

A close-up photograph of several hands of different skin tones stacked together in a supportive gesture. A bright green scribble is overlaid on the left side of the hands.

BY GIRLS, FOR GIRLS: BIG SISTER IMPACT REPORT

BIG SiSTER

Introduction

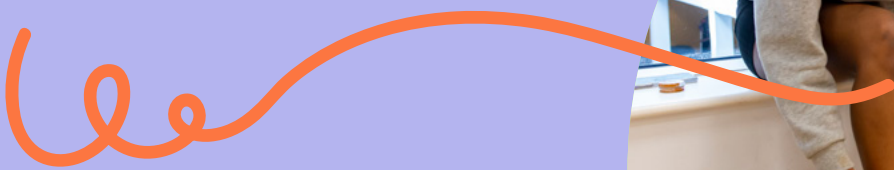
As Women in Sport approaches our fortieth anniversary, the ground-breaking work we do to deeply understand the lives and needs of women and girls has never been more important.

Despite the high-profile successes women's sport has enjoyed over the past few years, we know that the reality for many women and girls is that they are still faced with far too many unfair, gendered barriers to experiencing the joy and freedom of sport. It is teenage girls who often feel these barriers most acutely.

We are determined to disrupt this system by providing the knowledge, education and support girls need during puberty.

Big Sister is a team effort and we are delighted, and proud, to have worked with such committed partners - Places for People, Places Leisure and Hey Girls. I would like to thank them on behalf of everyone at Women in Sport for everything they have brought to the project. And of course, I want to thank our remarkable Big Sister ambassadors, without whose insight, time and inspiration Big Sister would never have delivered all that it has. They are the heart of Big Sister and we are extremely proud of each and every one of them.

**STEPHANIE HILBORNE OBE,
CEO WOMEN IN SPORT**



Big Sister's Impact

20

Big Sister ambassadors.



1m+

page impressions for Big Sister's Instagram page and 8,400 digital hub users.

269

girls actively using Places Locker app.

82

girls co-producing Big Sister content.



127

sport leaders trained.



19,380

women and girls supported through the availability of free to all period products.

3,267

girls using Big Sister gym memberships.

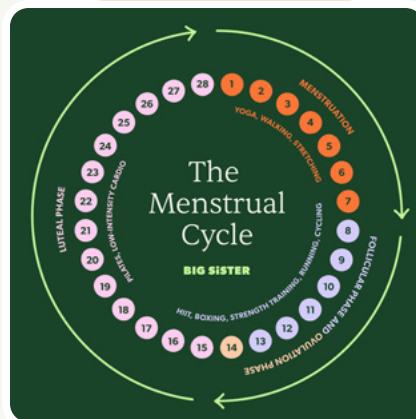


68

local community partners and

61

local schools engaged as part of Big Sister.

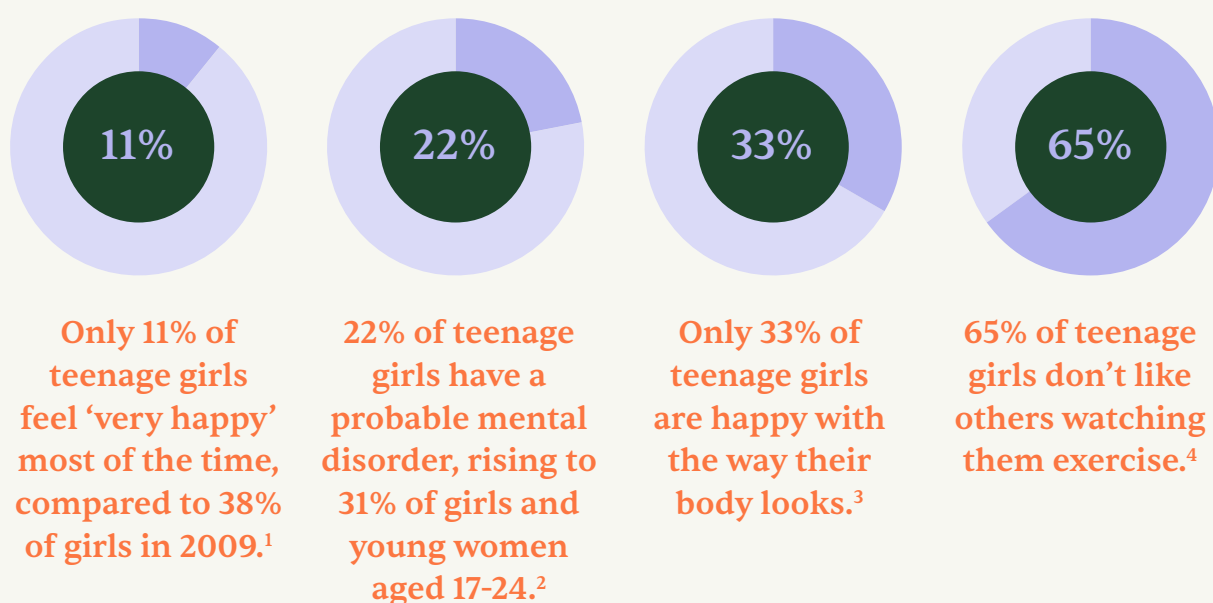


55,509

visits to participating leisure centres from Big Sister members.

Why Big Sister?

Teenage girls are in the midst of a mental health pandemic, facing disproportionate loneliness and anxiety-related illnesses leading to self-harm and eating disorders. It is simply wrong that their freedom and joy is being suppressed by society's expectations, and sport can be an antidote. All the evidence shows physically active children are healthier, happier and have greater wellbeing and confidence than those who aren't. But deep-rooted societal stereotypes tell girls that sport isn't for them. These gendered stereotypes start early, well before girls even arrive at primary school, and by the time girls hit puberty are well set in. The result is that teenage girls fall out of love with sport and this can follow them into adulthood.



Women in Sport research has found that **more than one million teenage girls in this country (43% of girls)** who once considered themselves 'sporty', disengage from sport following primary school, compared to just 24% of boys. Their life to that point has instilled a fear of being judged by others, and has crushed their confidence in their own ability. Limited opportunities to take part, the pressures of schoolwork, and not feeling safe outside were some of the reasons given for not wanting to participate for these girls.

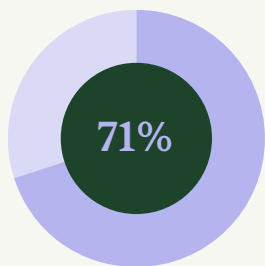


1 Girlguiding (2021) [Girls' Attitudes Survey 2021](#)

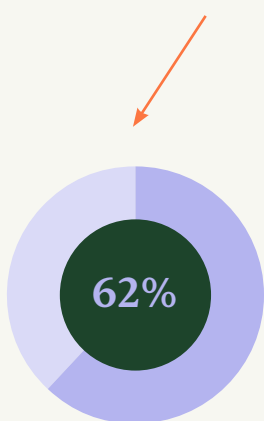
2 NHS Digital (2022) [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2022](#)

3 Youth Sport Trust (2022) [Girls Active National Report for Girls' Data June 2022](#)

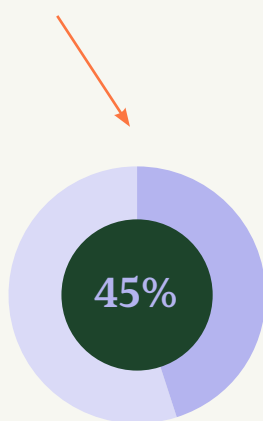
4 Women in Sport (2022) [Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls: Tackling Teenage Disengagement](#)



71% of teenage girls avoid sport and exercise when they have their period:



62% due to fear of leakage, and...



...45% because they feel more self-conscious at this time.



The combination of experiencing female puberty whilst being concerned by the image of your body plays a significant role. Puberty is a time of difficult physical, emotional and social changes but also when girls would benefit most from being active. As girls' minds and bodies develop, taking part in sport can feel particularly exposing, as physical activity can highlight insecurities and make girls feel self-conscious, vulnerable and objectified. The stigma surrounding periods in wider society and the lack of education and guidance on periods in sport and exercise also creates a lot of anxiety for girls.

This is not inevitable. It's not right that the unique challenges facing teenage girls at this crucial time of life are preventing them from experiencing the benefits and joy of being active. Working together, we can change the story. That's what Big Sister set out to demonstrate was possible.

What Did Big Sister Set Out To Do?

The aim was to empower and support teenage girls to enjoy sport, exercise and physical activity during puberty and their teenage years.

Big Sister is built on the deep understanding that Women in Sport has developed over our nearly 40-year history of the challenges facing girls and women. Working with our partners and our Big Sister ambassadors, Big Sister delivers a series of practical interventions to address these barriers.

Big Sister was created and shaped by girls for girls, as they discover their journey to getting active and they navigate the challenges and barriers faced during puberty. To truly understand and support teenage girls, you really need to understand them and their wider lives to help provide the appropriate level of support and guidance thus creating more positive and appealing experiences to engage them.

The Big Aims

To improve mental health, wellbeing and resilience by increasing girls' participation in sport, Big Sister:

Tackles Affordability and Economic Exclusion

- free membership for girls to give access to sport and exercise programmes in leisure centres in areas of deprivation in our project locations.
- online suite of workout classes for girls to access nationwide through the Places Locker app.

Removes emotional and practical barriers relating to puberty and periods to allow girls to participate in sport and exercise by:

- educating and training volunteer 'Big Sister' ambassadors to help us to connect with and support girls.
- providing physical and digital resources to equip girls with the knowledge, information and support they need to engage with sport and exercise during puberty.
- tackling period poverty and stigma amongst the girls and the local communities including by providing free sanitary products for girls in areas of deprivation.
- educating and supporting sports leaders to be confident in supporting girls to be active during puberty, understanding the barriers they face and providing resources to continue to develop knowledge and understanding.

Big Sister Is By Girls, For Girls

20 Big Sister ambassadors recruited.
82 girls co-producing content for Big Sister.

At the heart of Big Sister are the voices and lived experiences of a diverse group of girls: our Big Sister ambassadors. Girls and young women sit at the heart of everything Big Sister does - now and in the future.

The role of the Big Sister ambassadors in building, shaping, and bringing life to Big Sister has been vital. Their input, and that of the other girls who co-created the project, has allowed Big Sister to truly be built by girls, for girls. Centring girls' voices and experiences in this way has undoubtedly been central to the appeal of both the digital content and the physical activity offer we provided. Our ambassadors are from all over the country, not just the areas with participating Big Sister leisure centres and helped us provide a diverse range of voices and experiences to guide and inspire younger girls.

Our fantastic ambassadors have been real advocates of the project, embracing the concept and supporting us in producing fresh and relatable content on our digital platforms. They co-created content with us (along with other girls) and helped ensure that the advice we were providing for Big Sister participants was the advice they wish they'd had, expressed in a way that would most resonate with our audience. We used our Big Sister digital hub and Instagram channel to share the amazing content they helped us produce.

They now have a deep, and deeply valued, relationship with Women in Sport and are helping to shape our wider work around teenage girls. Through this work we aim to give them the platform to share their stories as well as build skills for the future. Our ambassadors have already created content for some of our biggest fundraising campaigns and spoken to major corporate sponsors to shape upcoming work - and this is just the beginning.



“Being part of Big Sister has allowed me to legitimise my own experiences and realise that I could make a difference in the (often intimidating) world of sport, exercise and health. I wanted and was welcomed to be the normal, everyday role model to young girls that I wish I’d had when I was growing up. This project, in all its forms, has made a real impact on young women and girls across England, and even across the world through its digital channels. I can’t wait to see how it continues to grow!”

LUCY, 22 - BIG SISTER AMBASSADOR



“My experience with the Big Sister project has been extremely rewarding. The project has been invaluable to the local community and I wish that something like this had existed when I was younger as I am confident it would have stopped me from dropping out of doing the sports I love. I sincerely hope this initiative succeeds its initial pilot duration as I believe it is part of the key to combating the current mental health crisis within young adults. Thank you for the opportunity, it has been an honour to take part!”

EMILY, 25 - BIG SISTER AMBASSADOR



“Changing in body shape meant I didn’t feel comfortable wearing tight clothing anymore. I have strong religious values and choose to cover my body and wear a headscarf, but as a young teen I felt very judged by my peers and even the coaches for not fitting the “look” of the team.”

NAFEESA, 19 - BIG SISTER AMBASSADOR



Big Sister Is About Collaboration

The Big Sister initiative was led by Women in Sport and delivered in partnership with Places for People, Places Leisure and Hey Girls. The initiative was aimed at girls aged 9 - 15 in eleven deprived areas (across Norwich, Amber Valley, Sheffield and Rotherham). 18 months of funding from the UK Government's Tampon Tax fund, allowed us to reach girls most in need and in particular those who had fallen out of love with sport. Big Sister wouldn't have delivered the successes it has without the contributions made by everyone involved from all the partner groups.



Places for People is a leading affordable homes-led place maker. The Group charity, the Places Foundation, is an independent charitable organisation which provides grants and social investment to improve the lives of people and communities that have experienced disadvantage and are furthest from the labour market.



Places Leisure is a social enterprise operating leisure facility on behalf of local authorities across the country. Its facilities receive over 30 million visits per year across the 111 sites that it operates on behalf of local authorities across the country.



Hey Girls are the award-winning 'buy one, donate one' social enterprise, producing environmentally friendly period products that fund the fight to end period poverty in the UK. Hey Girls period products are responsibly sourced and made from sustainable materials, offering the functionality of plastic, without the pollution.



The Story Of Big Sister

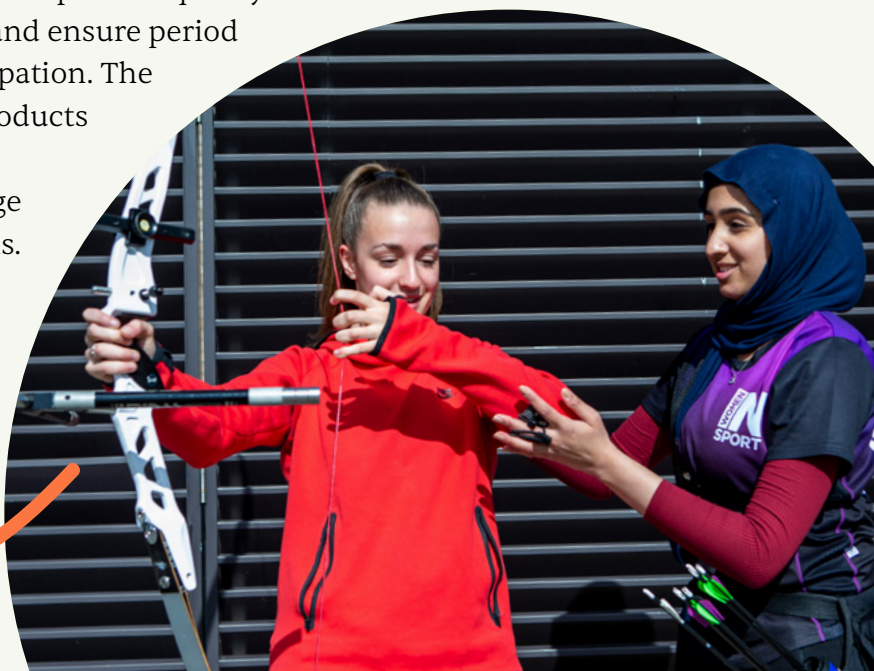
Big Sister was designed to make the most of the specific expertise of each of the partner groups, whilst ensuring that girls' voices remain at its heart. Each partner organisation addressed a different barrier to teenage girls being active. Women in Sport used our sector-leading insight to develop and deliver the Big Sister programme for girls to help them feel 'sport ready', via a range of digital resources to help them build confidence in sport. We also worked with sport leaders, delivering training to improve their knowledge and understanding of the emotional and physical barriers girls face during puberty, and of our 8 Principles for Success to create engaging offers for girls.

Places for People built a community-based team to engage with existing networks of schools, sports clubs, community groups and charities to recruit girls aged 9-15 to Big Sister and encourage sport leaders to participate in our educational delivery.

Places Leisure provided free girl-focused exercise sessions and gym memberships in each local leisure centre as well as bespoke online content and workout sessions. Additionally, girls were also given free access to the award-winning Places Locker fitness app.

Thanks to the community links of Places for People, Places Leisure also delivered some Big Sister engagement sessions in the community. These were delivered via school assemblies, classroom sessions, and fitness taster sessions as well as attending community events to showcase the project and build connections.

Hey Girls provided free disposable period products in the leisure centres for girls to access. Reusable products were also distributed to community organisations via Places for People and given directly to girls most in need. Period education workshops were delivered to both stakeholders and ambassadors designed to empower and enable people to talk about periods, period dignity and period equality with confidence, as well as how to use products and ensure period poverty does not present a barrier to participation. The ambassadors received a pack of reusable products with stakeholders also receiving a pack of resources to further develop their knowledge and understanding to share with their teams.



What Does Big Sister Mean For Girls?

3,267 girls accessed Big Sister membership offered by their local leisure centre resulting in 55,509 visits to these leisure centres from girls.

19,380 women and girls were supported through the availability of free to all period products thanks to Big Sister partners Hey Girls.

At the heart of Big Sister is the practical offer of support to help girls get active and feel happy and confident. Led by Places Leisure, this consisted of a free three-month gym membership which included unlimited gym and pool access, Big Sister specific group fitness classes and access to the Places Locker app.

In addition to the physical activity offer, participants also had access to free Big Sister clothing and period products. Hey Girls provided the period products, which were free for all and situated in the women's toilets and changing rooms in participating leisure centres as well as being distributed to community partners (including schools) throughout the local areas. Information about periods and the different types of products available was also distributed alongside the products themselves. Places for People are still distributing these products in the community.

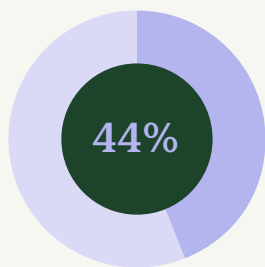
The fitness classes, called We Move, were safe, single-sex spaces led by dedicated and specially trained instructors. They allowed the girls to explore sport in a judgement-free environment with girls their own age. 'We Move' was the name chosen by our ambassadors as it emphasised the message that all girls were in it together, sessions could be taken at your own pace and there was no pressure to perform.

The content for the classes was driven by the girls themselves and covered a huge range of activities, from dance to dodgeball to weight training. Football sessions were also offered at some sites. As well as live face-to-face classes, some We Move sessions were also filmed for the Places Locker app and YouTube channel.

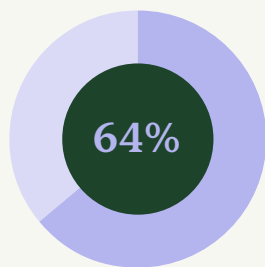
The role of the We Move classes and instructors is key to the success of Big Sister. Not only have they allowed the girls taking part to experience new sports and new ways to be active, they've also built girls' confidence, created new friendships and allowed girls to de-stress in a completely safe space. They've helped girls prioritise their mental health, including introducing girls to meditation and mindfulness at some sessions. The instructors have become important mentors and confidants to the girls. The freedom to choose activities within the class has given girls a sense of ownership of the programme. And most importantly, they've had fun!

Big Sister Positively Impacted Girls' Engagement

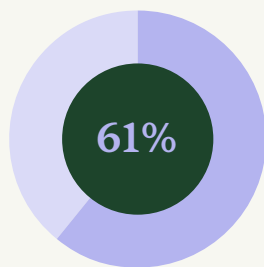
The most important achievement of Big Sister is that the girls taking part are now more confident, more active and happier than they were. Thanks to Big Sister, we have opened the eyes of a group of girls to the joy and freedom sport and physical activity. They feel like sport is somewhere they belong.



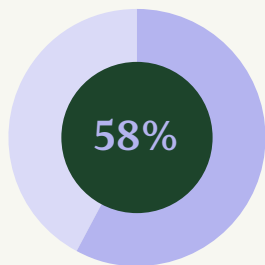
44% of girls are doing a lot more exercise now.



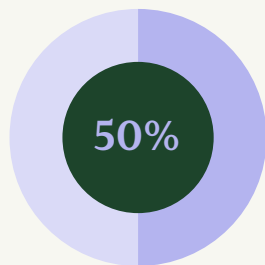
64% enjoy taking part in sport and exercise more.



61% feel more motivated to take part in sport and exercise.



58% feel more confident to take part in sport and exercise.



50% have tried new sports and activities at school or in a local club.

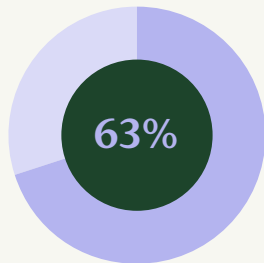
“I feel like if I’m doing sport, especially the Clubbercise stuff we do, it’s just a bit more like letting go, which obviously helps with confidence.”
(GIRL, AGED 12)

“I really like it because it’s in my age group and it’s only girls, because sometimes the boys overreact and stuff.”
(GIRL, AGED 11)

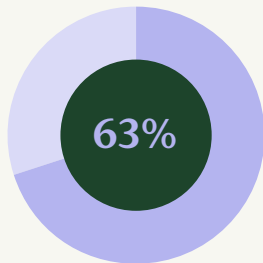


ENJOYMENT, MOTIVATION, CONFIDENCE

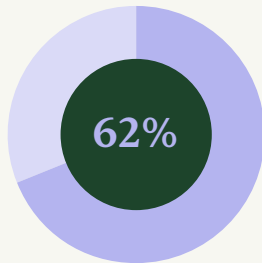
Big Sister Positively Impacted Girls' Health And Wellbeing



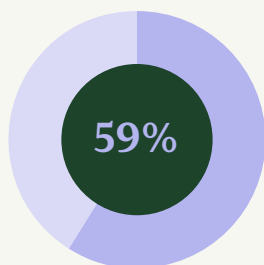
63% said their resilience has improved.



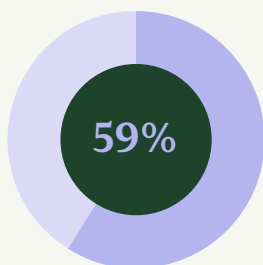
63% are more confident to try new things in their life.



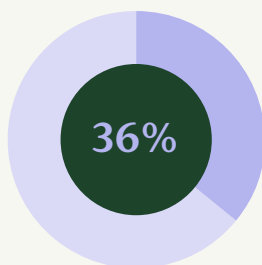
62% said their overall confidence has improved.



59% said their overall happiness has improved.



59% feel fitter and healthier now.



36% feel more supported in their lives.

RESILIENCE, HAPPINESS, HEALTH



“[I talk to instructor about] personal problems. Especially because she’s a girl so she’ll understand it.”
(GIRL, AGED 13)

“At school you could just be stressed by all these tests and here you can just let loose.”
(GIRL, AGED 9)

“I like that they do sports that I’ve never tried before.”
(GIRL, AGED 9)



“Big Sister made me feel a bit more confident because now I’d be able to do sports... I feel able to go on a team with people I didn’t know now.”

(GIRL, AGED 12)

“I never wanted to take part in dance at school before because I wasn’t any good but since coming here (We Move) we do lots of dance and I like it, so now I join in at school.”

(GIRL, AGED 11)

“It was really local to us... we could walk, mum or dad wouldn’t have to give us a lift. It was just very convenient, and it was a bit novel to go in the gym as well.”

(GIRL, AGED 14)



“I like that I have made new friends that I didn’t know before. I’m not worried now to try something new because I know now that if I try it, I might enjoy it.”

(GIRL, AGED 10)

“I got to go swimming loads, my mum has 5 girls so we can’t afford to go a lot but with Big Sister we could go all the time. I learned how to swim... I wouldn’t have done this so quickly if it wasn’t for the free swimming... thank you.”

(GIRL, AGED 11)

“This was the first time I’d used a gym and it made me realise that I really enjoy being there. It was exciting that I could finally be introduced to it and I loved my time there!”

(GIRL, AGED 12)

“It helped motivate me to live a healthier lifestyle and allowed me and my friends to go to the gym for free meaning we could all go without it costing our families.”

(GIRL, AGED 15)





The Big Sister Network

127 sports leaders trained and upskilled to feel more confident supporting girls during puberty.

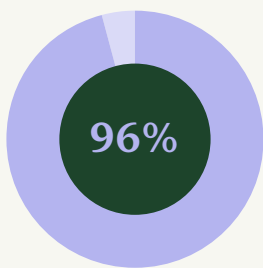
68 local community partners and

61 local schools engaged as part of Big Sister.

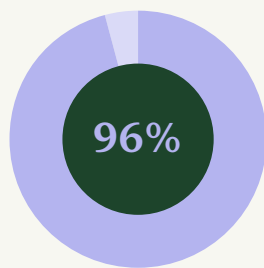
The final component of Big Sister was providing training to coaches, teachers, community activators and sports leaders on the physical and emotional challenges faced by teenage girls during puberty and how best to support them.

Women in Sport delivered a series of face to face and online workshops which explained the challenges in depth and asked participants to put themselves in the shoes of a teenage girl trying to be active. The sessions were open to leisure centre managers and staff as well as wider community leaders in the pilot areas. We have recently trialled expanding the availability of the workshops outside these areas too, with a dedicated e-training module being developed that can be rolled out nationally.

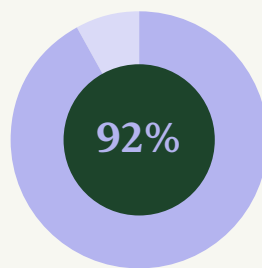
Feedback from our partners has been extremely positive, particularly from those directly involved in delivering the project on the ground. To highlight some key achievements, as a result of taking part in Big Sister and our training for sports leaders:



96% of respondents felt more aware of how the wider lives of teenage girls can influence their ability to be active.



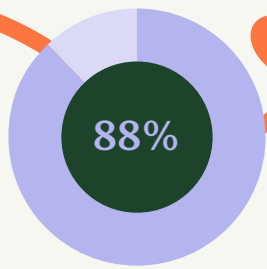
96% felt inspired to influence change for teenage girls.



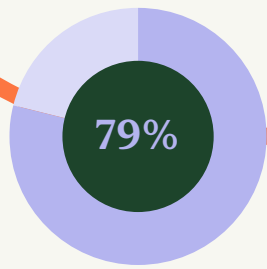
92% felt they had a stronger understanding of the barriers and fears that teenage girls face to being active during puberty.



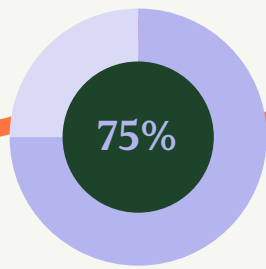
INFLUENCE, INSPIRATION, UNDERSTANDING



88% felt able to apply what they learned to their role to improve teenage girls' experiences.



79% felt more confident to engage with teenage girls.



75% felt more confident talking about teenage girls to others.

“It opened my eyes in all honesty, I have worked in leisure for nearly 7 years and did not realise the gravity of the situation until the workshops. Seeing the difference in the girls is really rewarding and I am glad we were included in this. I think we are all incredibly proud to be involved, the project is brilliant and provides a comfortable platform for young girls to get into exercise.”

BEN SENIOR,
LEISURE CENTRE MANAGER FOR WISEWOOD, SHEFFIELD

“I’ve experienced participants coming into the centre anxious and nervous upon sign up and who have now made visiting the centre a regular activity. They now appear to be confident and positive in a ‘gym’ environment.”

MARTYN PRESLAND,
GENERAL MANAGER FOR WATH UPON DEARNE, ROTHERHAM

“I believe Big Sister has increased participation of young girls, particularly for us we have seen our junior gym time and classes become consistent each week. Some have been first time, others are those who love physical education at school and looking to continue with it outside of school hours.”

CHLOE AMIS, LEISURE CENTRE MANAGER FOR NORWICH RIVERSIDE, AND PREVIOUS WE MOVE CLASSES INSTRUCTOR



Where Next?

Big Sister has proved that by tackling the economic exclusion of physical activity as well as breaking down the complex barriers and stigma relating to puberty and periods, girls can experience the joy, freedom and resilience of sport and activity that they need to navigate the wider challenges of being a teenage girl in today's world. We know that by creating the right environment with and for girls - the right access, the right awareness and knowledge and the right support, girls will thrive in sport and society.

We will continue learning from Big Sister as well as from our Big Sister Ambassadors. We will embed the principles of the Big Sister success through all our work, building on the knowledge we have gained on our deep understanding of the lives of women and girls.

Through Women in Sport's advocacy and influencing work, we will be using Big Sister to demonstrate the importance of strategic planning that addresses the needs of girls. It is vital that we continue to challenge individual and organisational beliefs around gender stereotyping and gender equality. This will ensure a greater understanding of how our cultures and offers need to change to surround girls with the expectation that they do belong in sport.

Big Sister is emboldening girls to find and reclaim their love of sport and activity... are you?



BIG SiSTER

For any enquiries about Big Sister please email
info@womeninsport.org

