



UK Deaf Sport

SUPPORTING DEAF GIRLS TO STAY ACTIVE IN THEIR TEENAGE YEARS AND BEYOND

OCTOBER 2022



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INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

Women in Sport's Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls¹ research showed that 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. 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 2.2 million girls aged 11-16 in the UK² and shockingly, over half are missing out on the benefits of sport and physical activity in their transition into adulthood. By this age, only 45.3% of girls in Years 7-11 achieve the Chief Medical Officer's recommended levels of an average of 60 mins of physical activity every day.³ Furthermore, girls from lower socioeconomic groups and Black, Asian and other ethnic minority backgrounds are even less likely to be active than their peers. Too many girls at this life stage are also developing negative attitudes towards sport and physical activity and they stop enjoying taking part. These attitudes become increasingly entrenched and act as barriers throughout their lives.

There are over 51,000 deaf children in the UK, including over 17,000 secondary school-aged students.⁴ We know that deaf teenage girls experience these barriers and more when taking part - or trying to take part - in sport and physical activity. UK Deaf Sport and Women in Sport came together to complete this research to understand what specific barriers exist for teenage girls who are deaf or hard of hearing. We want to remove these barriers so that deaf and hard of hearing girls can achieve their goals, whether that is taking part in grassroots sport, making their way to the Deaflympics, or anything in between.

METHODOLOGY

We spoke to 18 girls across three schools in England, including the Midlands and the South East between May and August 2021. The girls ranged in age from Year 8 to college. All of them enjoyed physical activity; some took part in organised sport and physical activity while others had more informal involvement. The girls took part in a wide range of sports, including dance, swimming, yoga, running, football, volleyball, basketball, tennis, cricket, boxing, gym activities and archery. We also spoke to a PE teacher at a deaf school to understand her perspective. All of the quotes in this report come from the girls who took part in the research.

1 Women in Sport (2018) Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls (Research Report: Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls: Building Strong Foundations for their Futures - Women In Sport)

2 Office of National Statistics (2021) Overview of the UK Population (Overview of the UK population - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk))

3 Sport England (2021) Active Lives Children and Young People Survey Academic Year 19/20 (PowerPoint Presentation (sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com))

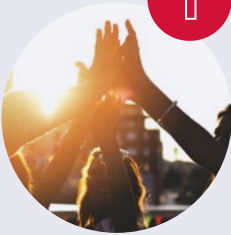


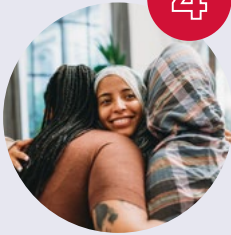

4 Consortium for Research in Deaf Education (2021) 2021 UK-wide summary: Educational provision for deaf children in 2020/2021. (crde-2021-uk-wide-summary-final.pdf (ndcs.org.uk))

WHAT IS LIFE LIKE FOR DEAF TEENAGE GIRLS?



"There's been too many times I've been to places and a hearing person is explaining something to somebody and I've missed it. When I've asked them to repeat it, they've just fobbed me off. It's really annoying."

Before diving into sport and physical activity, it is important for us to understand what is going in teenage girls' wider lives. We have done extensive previous research with teenage girls and identified five anchors in their lives that form the bedrock for their needs and motivations. When we spoke to deaf and hard of hearing girls, we found that these anchors held true but with some nuances.

 <p>1</p>	 <p>2</p>	 <p>3</p>	 <p>4</p>	 <p>5</p>
<p>SUPPORT NETWORK A sense of place in the world.</p>	<p>SOCIALLY CONNECTED Validation.</p>	<p>INDEPENDENCE AND NEW EXPERIENCES Making formative memories.</p>	<p>MOMENTS OF PRIDE Fuelling self-worth.</p>	<p>KEEPING ON TOP OF IT ALL Time well spent (re-prioritisation).</p>

Original Framework - Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls (Women in Sport, 2019)

1

SUPPORT NETWORK

Girls need a strong support network to develop their sense of place and identity. 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. Key people in their lives, specifically friends and family, and especially mother figures, can be powerful influencers who help shape what they do and who they will become.

For deaf and hearing girls alike, the primary support networks were family and friends. For deaf girls in sport, support networks are even more important because of the need for interpreters to understand training instructions and communicate with teammates and coaches. In some cases deaf girls dialled up the importance of family, and in other cases schoolteachers, coaches and friends were more important. Some girls told us they relied on their parents for motivation and practical support to take part in extra-curricular activities; for instance, if an interpreter fell through parents stepped in to find the right support. Other girls told us their families⁵ did not know British Sign Language and they therefore felt somewhat disconnected from their families. In this case, school connections and deaf friends became even more important.

"Quite often I don't even know what's going on in my own house."

"The vast majority of us are living in families where we can't communicate."

2

SOCIALLY CONNECTED

Social media use is a significant and all-consuming part of life for this generation of girls. It provides validation of who they are, their friendships, popularity, and success. The amount of time teenagers spend online has increased rapidly over the past decade; even before the pandemic increased most people's internet usage, 46% of girls aged 13-15 were spending more than three hours a day on social media (compared to 24% of boys), putting massive pressure on time available to do other things.⁶ Social media becomes even more important to girls when they move into secondary school and become increasingly dependent on 'likes' for social validation, where constant comparisons of their lives with others' can lead to a real fear of missing out and a real 'compare and despair' attitude.

The deaf girls we spoke to reiterated the importance of social media and talked about watching videos daily on YouTube and TikTok. It was also a place to discover deaf and hearing role models, including dancers and other athletes. They found it easier to connect with others online because there were no communication barriers.

⁵ This is a common problem: 9 in 10 deaf children are born to hearing parents, and only 1 in 10 of those parents learn British Sign Language.

Source: British Deaf Association (2015) Fast facts about Deaf community (Fast facts about the Deaf community - British Deaf Association (bda.org.uk))

⁶ Scott et al (2019) Social media use and adolescent sleep patterns (PsyArXiv Preprints | Social media use and adolescent sleep patterns: cross-sectional findings from the UK Millennium Cohort Study).

“There’s been too many times I’ve been to places and a hearing person is explaining something to somebody and I’ve missed it. When I’ve asked them to repeat it, they’ve just fobbed me off. It’s really annoying.”

“As a deaf girl I feel left out. I’d much rather that the deaf and the hearing world came together and worked together more so there’s that interaction.”

3

INDEPENDENCE AND NEW EXPERIENCES

Teenagers are keen to have new experiences and develop independence, allowing 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. We observed amongst teenage girls that new and exciting experiences become formative memories that help shape future behaviours and attitudes.

This was no different for deaf girls but their opportunities to have new experiences were sometimes limited. The girls said their parents tended to be more protective because they were deaf, and this can limit girls’ ability to be independent in their teenage years. Some girls told us that their parents came along to activities to provide support even if the girls did not feel they needed it; while the parents were trying to be

helpful, the girls felt hemmed in and unable to develop independence. Other girls said their parents did not like them leaving the house outside of school hours because of fears about what might happen to them, both because they were girls and because they were deaf. On the other hand, one girl said her mother was worried people would judge her as less capable because she was deaf and therefore taught her to be independent from a young age.

“It’s not fair. My sister goes out and has lots of fun – she does so much whereas I just stay at home because there’s nothing for me to do. I want to be independent and join clubs and teams. It has a massive impact on my mental health.”

“[My parents say] things can happen to girls. But I see girls being really independent and I’d like to try it.”

4

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. 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. 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.

This is no less true of deaf girls, and we need to ensure they can access these moments of pride in sport. Currently, deaf girls are struggling to access sport and therefore are not able to reap the benefits of sporting success. Some of the deaf girls we spoke to had to drop out of sport for practical reasons (such as lack of interpreters) before reaching their full potential (to be discussed in more detail later in the report), denying them the opportunity to grow and progress.

“We don’t get the same information so we’re limited in the training we get and the skills we develop compared to hearing people.”

5

KEEPING ON TOP OF IT ALL

During the teenage years, girls start setting their own priorities and choosing what they want to do, versus what they must do, for the first time. 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 get the balance right. Deaf girls have the extra challenge of navigating a world not built to meet their needs, which throws up additional barriers in many areas of their lives. This leaves them with even less time and forces them to prioritise.

During the teenage years, school work often takes priority over everything else. This is especially true for girls. A PE teacher at a deaf school told us she hosts an after-school club with both academic and sports options. She finds that girls are so driven by academics that no matter what physical activity or sport she offers, they will always choose to focus on academics while the boys play sports. She thinks this is because girls feel more pressure to achieve academically than boys.

THE IMPACT OF PUBERTY

In addition to understanding what girls value at this stage in their lives, we must also consider what else is happening in their lives that can impact on sport and physical activity. This includes puberty, which has huge physical and emotional impacts on girls. During this time, their bodies are changing shape as they grow breasts and develop body hair, and they start having periods. But beyond these physical changes, they also experience mood swings, low confidence, emotional outbursts, and sometimes shame, confusion and fear.

All of the changes that happen during puberty can have a negative impact on girls' involvement in sport and physical activity. The teenage girls we spoke to for this research were understandably hesitant to talk about these issues in a focus group setting, but a previous Women in Sport report on puberty explored how these changes affected girls' involvement in sport and physical activity.

Girls said they felt like they were being watched and scrutinised more, and this feeling made them want to disengage from sport. Coming to terms with their changing bodies also created stress and anxiety. They had to negotiate new information that they sometimes found embarrassing, such as using sanitary products and buying sports bras.⁷ A PE teacher at a deaf school told us

she noticed the girls' discomfort and self-consciousness, especially in the changing rooms, and in response, put up additional physical barriers to allow girls more privacy. Even with this additional protection, one Year 9 girl still prefers to change in the accessible loo so no one can see her. Girls also worried about leakage if taking part in sport or physical activity and tried to avoid PE when on their periods.

⁷ Women in Sport (2018) Puberty and Sport: An Invisible Stage (Research Report: Puberty & Sport: An Invisible Stage - Women In Sport)

SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY: WHAT'S STOPPING DEAF TEENAGE GIRLS FROM TAKING PART?



"People need to stop teasing and being unkind because we're deaf. I'm the only girl in my boxing club. The boys wind me up for being a girl and for my deafness."

We spoke to 18 deaf teenage girls who enjoyed sport and physical activity and took part in a wide range of sports, including dance, swimming, yoga, running, football, volleyball, basketball, tennis, cricket, boxing, gym activities and archery. The girls had all experienced a number of barriers. Some were able to overcome those obstacles but others had to quit sports they loved and find other activities. Other girls wanted to take part in a more organised version of what they were doing (for instance, joining an athletics team instead of a running club) but barriers kept them from doing so. In this section of the report, we review the issues that deaf teenage girls experience when taking part in sport and physical activity.

**IT'S HARD TO FIND
APPROPRIATE ACTIVITIES
OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL,
LEAVING GIRLS FEELING
A LACK OF BELONGING.**

Almost all of the girls we spoke to played sport through school rather than in clubs outside of school. Many girls expressed a level of discomfort doing activities with hearing girls because of the communication barriers. They were afraid they wouldn't be understood, that they might be made fun of, and that they wouldn't be accepted as part of the group. They also didn't know where to find information about sport and physical activity they could take part in, especially provision for deaf people.

While we spoke to active girls who loved sport, there will be many girls who don't enjoy school sport. According to the Youth Sport Trust, 79% of more active girls aged 11-16 liked taking part in PE

compared to only 51% of their less active counterparts.⁸ If deaf girls aren't given the opportunity to experience sport outside of school, they will miss out on the chance to find something they truly love. Furthermore, some of the girls we spoke to felt isolated once they left school at the end of the day. All of the girls attended special schools for deaf children and many had to travel a long way each day to attend. This meant that when they went home, they did not know any other deaf children in their area and struggled to find people with whom they could play sport. They therefore felt isolated. Having access to sport outside of school could help deaf girls expand their friendship groups beyond their school community.

"My brother has been to a few clubs - boxing and karate. He's hearing but there's nothing for me."

8 Youth Sport Trust (2021) Girls Active: National Report for Girls' Data (National - Girls Active Pre-Intervention - Girls report (youthsporttrust.org))

GIRLS FEEL INTIMIDATED ABOUT STARTING A NEW ACTIVITY.

It's really hard for girls at this age generally to start a new activity. They fear going to an activity alone and meeting new people. Teenage girls are digital natives and can prefer the anonymity of interacting online. This fear is exacerbated for deaf teenage girls, who worry about communication issues and being teased. The girls we spoke to said they wanted to stay near the back and "hide" when first trying out a new activity, but simultaneously needed to be near the front in order to lip-read from the instructor or coach. They also worry about communication issues with instructors, coaches and teammates as most hearing people don't have much deaf awareness. Several of the girls had been made fun of in the past because they used British Sign Language and worried about this happening when they met new people.

For some girls, this fear meant they avoided joining team sports or activities even if they enjoyed them. For instance, one girl spent a lot of time kicking a football around by herself instead of joining a team. Another girl had taken part in dance classes when she was younger, but now learns routines online in her room instead because it is less stressful. She said the social anxiety she felt about taking part in a group activity is definitely exacerbated by the communication issues she would face.

A PE teacher at a deaf school, who had previously taught at a mainstream school, told us she thinks deaf students have

particular issues with confidence. She found that students were really worried about what hearing players would say about them, and preferred to stay in the school bubble when playing sport. She worked hard to encourage girls to try sports outside of school, but found that weeks of convincing could be undone if girls had one experience with a coach or teammates who were not deaf aware.

"If I don't know any of the players on the team, then I wouldn't be able to play because I wouldn't be able to ask them for information."

IT'S EASY TO FEEL LEFT OUT IN A HEARING ENVIRONMENT.

Even when deaf teenage girls do overcome their fear and join an activity, it can be hard to feel like they belong when everyone else is hearing. While most teammates and coaches mean well, they struggle to communicate in a deaf-friendly way. The result is that deaf girls feel left out of socialising and team bonding, aren't able to take part in conversation and don't feel like they truly belong in the team. We know belonging and feeling socially connected are important motivations for teenage girls to take part in sport, so it's not surprising that this lack of belonging can push deaf girls to drop out even if they enjoy the sport.

"[My teammates] are nice enough, but some can't be bothered. They're not interested in the deaf thing or make the effort. Some of them are anxious because they don't understand."

"There were lots of communication barriers at my swimming club so I stopped going. I won't join any other clubs or activities unless I have an interpreter."

OTHER PEOPLE CITE GENDER AND DEAFNESS TO DISCRIMINATE AGAINST GIRLS.

Several girls said they were blatantly told they didn't belong on a team or in a gym because they were girls and because they were deaf. One 18 year old who has been playing football most of her life told us about having a regular kick-about with hearing boys at her college. They generally treat her as an equal but she has had boys come up to her and say she shouldn't be playing football because she's deaf, or because she's a girl, or both. Another girl attended a boxing club where she encountered similar issues. She was the only girl there and the boys would tease her for both signing and being a girl. Her parents spoke to the boxing club but the coach refused to do anything to solve the problem. She carried on but struggled to feel like she belonged at the club.

"People need to stop teasing and being unkind because we're deaf."

"I'm the only girl in my boxing club. The boys wind me up for being a girl and for my deafness."

"I have to prove myself to [the boys]."

BIAS AGAINST DEAF GIRLS IN SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ALSO SHOWS ITSELF IN MORE SUBTLE WAYS.

Schools, clubs and parents all play a role in showing girls that they belong in sport, but they can also send the opposite message. One group of girls told us that their school shares grounds with a mainstream school but does not get to use their sport facilities and is instead limited to a small outdoor space. During Covid, boys' sport was prioritised for the limited outdoor activity space. Boys were taken outside to play football while girls were kept inside for PE in classrooms and they mostly did dance. The girls complained about this but nothing changed.

While some parents were supportive of their daughters' participation in sport, others worried about their safety because of their gender and deafness. In these cases, parents were very protective, not letting girls take part in extracurricular activities, or insisting on going with them to the activities. Other girls told us that their brothers' sports took priority over their own activities. One girl explained

that her parents said they didn't have time to drive her to activities because they were committed to driving her brother to his boxing and karate lessons.

The girls we spoke to and their PE teachers sensed that there were fewer opportunities for deaf teenage girls than boys in sports outside of school. They thought this might be a vicious cycle in the sense that boys demanded football or other sports and therefore there were more teams for them and this gained its own momentum, leaving girls behind.

"There aren't as many opportunities for girls so often they're forced to do things such as dance when they might want to do other sports."

"In year 8 I said I wanted to take part in the football and someone told me I couldn't so I had to stay in the dance group. I wasn't happy about it. Maybe the teacher thought I was soft but we're not, we can do the same things as boys."

"My parents don't want me to go out. They're really over-protective because I'm a girl."

LACK OF COMMUNICATION SUPPORT MEANS GIRLS ARE DROPPING OUT EVEN WHEN THEY LOVE THE SPORT - OR NOT EVEN TRYING SOMETHING IN THE FIRST PLACE.

Some girls have already decided at this age that it's too much hassle to join clubs or teams with hearing people, based on past experiences. The girls told us there was very limited deaf awareness amongst hearing coaches, teachers, instructors and players. Throughout their lives, the girls have had coaches and instructors who speak too fast and don't slow down when asked, forget to face the girls so they can lip read, or get annoyed if they have to repeat themselves.

Many of the girls had talked about taking part in sport when they were younger and eventually dropping out because the ongoing struggle with communication was exhausting, or avoiding certain activities because they knew communication would be an issue. One girl talked about doing karate when she was 7 or 8 with a hearing step-cousin but he didn't help translate at all, so she ended up staying only a few months and told her mum she wanted to quit because the communication was too hard.

Girls have also missed out on opportunities within sport because there is no one to interpret or provide support. One Year 8 girl talked about playing on a football team with a hearing friend who interprets for her. Her coach is good about using visual demonstrations and hand gestures to help her understand instructions. She was offered an

opportunity to play at county level and really wanted to take it, but her friend who serves as an interpreter was not invited to join that team. She couldn't afford an interpreter and the team didn't offer one, so she couldn't join the team.

PERFORMING OR PLAYING IN COMPETITIVE MATCHES IS A PARTICULARLY STRESSFUL TIME AND COMMUNICATION IS EVEN HARDER.

We already know that around the time of puberty, teenage girls struggle to be "on show" at this age and are really hard on themselves. They feel judged if they make mistakes, and like they're not good enough: 65% of teenage girls don't like being watched when playing sport, and 55% don't feel confident taking part in sport.⁹ This fear and stress is exacerbated for deaf girls by communication issues.

During games or performances, communication from hearing people can go out the window in the stress of the moment. In competitive matches, teammates and coaches forget to communicate clearly and the deaf person is left wondering what they are supposed to do. Referees can cause further problems by penalising deaf players for breaking the rules because they couldn't hear the whistle or instructions.

Elite deaf athletes such as Jodie Ounsley, a deaf England rugby player, have spoken about referees giving warnings and yellow cards for perceived offenses that were

actually due to not being able to hear. And in dance performances, dancers struggle to feel the beat of the music and can't stop in the middle of the number to ask for help like they can in practice.

"The [ballet] performances were definitely nerve-racking. I was sweating and nervous."

"The hardest thing is communication. No one can sign and they don't understand why I'm struggling... My friends are often chatting and I'm just not involved, they don't include me... There's always background noise so it's too hard to manage. You don't know who said what, who's spoken, what did they say, what's been decided? All the cross chatter."

"There's been too many times I've been to places and a hearing person is explaining something to somebody and I've missed it. When I've asked them to repeat it, they've just fobbed me off. It's really annoying."

⁹ Women in Sport survey of teenage girls (2021), forthcoming.

DEAF TEENAGE GIRLS DON'T HAVE SPORTS ROLE MODELS WHO ARE LIKE THEM.

While women's sport is increasingly gaining more recognition and airtime, female athletes are still generally less recognised and visible than their male counterparts. This is even more true for deaf female athletes. Even though all of the girls we spoke to enjoyed sport and physical activity, only one of them could name a deaf female athlete. They were mostly aware of male cricket and football players, and knew that this was because male sports were much more likely to be shown on television - something they thought was unfair. They also made the occasional reference to female athletes such as Megan Rapinoe. Only one girl could name a deaf dancer and actress (Lauren Ridloff), who she found through a school project when she was asked to identify a role model. Most were also unaware of the Deaflympics and had never seen any deaf teams play sport on television or online.

Girls benefit from role models who are like them at the elite level to show them what is possible. According to a recent report by Women in Sport and Sports Direct, only 29% of girls aged 13-24 said they aspired to be a top athlete compared to 58% of boys,¹⁰ and we know that lack of visibility of female athletes contributes to this gap. There are definitely deaf female athletes doing amazing things in sport, but these girls are not aware of them. Because of that lack, the girls we spoke to felt they had to become role models themselves.

"I want to travel the world, proving that deaf people can do what they want."

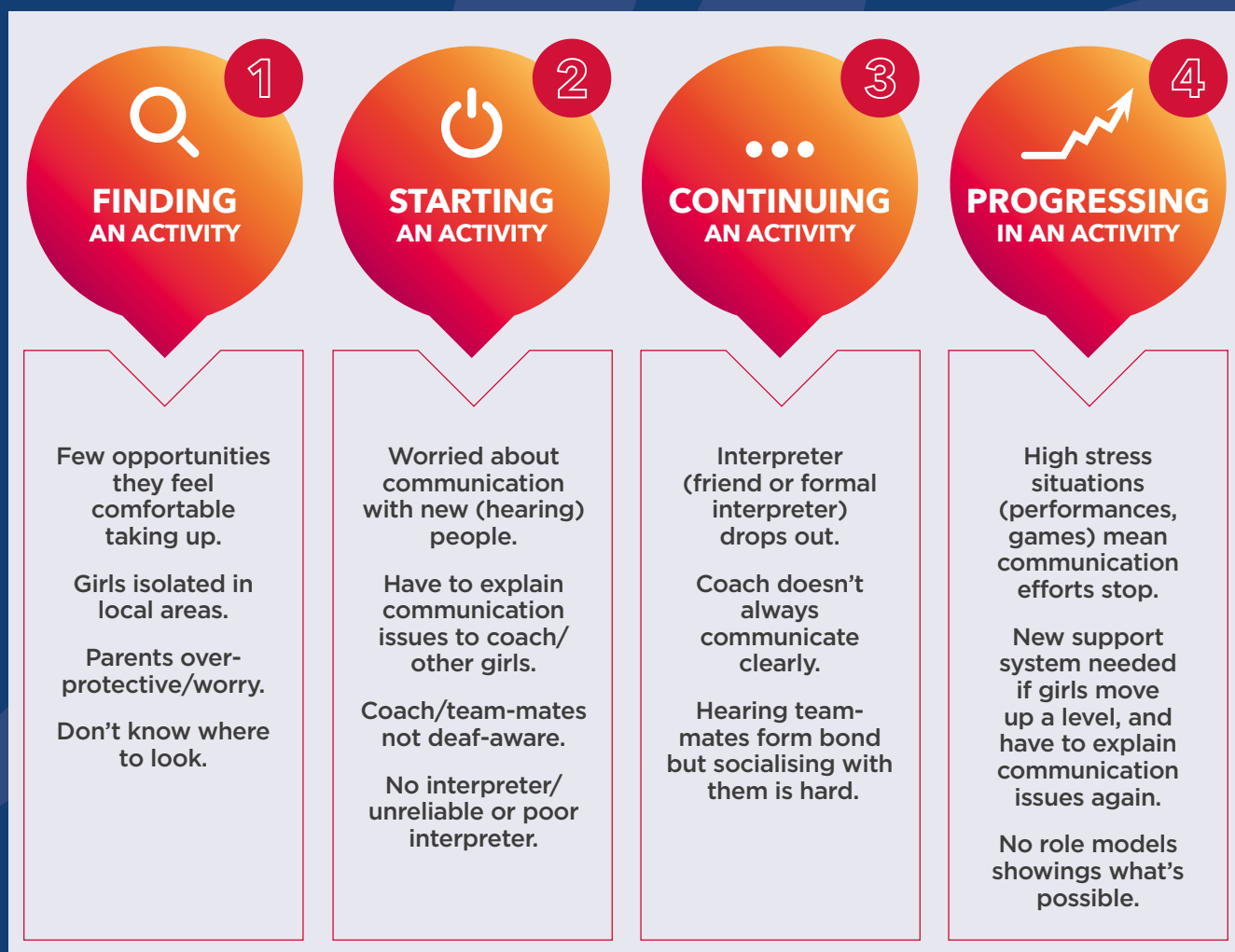
"I'm just determined. I won't give up. I don't care what people think. I don't worry about stuff. I'd like to play professionally for a women's team. It would be great to have a role model and to encourage more deaf girls to go and play."



BARRIERS DEAF GIRLS FACE IN SPORT AND ACTIVITY

Deaf teenage girls are finding it hard to participate in sport every step of the way, and are at increased risk of dropping out of sport - or not even starting. If we don't support them to get active at this stage, we risk life-long disengagement with sport.

DEAF GIRLS HAVE TO OVERCOME MASSIVE BARRIERS AT EVERY STEP IF THEY WANT TO TAKE PART IN SPORT



RECOMMENDATIONS

ONLINE TOOL KITS FOR COACHES

Encourage basic deaf awareness for coaches of all sports so they can support their deaf participants, including practical resources that coaches and teammates can use to adapt their communication and make sports more inclusive. Join up with UK Coaching/Disability Sports Coach to disseminate.

GIRL-FACING RESOURCES

Girls in our research talked about wanting to be role models in sport for other deaf girls, and we can leverage this motivation. What resources can we provide deaf teenage girls that they can use with teammates and coaches to improve deaf awareness? This will also help close the gap with coaches who aren't formally qualified and therefore might not have access to other resources.

CAPITALISE ON THE VISUAL NATURE OF SPORT

Encourage coaches to post videos demonstrating certain skills, and direct girls to watch these before practices. Advise coaches on how to make better use of online spaces that can minimise communication barriers and give deaf girls a sense of belonging and support network beyond the physical activity itself. Providing these support networks will prevent girls from dropping out.

SIGNPOST GIRLS TO APPROPRIATE ACTIVITIES

UK Deaf Sport has a role to play in helping teenage girls find appropriate activities in their area.

THINK ABOUT HOW YOU CAN INTRODUCE ELITE ROLE MODELS TO TEENAGE GIRLS

Create lesson plans for teachers that encourage girls to research deaf sporting role models. Organise for deaf athletes (including women) to speak more often at deaf and mainstream schools. Encourage schools to make a big deal out of Deaflympics and even show it in schools. The PE teacher we spoke to was really keen to get support from UK Deaf Sport to bring deaf athletes to speak to her students.

BUT DON'T NEGLECT ROLE MODELS CLOSER TO HOME

UK Deaf Sport could develop a big sister programme to support girls getting into sport, involving slightly older girls who can encourage them and help them navigate the communication and confidence issues. Deaf girls already involved in sport could offer tips to others on how to get involved in sport and activity. We must empower deaf teenage girls who love sport to fight for change, and leverage their voices to encourage change for all.

CASE STUDY

SARA*

FOOTBALL PLAYER



SARA HAS ALWAYS BEEN ACTIVE AND FOOTBALL IS HER PASSION.

When she was in primary school, she liked running and competed regularly. She also gave swimming a try and liked that too. But since the age of 9, her true love has been football. Her dad loves football too and took her to the park regularly to play alongside her brother. As she's quick to tell you, though, she's better than her brother. When she was 9, she was invited to join a football match for deaf children.

* This girl's name has been changed so she can remain anonymous.

"[As a deaf child] it was difficult for me to do anything, and it was lonely at home. There was nothing to do most of the time, so someone asked me if I wanted to join a game,"

Sara remembers.

From that point on, she couldn't be stopped. She joined a team that played regularly and kept progressing. Now age 18, she's playing weekly matches on a women's club team. She's the only deaf woman on the team.

While she loves playing football, communication is a constant struggle. This is both with her coach and hearing teammates.

"I try to use email to talk to people. I have emailed the coach many times to say I'm struggling, can we have 1-2-1 before and after [practice]?"

The coach is supportive and the 1-2-1s help Sara better understand instructions and training. Her teammates are nice too, but don't always know how to interact with her.

"Some can't be bothered, they're not interested in the deaf thing or make the effort. Some of them are anxious because they don't understand...No one can sign and they don't understand why I'm struggling."

This means that Sara is often excluded from social chat amongst teammates, not understanding what people are saying.

The lack of communication and deaf awareness can also cause difficulties during matches.

“It’s a massive issue. I don’t know where I’m supposed to be, don’t know what they expect me to do. They’re so busy and stressed that they don’t see me. I have to put my hand up. It’s all about placement. They’ll ignore me sometimes.”

Simple tweaks to communication, including hand signals, could help resolve these issues. Sara thinks interpreters would help a lot. When she was in primary school, one of her teachers could sign and came along to football practices and matches to interpret. But when Sara moved to a new team and her practice times changed, the teacher couldn’t attend. Sara asked the new team to book an interpreter, but for reasons she doesn’t understand, it never happened.

What does Sara think deaf women and girls need? It’s not surprising that when asked what she thinks would support more deaf women and girls to take part in sport, Sara talks about communication.

“It’s ever so simple! They just need to have an interpreter. I’d know what was going on all the time, whether it was a player or coach. We can lip read at times but people are busy and shouting [during matches].”

She also encouraged deaf awareness amongst coaches and players so that they would understand how to communicate with deaf teammates even

if an interpreter wasn’t present.

Determination and inner resilience help Sara succeed. While she thinks interpreters and deaf awareness would help, Sara is determined not to let communication barriers get in her way. Even when things get tough, she is not one to quit.

“I’m just determined. I won’t give up. I don’t care what people think.”

That drive and determination have come in handy outside of club football, too, when she comes up against discrimination. Now that she’s in college, Sara plays casual matches with friends in the park a few times a week. She hasn’t found any women to play with, so she plays with a group of men.

“They’re a good bunch of boys... they don’t treat me differently, they will try to talk to me and just give me a thumbs up.”

But she’s also come across some bullies:

“They don’t think I should be playing because I’m a girl, or because I’m deaf. I have to prove myself to them.”

What’s next for Sara? Despite the obstacles, she’ll keep playing football. She has her sights set high and she wants to inspire other deaf girls too:

“I’d like to play professionally for a women’s team. It would be great to be a role model and to encourage more deaf girls to go and play.”

CASE STUDY

CAITLIN*

SWIM COACH



CAITLIN IS IN SIXTH FORM AT A SCHOOL FOR DEAF CHILDREN. SHE IS DEAF BUT HAS COCHLEAR IMPLANTS THAT ALLOW HER TO HEAR AND COMMUNICATE A FAIR AMOUNT.

Caitlin has always loved swimming. Her parents first got her into it when she was very young because they wanted her to know how to swim for safety reasons. Her dad was particularly athletic and supported her to do the classes alongside hearing children and a hearing coach. She says the children in her class didn't really understand how to communicate with her, which was hard and lonely.

*** This girl's name has been changed so she can remain anonymous.**

The coach similarly wasn't deaf aware but did his best to help her. Looking back, she can see that she missed out on key instructions; she's been correcting her strokes and getting rid of what she calls "bad habits" ever since. Sometimes her dad came along to sign so that she could understand the instructions. Once she knew the basic strokes, she quit lessons and practiced them on her own. She likes swimming because it makes her feel good.

"Sometimes when I have problems, when I go swimming it helps me not think about it. When I'm in the pool, I feel relaxed."

What prompted her to coach? Even though she was participating in swimming galas at school and loved it, it didn't cross her mind to teach it. She was interested initially in taking a lifeguarding course, but because she also has a visual impairment, she cannot become a lifeguard. Her dad supported her to look at other options, and together they found a swimming course provided through the National Deaf Children's Society.

Even after she signed up for the course, she wasn't sure she wanted to be a swim teacher. But the more she thought about it, the more she realised teaching swimming was a perfect combination of her two passions: working with children and swimming. Her dad and the Head of PE at her school encouraged her, helped build her confidence, and helped with the logistics of training and finding a job as a swim coach.

Training with other deaf girls helped build her initial confidence. On the one-week Level 1 course, all of the

participants were deaf. They had all the support they needed and Caitlin left feeling really confident. Shortly after, she got a job once a week teaching swimming to hearing children. None of the children had ever met a deaf swimming coach before, but they adjusted quickly. She told them to look at her when speaking so she could lip read, and called her manager over if she and the students had issues understanding each other. It takes a lot of concentration to lip read so she can sometimes find lessons exhausting. But even though it's hard, she loved it and wanted to progress.

The environment is also crucial to her ability to coach. She teaches in outdoor pools rather than indoor pools in large sport centres. The echoes in sports centres, sometimes alongside loud music, make it almost impossible for her to pick up what people are saying around her when she has her cochlear implants in.

Progression as a coach required resilience and support: a year after completing her Level 1 course, she decided to pursue her Level 2 coaching qualification. This time, she was the only deaf person signed up for the course. The course providers agreed to provide a British Sign Language interpreter, but a week before the course they contacted her to say they couldn't find anyone. Her dad swung into gear, working with the organisation to find someone. Ultimately, the person they found wasn't a qualified interpreter but knew British Sign Language. This meant that the interpretation wasn't top-notch, so Caitlin didn't always understand what was going on during the course. In addition, the interpreter wasn't able

to attend one of the days of training. Unlike the first course, Caitlin left feeling frustrated that she had missed some of the material and less confident that she had learned the same information as her hearing counterparts.

But she didn't let that experience dim her enthusiasm for coaching. She now teaches two groups of children per week: one group of hearing beginners and one group of deaf children. She loves seeing kids' progression in the pool and comes up with creative games to help them develop a love for swimming. She says coaching deaf children is a lot easier because she can rely on British Sign Language rather than lip reading, but that doesn't keep her from working with hearing children too.

When she graduates, she plans to go into childcare as a career and will definitely continue to coach swimming. Her next goal is to train as a coach for water babies, so she can see the differences between babies and children and expand her coaching skills.



UK Deaf Sport



"I'd like to play professionally for a women's team. It would be great to be a role model and to encourage more deaf girls to go and play."