

REFRAMING SPORT FOR TEENAGE GIRLS

Tackling teenage disengagement

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Women in Sport was founded in 1984 and its vision is that no-one is excluded from the joy, fulfilment and lifelong benefits of sport and exercise. Recognising that gender stereotypes and institutional bias are holding women back in life and in sport the charity's purpose is to give every woman and girl the opportunity to take part and inspire her to do so. The charity has a track record of success in securing change based on its deep understanding of the needs and aspirations of women and girls at each life stage and its determination to break down stubborn gender inequalities through its innovative work and campaigning within the sports sector and beyond.

This report summarises our most recent survey findings of over 4,000¹ adolescent girls and boys to understand the similarities and differences in their attitudes towards sport and physical activity. Importantly we were able to understand how the various barriers play out for sporty and non-sporty girls, identifying the barriers that are magnified differently across three key groups *The Uninspired*, *The Missed Opportunity*, *The Passionate Participants*. For each group we have identified the key barriers and opportunities that we need to create to reimagine the opportunities for them to support girls who are disengaging with sport and exercise.

The spectrum of engagement

The 'spectrum of engagement' examines the various different needs and motivations of teenage girls, from those that just need a nudge, to those who have completely disengaged with sport and exercise, rather than simply considering girls as one homogenous group. In this way, we can identify solutions which add true value and relevance to their lives.



This research quantifies and builds on our extensive qualitative and ethnographic understanding of adolescent girls in 2018, 2019 and 2021 including *Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls*, *Puberty and Sport: An Invisible Stage* and *The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Teenage Girls' Lives and Physical Activity*.

¹ Nationally representative survey of 2,291 girls and 2,024 boys aged 11-18 conducted by Savanta in July 2021. All figures presented in this report are from this sample, unless otherwise specified.

WHY DO WE NEED TO REFRAME SPORT FOR TEENAGE GIRLS?

The need to engage girls in more active lifestyles has never been more urgent. This generation of teenage girls are experiencing worrying mental health issues and report being less happy, more anxious and increasingly dissatisfied with their appearance. The pandemic has, in many instances, simply amplified these issues for many girls.

We know when teenage girls are active, they are healthier and happier. They also have greater self-esteem, body confidence and wellbeing and that love of being active stays with them as they get older. However, there are many ways in which girls are being given the message, both explicitly and implicitly, that there's limited value in girls taking part in sport and physical activities beyond keeping fit and looking good.

An underlying narrative prevails; that girls are not as competitive; that sport is not important for girls; that they will never be as good at it compared to boys; that sport can be at odds with femininity. Add to that the harassment and unwanted attention teenage girls are subject to when exercising and quite simply, taking part becomes a burden, instead of bringing freedom and joy. We need to change this.

Key Findings

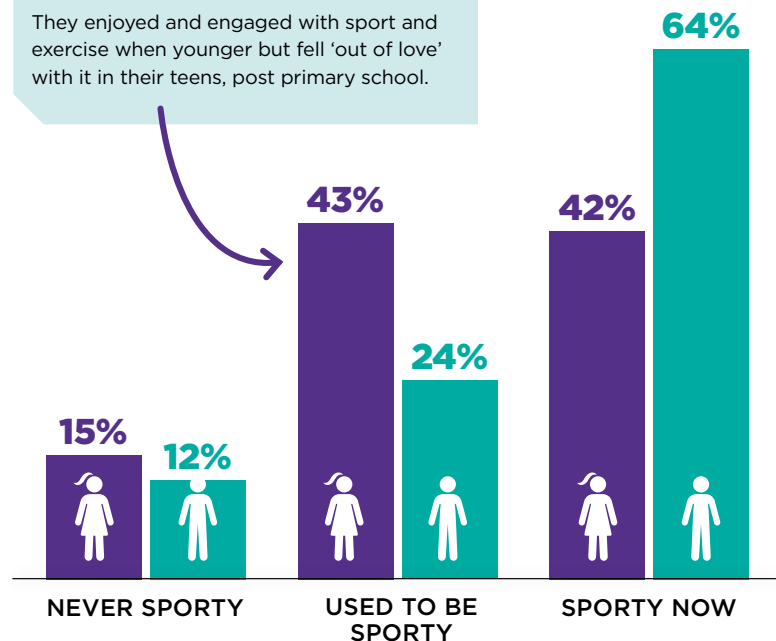
1. Girls are losing their love of sport during teenage years at an alarming rate, and ruling themselves out rather than in.

Shockingly 43% of girls who classified themselves as sporty and active in primary school now no longer feel that way and are dropping out of regular exercise (the comparative figure for boys is 24%). In their teens, girls start to define themselves rigidly as either sporty or not sporty, and whereas 6 in 10 boys say they are sporty only 4 in 10 girls say the same thing. By the time they are 17/18 years old, a massive 55% of girls will have disengaged.

For many girls this will continue to act as a significant psychological barrier throughout life as habits become embedded and they become part of an inactive generation of women who are simply missing out. Time and time again we hear women in their thirties, forties and older citing negative experiences in teenage years as the reason they cannot participate in sports activities. We are therefore looking at ways we can break this cycle early in the process and bring about positive change to women's and girls' lives.

TEENAGE GIRLS ARE MUCH MORE LIKELY TO SAY THEY ARE NO LONGER SPORTY.

They enjoyed and engaged with sport and exercise when younger but fell 'out of love' with it in their teens, post primary school.

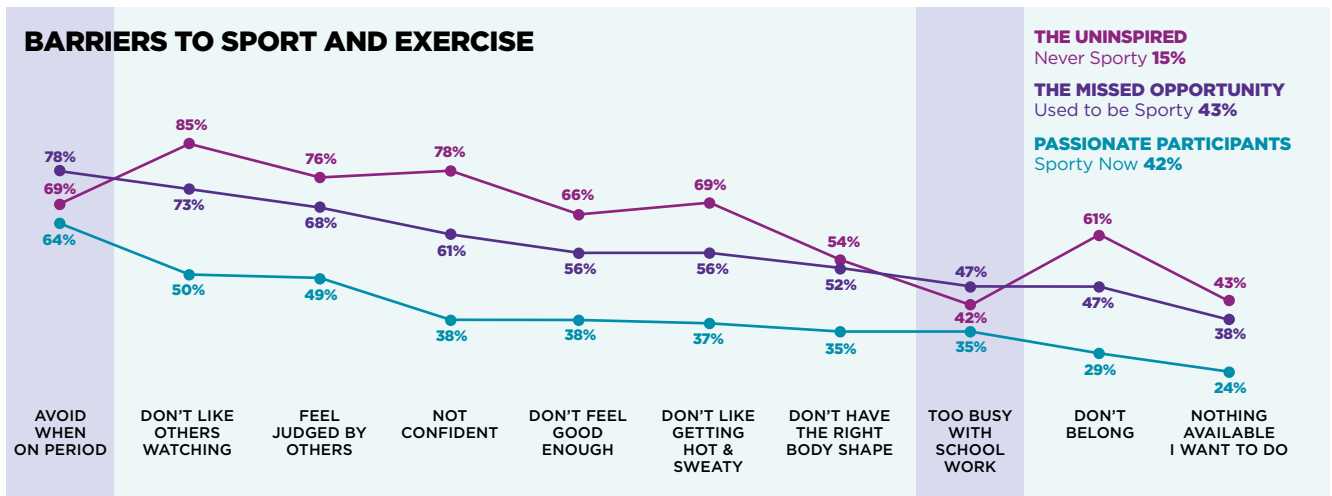


2. Self-belief, capability and body image concerns can be significant issues for all girls making girls feel vulnerable when playing sport or taking exercise.

Girls frequently struggle during puberty when their bodies are changing shape and so taking part in sport and exercise can be particularly exposing making them hyper self-conscious. Girls feel more 'on show' when being active with a huge 65% not wanting others to watch them during exercising (just 44% for boys), often exacerbated by the sports clothing they wear and this can affect confidence, making them feel scrutinised and judged on both appearance and ability.

THE BARRIERS DIFFER IN MAGNITUDE DEPENDING ON GIRLS' ENGAGEMENT

- ▶ Periods and schoolwork affect girls regardless of their engagement levels.
- ▶ Fear of judgement and lack of self-belief still affect even many of the sporty girls.



3. All girls, even the most sporty, need more support to manage the physical and emotional impact of puberty on physical activity.

Puberty is a time of difficult physical and emotional changes but also when girls would benefit most from being active. Physical activity can highlight insecurities and make them feel self-conscious, vulnerable and objectified. Monthly periods create anxiety in a sporting situation with 7 out of 10 girls avoiding being active when on their period. 62% of girls avoid exercise due to fear of leakage and 45% because they are more self-conscious at this time. There is a need for better support and education particularly in relation to managing puberty and periods when taking part in sport and exercise to help girls feel more in control and comfortable and view sport and exercise as a benefit.

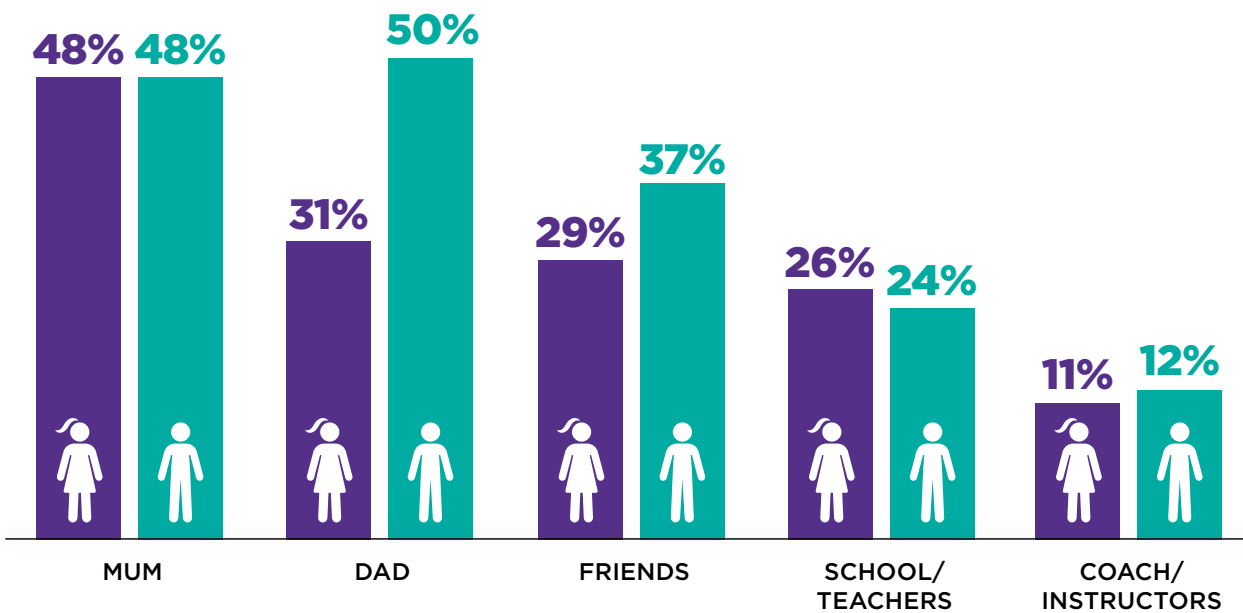
AROUND 7 IN 10 AVOID BEING ACTIVE WHEN ON THEIR PERIOD (REGULARLY/SOMETIMES)

Managing periods is challenging for all girls, regardless of how *sporty* they are, and can lead to long term absences and habits that are difficult to reverse.

4. Fathers/father figures support their daughters less than their sons but could play a powerful role in encouraging girls to love being active.

Our research found that girls and boys feel equally supported by their mum to get active (48%) but only 31% of girls feel encouraged and supported by their dads, compared to 50% of boys. We observed that many dads, often unconsciously, place more emphasis on their son's sporting activities. We noted that sporty girls are much more likely to have a supportive Dad. Yet having the right support and role models around girls are important influences particularly when girls find it much harder to motivate themselves (47% girls vs 67% boys).

WHO ENCOURAGES AND SUPPORTS YOU TO BE ACTIVE?



5. Girls want a wider variety of fun, exciting and accessible opportunities to get active - many like competition if the context is right.

We all need to work harder to support girls and remove the persistent barriers they face to being active. But we also need to re-imagine sport and physical activity as something that they truly value and perceive to enhance their lives; something that will help them on their journey to being confident and feeling good about themselves at this pivotal life-stage. Interestingly, our research showed 64% of girls enjoy competitive sport compared to 74% of boys. 66% of girls believe they are good at team sports compared to 73% of boys. But girls lack the opportunities to play team sport unless they are really good and therefore feel a sense of failure in a competitive environment where they will never thrive. It loses the fun factor! So options to take part at the right level are important.

I think competition gets so many more girls involved... I never knew I was competitive until I really enjoyed the games where you're on teams and can win!

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings illustrate the importance of understanding teenagers' engagement with sport and exercise through a gendered lens.

Teenage girls and boys experience it differently and require different solutions. Girls have numerous, complex barriers that influence their enjoyment and participation and understanding how these manifest across the spectrum of engagement is key to providing more targeted and effective solutions that give girls what they really want and need.

We have a significant opportunity to re-engage them and we must work harder to do so and to prevent girls from missing out. In particular, we are deeply concerned by the number of girls who disengage from sport and exercise post primary school, with a further dip age 17-18, once school sport is not longer compulsory. Many of these girls enjoyed being active when younger but have needlessly fallen out of love with it in adolescence. We can now pinpoint and address their needs through our insight and understanding and have outlined specific recommendations for each of the three groups *The Uninspired*, *The Missed Opportunity*, *The Passionate Participants* in the [full report](#).

These recommendations use the Women in Sport's 8 Principles for Success, aimed at closing the relevance gap between girls and sport and exercise and to make it a much more meaningful and exciting prospect in their lives. Sport and exercise providers can use these principles to evaluate and enhance existing programmes, and to develop new initiatives through a teenage girl lens to ensure they are truly accessible and engaging to all 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 and our research and advice service for more information.

THE 8 PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESS

1



NO JUDGEMENT

Take pressure off performance and give freedom simply to play.

5



BUILD INTO EXISTING HABITS

Tap into existing behaviour in other spheres.

2



VOKE EXCITEMENT

Bring a sense of adventure and discovery.

6



GIVE GIRLS A VOICE & CHOICE

Allow girls choice and control to feel empowered.

3



CLEAR EMOTIONAL REWARD

Reframe achievement as 'moments of pride', not winning

7



CHAMPION WHAT'S IN IT FOR THEM

Make it about more than just health.

4



OPEN EYES TO WHAT'S THERE

Redefine sport as more than school sport.

8



EXPAND IMAGE OF WHAT 'SPORTY' LOOKS LIKE

Create truly relatable role models which inspire.

Thanks to all the teenage girls and boys that took part in this insight and research project and to our supporters Sport England.

