

How To Engage Girls Aged 13-15 In Sport And Activity

PERCEPTIONS

Sport England found that, during this age span, participation in sport develops from something guided by parents and school, to something guided by individual choices.

Young people are also becoming conscious of how they are perceived by their peers and other important people in their lives, which creates a structure for their personal development, and will rarely do something that risks jarring with their social group.

As such, to engage successfully with this demographic, sport must fit in with the likes and needs of a child's social group - rather than isolating them - and connect to other interests and priorities.ⁱ

Weight affects perception

Recent research has shown that attitude to physical activity can differ according to a girl's weight. The study found that obese adolescent girls often have lower sport participation rates and a less positive attitude towards physical activity, as well as finding limited pleasure in activity.ⁱⁱ

However, an American study suggests this does not have to be the case. A survey of obese and non-obese girls revealed almost all displayed positive interest in sport and dance activity, although there was some awareness in the obese group that they were not as active as they might be.ⁱⁱⁱ

Changing perceptions of the benefit of activity

During the 13-15 age group, girls' priorities start to change. The perceived benefit of activity becomes less about having fun and more about looking/feeling good.

Being healthy is also seen as important, as evidenced by a StreetGames study that found girls recognise the importance of a healthy lifestyle and see exercise as part of this.^{iv}

However, according to an Irish study, perception in regards to health is often guided by the level of activity undertaken, with more active adolescents seeing a clear link between health and being active. One participant commented: 'that you see people jogging on the road and you know they are fit and healthy.' Inactive adolescents tended *not* to draw this comparison and relate being healthy to nutrition, rather than exercise. One respondent associated being healthy with 'not getting fat...eating the right food to help your body.'^v

MOTIVATIONS

A 2013 StreetGames report suggests that, in regards to activity, key motivators for girls are keeping fit and healthy, fun and socialising, the freedom offered by participating outside school, relaxing and de-stressing, and improving individual performance.^{vi}

A Sport England report found the chance to be active with people who weren't competitive and who shared similar skills and interests was another important motivator. It also revealed that parents and teachers have an important role to play in motivating girls. For example, parents by readily providing transport and teachers by providing activity choices that girls enjoy.^{vii}

A 2014 study into adolescent girls and activity found that girls may prefer same-sex classes. Some may feel inhibited by male dominance and be sensitive to body image issues in mixed classes. Thus, providing same-sex classes may be a positive motivator for girls.^{viii}

Enjoyment is a motivator for many

Research conducted at Dublin City University found that enjoyment was a key motivator for many young people.^{ix}

A data analysis questionnaire for Reading Borough Council backs up this finding, with 50.8% of respondents listing fun and enjoyment as a main factor in motivating them to participate in activity.^x

However, fun must not be seen as a motivating factor for all. Sport England research reveals that, for many young people, sport was last seen as fun in primary school. Enjoyment of sport then starts to fade in secondary school, where many perceive it as a more serious pursuit for those who are more able. Thus, not all young people are motivated by the desire to have fun.^{xi}

Motivations are affected by weight

As with perception, weight also appears to have an effect on some aspects of motivation. A study has shown that many motivations (social contact, competition, feeling better, improving health and physical condition) are unaffected by the weight of the participants. However, three motivations – enjoyment, losing weight and looking better – were found to differ according to weight. Enjoyment was found to be less important for obese girls than for the normal-weight girls, whilst losing weight and looking better was more important for obese girls.

The study also noted that, as weight loss associated with exercise is likely to be relatively small, obese girls should be encouraged to experiment with different activities until they find something they enjoy.^{xii}

BARRIERS

Data collected from multiple studies and research projects across the world suggests a number of common barriers that prevent or discourage girls from participating in activity.

These include:

- Bad experiences of school sport. These include lack of encouragement from staff, not enjoying any one sport, the overly competitive nature of school sport, and a dislike of changing in front of others.^{xiii}
- Limited free time due to the demands of other commitments. These are educational and social, as well as family commitments such as household chores and looking after siblings.^{xiv}
- Not enough family support. This factor includes access to activities outside school being limited by parents who are unwilling or unable to provide transport; parents not encouraging (or even discouraging) participation; and parents who are not active themselves - thus depriving girls of someone to participate with.^{xv}
- Fear of being laughed at or bullied.^{xvi}
- The perception of not being as good at sport as others (particularly true in overweight girls).^{xvii}
- Activity being too tiring.^{xviii}
- Previous experience of sexism - not being taken seriously when taking part in sport.^{xix}

Barriers and weight

Research that specifically looked at weight in regards to participation found overweight girls reported significantly higher body-related, resource, and social barriers in regards physical activity compared with girls of normal weight.^{xx} Another study found that feelings of inadequacy, dislike of competition and fatigue were common barriers amongst overweight girls.^{xxi}

MESSAGES

Studies have revealed the type of message that successfully connects with this demographic in regards to encouraging activity, as well as the type of message that *fails* to connect.

The word ‘sport’ can have negative connotations

Research by Sport England found the word ‘sport’ has negative connotations for many girls, as they associate it with bad experiences at school and an overly competitive environment. Promotions that don’t mention sport could therefore prove popular, as they offer broader appeal.^{xxii}

Avoid assumptions about girls’ abilities

Sport England found that offering a broad range of activities to both boys *and* girls, thus not assuming girls are unable to participate in certain sports, could be beneficial. Making activity a part of other activities girls enjoy is also recommended.^{xxiii}

Marketing style

In addition, Sport England found the delivery of the message was also important. Girls responded best when the person delivering the message was seen as ‘trustworthy’, ‘expert’ and ‘like me’. Other important factors include having illustrations with bold colours and urban-style graphics, as well as catchy and direct slogans, and demonstrate the expertise of the coach/instructor.^{xxiv}

PARTICIPATION

Recent StreetGames research has provided a host of insights into the type of activity girls currently participate in, with dance found to be most popular. This was followed by, in order, netball, swimming, football and running.^{xxv}

Activity levels and demand are both high

Questionnaire data compiled by Reading Borough Council points to the high demand for activity amongst girls. Responses showed 67% of young people surveyed currently participate in extracurricular sport during term-time. In addition, when asked what pastime they would like to do more of during term-time, sport was the most popular answer (35% of respondents).^{xxvi}

How to encourage more participation

Sport England research found that a broader offering of activity is needed to break the norm of sport participation.^{xxvii} This is backed up by the StreetGames research, which found a wide range of activities that girls wanted to try. These include swimming, gym, trampolining, adventure sports and roller-skating.^{xxviii}

StreetGames research also revealed key criteria that encourage participation. These include convenient times (straight after school and in school holidays) and locations (near to school/home), value for money, and a choice of interesting activities.^{xxix}

A StreetGames study into its own Let’s Get Fizzical programme (designed to provide physical activities not normally available in the school curriculum) found a high proportion of girls taking part. Popular activities included boxercise, Zumba, street dance, handball and rugby.^{xxx}

Another study found that girls can be encouraged to participate by positive influences. A recent study found teenagers were more likely to be active if they perceived pressure from teachers, friends or family members, and were surrounded by friends who were also active.

The study also suggests that girls with active friends see sport as a way to spend more time with their social group, so are more likely to participate themselves.^{xxx}

COMMUNICATION

Research has pointed to a number of key factors in relation to communication channels and methods.

Effective channels and information

Research by StreetGames found that girls find information on activity from a wide range of sources. These include school, social media, adverts, text messages, posters and leaflets in the post.^{xxxii} However, our own research has shown that, because of the cost of print and distribution, poster and leaflets are not an effective way of reaching the target audience.

Reading Borough Council's data analysis found that most respondents (38.3%) found out about activities from friends, followed by school (16.6%), parents/carers (15%) and the internet (11.7%).^{xxxiii}

StreetGames research also looked at the information that should be communicated to encourage participation. This includes cost, times, type and nature of the activity (competitive or non-competitive), information on incentives (e.g. a free trial), and images of people taking part.^{xxxiv}

In addition, the StreetGames research made a number of pertinent recommendations in regards communicating with girls about activity.^{xxxv}

These include:

- Take sport away from an educational context – many girls link sport inextricably with school, even if they participate outside school, so have limited ideas in regards sport outside education. It is therefore important to create an awareness of the importance of activity outside school, thus developing a desire to continue sport once the target audience leaves school.
- Choice is key – there is a perceived lack of choice in regards school sport. This means communicating the choice of a wide range of activities outside school could be a key factor in driving participation.
- Communicate in a way that interests girls – to be successful, communications should reflect both motivations (e.g. being healthy, cost, learning new skills) and non-sporting interests (e.g. family, socialising, music and reality TV).

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