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# ISSUES CONCERNING GIRLS' SPORTS PARTICIPATION DURING CHILDHOOD & ADOLESCENCE

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*Les adolescentes canadiennes ont tendance à moins participer aux sports et aux activités physiques quand elles passent du cycle inférieur au cycle supérieur des études secondaires. Souvent pour elles, les occasions de pratiquer un sport compétitif sont limitées. Les jeunes femmes ont besoin à la fois d'encouragement et d'exemple de la part des agents socialisants afin de s'engager dans le sport. Les sentiments de compétence, le désir d'être socialement populaire, les stéréotypes de la femme athlète, les modèles, contribuent tous à la participation féminine au sport et aux activités physiques.*

The issues and concerns about young girls' participation in sports/physical activities are both similar and different from those of adult and aging women. The major issues can be presented in a series of questions. To what extent are young

girls participating in sport/physical activity and in what types of activities are they participating? Are there optimal opportunities available for girls and adolescents to participate in the activities of their choice? What factors influence their involvement? How important are sports/physical activities to young girls compared to other activities? What is the impact of stereotypes on girls' participation? Are there effective role models for young girls?

This paper will attempt to offer the current research findings answering these questions and make suggestions for encouraging girls' participation in sport/physical activity.

### Extent and Type of Participation

Canadian adolescent girls tend to decline in activity participation from junior to senior high school, a fact documented in Statistics Canada's surveys and in the author's own research. However, the extent of participation varies quite considerably for different types of activities. Three separate Canadian surveys showed the percentages of junior and senior high school girls participating in at least one team/program in each of three categories of activities as follows:

- 1) School intramural teams: 40-90 per cent of population,
- 2) community-organized teams or lessons: 30-58 per cent, and 3) interscholastic teams: 18-40 per cent.

Percentage of participation seems to decline as the activities move from low-key recreational activities (intramurals) to more highly structured and competitive activities (interscholastic teams). We must determine why girls appear to be more interested in participating in recreational than competitive activities and why participation declines as girls move into senior high school. The following topics suggest some reasons for this trend.

### Opportunities

Documentation has shown that girls have limited opportunities for participation in competitive and

recreational sports/physical activities outside the public-school system, especially compared to boys of the same age. Recreation and community agencies offer many more and varied programs for boys than for girls. Girls must be given more opportunities to participate if they are to develop skills and attitudes necessary to continue being active throughout their lifetimes. Also, one of the reasons for a lower percentage of participation in interschool teams is probably reduced opportunity. Schools must strive to provide athletic programs for all girls desiring them.

### Socialization into Sport/Physical Activity

One of the most important issues facing girls during childhood and adolescence is whether or not to become involved in sport/physical activity. A certain amount of research has examined socialization into sport and for the most part has concentrated on three factors believed to influence sport involvement:

- 1) socializing agents (significant others such as parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and coaches),
- 2) socialization situations (opportunity set, including socio-economic status, amount of sports equipment, place of residence, ethnic and religious background), and 3) personal attributes (personality traits, attitudes, self-concept, body image, etc.).

Research on the first two components has clearly shown that both are very important in influencing young girls to become involved in sport/physical activity. Although the research is not conclusive on which socializing agents (mother, father, peers, teachers, coaches) are most influential, it is certain that young girls need encouragement and example if they are to become socialized into sport. Opportunity set, particularly socio-economic status and amount of sports equipment available, is also crucial for involvement. Thus a young girl needs both a positive socialization influence from

significant others and opportunities. The third component in the sport-socialization model, personal attributes, has mainly been examined by comparing traits of athletes and non-athletes, participants and non-participants. The research has been contradictory. For the most part, personal attributes have not been very helpful in explaining why girls do or do not become involved in sport/physical activity.

### Perceived Competence

Another theoretical model for explaining leisure involvement suggests that the most important determinant of the activities in which a person becomes involved is perceived competence in that activity. If we apply this model to sport and physical activity, a young girl or adolescent would become involved if she felt competent in her physical abilities.

Is perceived competence related to participation and/or competition in sport/physical activity? Several research studies on female athletes have shown that perceived athletic ability is closely related to participation. It would appear that satisfaction and confidence in moving are prime prerequisites for girls' participation in physical activities.

The next question is just how competent girls are in physical activities. The motor-development research indicates that in fundamental motor patterns such as running, jumping, catching, kicking, and striking there are very few sex differences in ability before puberty. After puberty, however, boys continue to improve in performance, while girls tend to level off around age thirteen and in some cases even decline in performance. The exception to this general trend is in the skill of throwing, where significant sex differences can be seen as early as three years old and continue throughout childhood and adolescence. For some reason a mature throwing style is not considered part of a girl's essential repertoire; thus many girls never develop the skill. Unfortunately, the throwing pattern forms the basis for many ball sports

(softball, basketball, volleyball) and racquet sports (badminton, tennis, racquetball), and an immature form will greatly affect performance in these activities. Perhaps after puberty girls are reluctant to participate alongside boys or even by themselves because of their perceived incompetence. Puberty is also a traumatic time of physical, emotional, and social changes; young girls may not be willing to subjugate themselves to activities in which they feel incompetent.

Of course, many adolescent girls are competent and skilled in a host of sports and physical activities. In particular, competitive female athletes continue to improve their performance well into their late teens and early twenties, so one must question the decline in performance of the average adolescent. There are morphological and physiological differences that explain some of the sex differences, but females are quite capable of increased performances after puberty. The plateau or even decline in the average adolescent girl's performance may be due to decreased participation, practice, and to decreased motivation to excel in sport/physical activity. Adolescent girls must be encouraged to hone their physical skills. By improving these skills they will also improve their perceived competence and hence their inclination to participate in a wide variety of activities.

### **Importance of Sports Compared to Other Activities**

To fully understand young girls' and adolescents' participation in sport/physical activity, we must examine their other interests, aspirations, and activities. Firstly, where do sports rank in the school scene? Three studies have investigated girls' aspirations at school. All three have found that most elementary and junior high school girls wanted to make good grades, then to be popular, and finally to be good at sports. It seems that for the majority of young girls, being good at sports is low on the totem pole.

Other studies have examined girls' perceptions of what makes them popular. The ranking changed with



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age — grades and sports ranked highest in elementary school; looks, grades, and sports ranked first to third respectively in junior high school. For high-school girls the rankings in descending order were leader of a crowd, leader in activities, cheerleader, clothes, athletic, the right family background, and lastly grades. Sports were not perceived by any of the age groups as being particularly important for popularity; sports also decreased in importance with the age of the girls.

This social emphasis among adolescent girls is further supported by their preference for activities. This author's survey indicated that girls in grades 7 to 11 ranked "going out," visiting friends, dating boys,

and listening to music ahead of playing sports as the activities they preferred most. Relative preference for sports did decline slightly from grade 7 to 11. It is understandable that adolescent girls will become more interested in social activities with the same and the opposite sex, but this interest does not need to preclude participation in sport/physical activity. Adolescents do have time to participate in a variety of activities. Also, participation in sport can be an important social experience, an ideal way to meet new people and develop friendships.

### **Societal Stereotypes of Female Participation**

Several studies have examined the image of the female athlete and have demonstrated some unfavourable or at least ambivalent feelings of the general population toward the concept. Fortunately, more recent studies have shown a more positive attitude toward the female athlete. Also, studies that have included this variable as one of many variables influencing participation in physical activity have reported that this attitude was not a significant variable explaining participation.

Other researchers have examined social stereotypes of particular physical activities. They have shown that leisure and recreational activities are definitely stereotyped. For example, in one study 75 per cent of male-classified leisure activities were sports, whereas 83 per cent of female-classified activities were not sports but other types of leisure. In a 1981 study of twelve physical activities, seven were considered more appropriate for males than females, three were considered equally appropriate (swimming, bowling, and bicycling), and only two were considered more appropriate for females than males (figure skating and ballet). Unfortunately, as two leisure researchers concluded, "stereotypic sex roles are still very important in the consumer's allocation of leisure time."

Images of the female athlete and stereotypes of activities are just two examples of the manifestation of sex-role expectations. There should,

however, be no prescribed behaviours or activities for either sex. Both should be free to pursue activities in which they are interested and for which they have potential, without fear of ostracism or prejudice. Educators and recreation programmers must strive to remove any sex-role biases and must particularly encourage young girls to participate in all forms of physical activity.

### Role Models

The final factor influencing girls' participation in physical activity is that of role models. There is a limited number of prestigious and influential role models for young girls in the mass media. Television, radio, newspaper, and magazine coverage is primarily of male athletes and events. For example, in *Sports Illustrated* the percentage of total articles devoted to women remained at the deplorable average of 5.2 per cent from 1956 to 1976. Without influential role models as examples, young girls find it difficult to believe in the importance of striving for excellence in sports. Even at a very young age and much closer to home, it is important for preschoolers to see other girls and women being active. An incident with this author's daughter watching an all-male children's fencing class illustrates the impact of child role models. The questions "Where are the girls? Don't girls fence?" are hard for even the quickest-thinking mother to answer.

### Summary and Conclusions

The main issue concerning girls' participation in sport/physical activity has to be why there is limited participation during childhood and particularly during adolescence. Participation tends to decline during adolescence. It also varies between competitive and recreational activities, with the most participation in school intramural activities, then community-organized activities, and least in interscholastic teams. School and community programmers must ensure that opportunities are available for all girls to participate in the

activities of their choice, particularly girls from lower socio-economic families where opportunities are more limited.

If we assume adequate opportunities, young girls can be encouraged to become involved in sport/physical activity by significant others such as parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and coaches. This positive socialization influence is crucial. Another crucial factor affecting participation is perceived competence in physical skills. Girls must be given opportunities and encouragement to improve their skills. Improved competence in physical ability will contribute greatly to satisfaction while participating and will ultimately increase participation.

As girls mature and become interested in changing social roles,

sport/physical activity may take on a secondary importance. They can be made to see that participation in sport and social activities need not be conflicting; in fact, the two can enhance each other. Traditional sex-role stereotypes of female involvement in sport must be discarded and girls encouraged to pursue activities that they are interested in and/or for which they have potential. Role models in the media and at the local community level can do much to interest girls in sport/activity participation throughout childhood and adolescence.

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### ENQUÊTE NATIONALE SUR LES FEMMES DANS LE LEADERSHIP SPORTIF

Toute personne qui se préoccupe du statut de la femme dans le domaine du sport et des loisirs lira avec intérêt le résumé de l'enquête nationale sur les femmes dans le leadership sportif. Une des découvertes importantes de cette enquête menée en 1980-1981 nous révèle que le nombre de femmes occupant les postes décisionnels est proportionnellement petit aussi bien au niveau du sport professionnel qu'au niveau des loisirs. Il est important d'encourager un plus grand nombre de femmes à rechercher des postes de commande dans les domaines de la condition physique et du sport amateur. Le rapport comprend également des recommandations et des suggestions à l'intention des femmes qui oeuvrent dans ces domaines. Pour obtenir une copie de ce rapport bilingue, écrivez à: Programme pour les femmes de Condition physique et de Sport amateur Gouvernement du Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0X6.

### NATIONAL SURVEY ON WOMEN IN SPORT LEADERSHIP

The summary of the national survey on women in sport leadership will be of importance to anyone concerned with the status of women in sport and recreation. A significant finding of the survey, conducted in 1980-1981, is that women hold a disproportionately small number of decision-making positions both at the professional sport and recreational levels. It is important that more women be encouraged to seek leadership positions in the field of fitness and amateur sport. The report also includes recommendations and suggestions for women involved in these areas. For a copy of the bilingual report write the Fitness and Amateur Sport Women's Program, Government of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0X6.