



Why focus on girls?

The *NSW Schools Fitness and Physical Activity Survey, 1997* made two key recommendations. The first recommendation related to the improvement of fundamental motor skills for boys and girls, and the second related to increasing the proportion of girls who are vigorously active. This survey, plus other research, points to a need for greater efforts to be directed toward the needs and interests of girls and young women, in an effort to keep them engaged in physical activity throughout their school and adult life.

Research also suggests that girls begin the slide towards inactivity around the age of 14 years through to 17 years. One South Australian survey found that by the age of 15 around 60% of female participants had “dropped out” of organised school sport (South Australian Sports Institute, 1992).

An overwhelming finding from research conducted in Western Australia (Malaxos and Wedgwood, 1997) was that girls want to play sport and to participate in physical activity. However, the question we need to ask is: Why don't they?

What are girls saying?

Let's look at some findings relating to girls and physical activity.

Most girls play sport to:

- ✧ keep slim and fit
- ✧ socialise and have fun
- ✧ belong to a team
- ✧ feel good
- ✧ relax
- ✧ learn new skills.

Sport is a major “turn-off” for many girls when:

- ✧ it's repetitive and boring
- ✧ it's serious and competitive
- ✧ it is played with boys
- ✧ boys watch girls play
- ✧ girls are treated differently from boys
- ✧ girls are made to feel inadequate because of a lack of skills.

Girls want:

- ✧ more community sport for teenage girls, especially non-traditional sports
- ✧ a wider variety of sports and activities in PE classes
- ✧ better skills development in primary school
- ✧ more female PE teachers and sporting role models
- ✧ single-sex classes when necessary.
(Malaxos and Wedgwood, 1997)

These findings give a clearer picture of what many girls want in terms of experiences in physical activity and sport. Many girls' reasons for involvement in physical activity are quite different from those of many boys.

What do girls and boys think about physical activity?

The *NSW Schools Fitness and Physical Activity Survey, 1997* found that there were several differences in attitudes to physical activity between boys and girls. The research confirmed that both boys and girls are involved in physical activity for similar reasons such as “to stay fit and healthy”, “to have fun”, “to be with friends” and “to make new friends”. However, for many boys being active was about “competition and a chance to win”, while for many girls, physical activity gave them the chance “to study and learn better”.

It is not surprising that skills associated with competitive sport are valued by boys more highly than others. Sport features significantly in the construction of boys’ masculine identities.

Traditionally, many characteristics associated with sport, such as strength, aggression and competitiveness, have been related to the development of the male character. Boys in schools report that “being good at sport” is a key aspect for defining themselves as a successful male. (Connell, 1995)

Though much has changed, stereotypical ideas about masculinity and femininity still limit the participation of girls and boys in sport and physical activity. Boys report having to continually prove their masculinity to one another if they wish to be accepted as male, and they see sport as a major avenue for doing this. Some boys also report fear of being ridiculed for showing expression and grace in such non-traditional activities as dance. Some girls also face ridicule and questions about their sexuality when they participate in rugby league and other traditional male sports.

Gender differences are so deep-seated and normalised within our society they are frequently subliminal. By the time girls and boys start school, they often have firm ideas about what is appropriate behaviour for them as girls and as boys. By pre-puberty, some girls are unlikely to participate in vigorous activity because it is considered “unfeminine” or inappropriate for girls. Consider the conversation presented below.

Interviewer: *Is school different for boys and girls?*

Girls and boys: *No.*

Girl: *Well, yes—in sport...*

Boy: *The boys like playing sport and the girls like playing with Barbie dolls and that.*

Girl: *Shut up. I hate Barbie dolls.*

Interviewer: *Do you girls like to play sport?*

Boy: *They don't like it.*

Girl: *We do...*

Boy: *(interrupting) You can't play.*

Interviewer: *What would happen if the girls went down to the oval to play?*

Boy: *(laughing) We wouldn't let them.*

Interviewer: *Why?*

Boy: *Because it's too dangerous.*

Interviewer: *Why is it more dangerous for them than you? Are all of you stronger than all of them?*

Boys: *(in unison; some boys flexed their muscles at this point) Yes.*

Girls: *(in unison) No.*



- Interviewer: *But didn't you boys play it when you were little and not very strong at all?*
- Boys: *Yes. (giggles)*
- Interviewer: *Girls, why do you think very few girls play soccer?*
- Boys: *(all at once) Too weak; they couldn't.*
- Interviewer: *I asked the girls.*
- Girls: *They wouldn't let us and they'd laugh at us and that.*
- Interviewer: *Would you play on the oval if there was space just for you?*
- Girls: *(with enthusiasm) Yeah.*
- Boys: *Would not. Oh.... (various mutterings)*

(Source: Clarke, 1990, p. 28-29)

Girls, as a group, and boys, as a group, respond differently to competitive sport. Girls in general are bothered less by whether they win or lose. In mixed groups, many girls report being "put off" by boys being overtly competitive, and teachers report that many girls are more competitive in single-sex groupings. (Clarke and Nutt, 1997)

Attitudinal studies about girls' perceptions of sport found that girls still feel that sport is a "boys' game" (Malaxos and Wedgwood, 1997). This perception considerably narrows girls' opportunities and reduces their motivation to succeed and participate in sport and other physical activities.

Girls would also like to have a greater involvement in the selection of their physical education experiences. A PDHPE program dominated by traditional games and competitive sports acts as a deterrent for the involvement of many girls and some boys in physical activity.

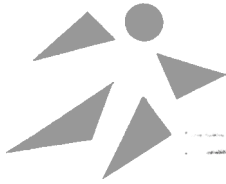
THINKING IT THROUGH

An historical perspective

1. Reflect on your experiences in sport as a child at school. What sports did you play? Who coached you and encouraged you in these sports? What sports did you watch? What were the high profile sports in your school at that time and who played them?
2. Select a person of the opposite sex (for example, a brother, sister or friend who went to school with you). What opportunities in sport did they have? How different were their experiences in sport compared with yours?
3. How have your personal experiences impacted on your values and attitudes to sport and physical activity?

A current perspective

1. What physical activity are you currently involved in and how frequently do you participate?
2. Has your participation in physical activity increased, decreased or remained the same over the past ten years? If there has been a change in activity level, why has this occurred?
3. Think of a person of the opposite sex who is close to you. What physical activities does he or she like, and how frequently does he or she



participate? Has that person's involvement increased, decreased or remained the same over the past ten years. Why?

4. If there are differences in experiences between you and the other person, why do you think this has occurred?
5. What factors have contributed to these differences?
6. What impact do your perspective and experiences of physical activity and sport have on your teaching practices?

The students' perspective

Ask girls and boys in your classes about their attitudes to PE, sport and physical activity.

- ✧ What do girls and boys think of each other in relation to sport?
- ✧ What do girls say about girls' involvement in sport and physical activity?
- ✧ What do boys say about boys' involvement in sport and physical activity?
- ✧ How do students describe their experiences in PDHPE and sport at your school?