relate to (i.e. those their age, with their body shape, with their level of ability).
- ▶ **By widening the image of what being 'sporty' can look like,** it reinforces that it's about what your body can do, not how it looks.
- ▶ **People who are deemed 'extremes' when it comes to sport,** such as athletes, or even sports teachers, don't resonate with girls in the same way.





## RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite sector-wide efforts to get teenage girls more physically active, we are not yet having a big enough impact. It is clear that girls have a complex relationship with sport and physical activity throughout their teenage years and that this life-stage has a damaging impact on both attitudes and behaviours for far too many girls and for far too long.

We have failed to inspire the majority of girls who don't class themselves as sporty, allowing previously engaged girls to feel they no longer feel they have permission to take part, because they are not 'the best' and those that have never engaged to feel excluded. Have we tried hard enough, not just to remove barriers but also to capture their imagination and interest? The message is clear – sport is not just for the exceptional few and every girl deserves to participate and enjoy the rewards of sport and physical activity in their lives.

We want to change this now and believe that in order to do this, we need to be much more innovative, much more joined-up as a sector and put girls much more squarely at the heart of the solutions.

### 1. Expand the relevance of sport to meet all girls needs

Commit to increasing participation amongst girls, by developing a girls' strategy which does not approach the issue as one homogenous group, but carefully considers the various different needs and motivations of a broader spectrum of girls, from those that just need a nudge, to those who have completely disengaged, and develop interventions which add true value and relevance to their lives.

### 2. Make the sports opportunities truly hard to resist - FOMO!

Girls not only require significantly more support to navigate barriers, but deserve much more inspiration and opportunities to participate, which are innovative, trigger interest and compete much more effectively with the other exciting things going on in their lives. We need girls to choose to be part of it!

### 3. Apply the principles of success in developing and evaluating initiatives

We cannot expect girls to engage with outdated notions of sport and exercise if we want them to be more active. The girls need to be at the centre of the solutions. By applying the Principles for Success, the sports sector should develop and evaluate initiatives through a teenage girl lens to ensure they are accessible, engaging and exciting.

### 4. Collaborate more as a sector to build long-term solutions with wider and sustainable impact

There is not one place in which to address this and solutions need to have a long term focus. We need to tackle this challenge both in and out of schools and even beyond the sector in order to share insights and good practice, and to deliver significant change in the positive impact that sport can have on girls' lives and their future wellbeing.

Women in Sport want to be the driving force for change for girls and this research is just the beginning of our journey. We will continue to build on and expand our insights in this area and work with partners both within and beyond the sport sector to build upon the ideas created in this research and explore more innovative solutions to help the sector make sport and exercise more relevant to girls lives. We believe this foundational exploration of girls' lives is a helpful starting point to inspire organisations to think differently about girls and close the relevance gap between girls and sport.



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- ▶ AKQA our launch partner



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  - British Cycling
  - British Gymnastics
  - Centre for Appearance Research
  - Dove Self-Esteem Project
  - England Boxing
  - England Hockey
  - England & Wales Cricket Board
  - Exercise Move Dance UK
  - Girlguiding
  - London Youth Rowing
  - Mini Mermaid & Young Tritons UK
  - Rugby Football League
  - Rugby Football Union
  - Sky Blues in the Community
  - Sport England
  - Street Games
  - Swim England
  - The British Mountaineering Council
  - The Football Association
  - Train Body Brain
  - ukactive
  - UK Coaching
  - Youth Sport Trust



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### **WHO ARE WE?**

We are Women in Sport.

Our vision is a society where women and men have equal opportunities.

Women and girls are missing out on the lifelong benefits of sport. We want to change this, now, for every woman and girl in the UK.

### **HOW ARE WE DOING IT?**

We are the only organisation in the UK that researches sport purely from the perspective of women and girls.

We use the insight gained to drive change through campaigns and partnerships.

Across all our work we include women and girls in socially deprived communities, where sport can have a uniquely empowering effect.

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