



Building Social Connection for Lasting Participation in Sport





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We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Department of Canadian Heritage (Sport Canada).

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PHOTOGRAPHY

- · Cover Canada Games Jeux du Canada / Scott Grant
- p5 Coaching Association of Canada / Association canadienne des entraîneurs
- p6 Coaching Association of Canada / Association canadienne des entraîneurs
- · p8 Bogetti-Smith Photography
- p12 Canada Games Jeux du Canada / Scott Grant
- p13 Coaching Association of Canada / Association canadienne des entraîneurs
- p16 Coaching Association of Canada / Association canadienne des entraîneurs
- p18 Coaching Association of Canada / Association canadienne des entraîneurs
- p22 Coaching Association of Canada / Association canadienne des entraîneurs









WHEN A GIRL CHOOSES TO PLAY SPORTS, WHAT SHE WILL GAIN GOES FAR BEYOND KICKING A BALL, LEARNING A NEW STROKE, OR CROSSING A FINISH LINE. THROUGH POSITIVE SPORT EXPERIENCES, GIRLS ARE MORE LIKELY TO REAP THE BENEFITS OF SPORT PARTICIPATION AND GROW INTO CONFIDENT AND MOTIVATED LEADERS.

However, longstanding false beliefs, upheld by an institutional bias, favour boys' participation in sport over that of girls. These perceptions have a measurable, negative impact on girls' socialization in general and on their experience in sport. By age 14, girls drop out of sport at two times the rate of boys. Creating a positive social environment that intentionally fosters a sense of belonging is integral to the retention of girls in sport and physical activity. For many boys, good performance creates a stronger sense of social belonging. In contrast, for many girls, feeling a strong sense of social belonging will enhance their performance.2 A recent study found that the top two reasons girls aged 7 to 16 choose to play and stay in sport are to make friends and to be part of a team.3

This resource is designed for coaches who are ready to intentionally support equitable sport. She Belongs offers practical recommendations to create social connection and better engage girls in the Learn to Train and Train to Train stages of the Long-Term Development in Sport and Physical Activity Framework (LTD). Everyone involved—sport and physical activity

organizations, coaches, managers and leaders, as well as parents/guardians—plays an integral role in creating the environments where girls can participate and have fun.

THESE ENVIRONMENTS:

- · are safe and welcoming
- · encourage girls to value and stay in sport
- provide a positive experience and lasting social connection
- expose girls to strong and powerful female role models
- empower girls to strive for their full and equal position in sport and society

Unlike the health benefits of regular physical activity,⁴ social connection is not guaranteed when a team is formed. Rather, the responsibility for cultivating it lies with the group leader(s). This resource focuses on social connection to help coaches design and implement programming that optimizes participation to retain female participants in sport and physical activity. Teach her that sport is where *She Belongs*.

THE LTD FRAMEWORK OUTLINES THREE POTENTIAL PATHWAYS ADOLESCENT GIRLS FOLLOW IN SPORT:

- 1. High Performance Sport
- 2. Competitive for Life
- 3. Fit for Life

A fourth common pathway for adolescent girls is to drop out of sport entirely.⁵ Grounded in research and best practice, Canadian Women & Sport and experts in coaching and the retention of girls in sport offer five key actions to help you achieve meaningful social connection on your team or in your program environment.



TIPS FOR FOSTERING SOCIAL CONNECTION FOR GIRLS THROUGH SPORT

- 1. Build the foundation for a positive culture.
- 2. Create an inclusive and safe environment for all girls.
- 3. See role models. Be role models.
- 4. Redefine girls' relationship with risk taking.
- 5. Recognize and respond to the signs of disengagement.

BUILD THE FOUNDATION FOR A POSITIVE CULTURE

Many factors contribute to the quality of social belonging that your participants experience throughout a season. A number of these factors are outside your control. But, as the leader, you can define your team's culture as one that champions the importance of social connection over team performance. The best time to introduce the values that help to shape team culture—to participants and parents/guardians alike—is at the beginning of the season or program. But you can start this any time.

HOW? USE THE CHECKLIST BELOW TO CULTIVATE YOUR TEAM CULTURE.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF A FRESH START OR TAKE A NEW APPROACH MID-SEASON.



INTRODUCE YOUR TEAM CULTURE

✓ Speak to the girls before the try-out activities begin about your general vision for the season and the importance of relationships. The vision should have clear, positive outcomes but allow for the girls to collaborate on how to achieve it.

Include the girls' voices. Ask them for examples of behaviours that show both inclusion and exclusion for example, giving a high five and ignoring a high five.



✓ Acknowledge that these expectations will be part of your evaluation when making selection decisions. Emphasize that you will evaluate participants on their character as well as their physical or technical skills.





MEET WITH PARENTS/ GUARDIANS TO EXPLAIN THEIR ROLE IN SUPPORTING THE TEAM CULTURE.

- Remind parents/guardians that they are their children's primary role models.
- ✓ Acknowledge that parents/guardians are highly influential. If they do not support the team culture neither will the participants.
- Reiterate that your goal is for the participants to have a positive experience which keeps them involved in sport for years to come.
- ✓ Set the expectation for parents/guardians to be supporters—not sideline coaches—during competition. Encourage cheers that celebrate the team's success: "Let's go, bulldogs!"
- ✓ Share a communication process so parents/guardians and participants know how best to approach you for guidance or to voice frustration without impacting their child's perception of the team culture.
- Offer support to parents/guardians on how to guide a participant through de-selection. Encouragement rather than criticism leads to improved performance.⁷



Remind parents/guardians to encourage the participant.

- Praise their courage for taking a risk.
- Emphasize what they did well.
- Remind them that their potential is undefined if they are willing to keep learning and trying.
- Provide specific information to parents/guardians on other organizations as options for participants to stay in sport (for example, contact information of local house league).



WALK THE TALK

- Highlight athletes you have coached or played with in the past who made huge contributions to their team by being a great teammate and emulating team values.
- Emphasize your team culture by collaborating and adopting mottos to repeat throughout the season.
 - "We have to act like a team off-ice to play like a team on-ice."
 - "Our team is made up of good people not just good athletes."
- Recognize the consequences of your actions when you make decisions that don't align with your team culture. If you don't follow it, why should your participants?
 - Do not make jokes at the coaching staff's expense if you would not want participants to make jokes at their teammates' expense.



Arrive prepared with activities that promote social bonding



- Integrate social, unstructured time into practices through informal activities (chatting while running during warm-up, playing valuesbased games, using lots of equipment, and modified, small-sided games).²
- Use novelty themes/games such as Survivor, Amazing Race, Scavenger Hunts, Capture the Flag.⁸
- Use prizes, trophies, decals, certificates, etc. as motivational tools.
- ✓ If you choose to ask for your participants' input, acknowledge their opinions and treat them as a serious consideration in your decision making.

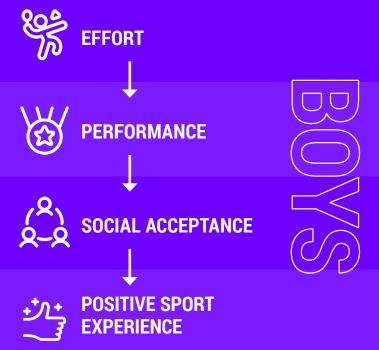


PROVIDE AN INCLUSIVE & SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR ALL GIRLS

An integral aspect of social belonging in sport is creating a safe and inclusive environment.

For many boy participants, performance enhances their social position. In contrast, for girl participants, social acceptance enhances individual and group performance.2 The social environment you create for your team will impact girls' enjoyment of sport and their level of engagement.





By upholding a standard of how you communicate and act with your participants, and how they interact with each other, you can instill a strong sense of social belonging. This belonging will allow your participants to feel safe enough to take risks in the pursuit of improvement.

WHEN IT COMES TO CREATING AN INCLUSIVE AND SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, WE ALL HAVE TO DIVE IN:

DE-STIGMATIZE INTEGRATE **VALUE ENGAGE**

D DE-STIGMATIZE DIFFERENCE THROUGH USE OF INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE.

Examine your language. Are you inclusive of all racial identities, religious affiliations, abilities, sexual orientations, sizes, statuses, and family structures?

SUBSTITUTE EXCLUSIVE LANGUAGE WITH INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE.

♥ DON'T	್ರ DO	WHY?
"Bring it in, GUYS ."	"Bring it in, EVERYONE."	This language reinforces that sport is for everyone, not just boys. This language is inclusive of participants who are gender fluid or gender queer.9
" BIGS at that net. Guards at this net."	"CENTRES at that net. Guards at this net."	This language does not threaten participants' positive attitudes toward their bodies. This language differentiates participants based on their skills and strengths rather than physical attributes. ¹⁰
"Be sure to thank your MOM AND DAD for getting you to practice today."	"Be sure to thank WHOEVER got you to practice today."	This language is inclusive of all family structures. This language does not shame participants whose family cannot participate equally in tasks such as carpool.
"We practiced how to deal with a trapping defense all week. Remember to not GO CRAZY when you see it in the game."	"We practiced how to deal with a trapping defense all week. USE THOSE SKILLS when you see it in the game."	This language does not perpetuate stigmas around mental illness. This language is encouraging the use of critical thinking instead of dissuading participants from making mistakes.

Ensure your participants also understand the harm caused by exclusive language. Correct your participants without shame by providing context to their error.

- · Frame the issue as one that impacts the entire team. For example, "I've heard a number of you use this word and it's something we need to talk about."
- Discuss the issue in terms of the potential impact of someone's language regardless of their intent. For example, "Do you know what that word means?" "Do you know who is hurt when it's used?"
- Encourage participants to hold each other accountable. Everyone represents the team. For example, "When someone from the community hears one of you using that word, they don't think Sam uses that word. They think the Bulldogs use that word."



INTEGRATE THE DIVERSITY OF **NEEDS ON YOUR TEAM IN YOUR** PLANNING AND PROGRAM-**DESIGN PROCESS.**

Team members can vary greatly in their learning styles. You risk being misunderstood and alienating some of your participants if your program delivery only caters to one learning style.



Use brief explanations to keep your participants' attention. Make corrections as your participants play.



Use a variety of strategies to explain skills and activities. For example,

- Use metaphors in your verbal explanations: "This player is the fox and this player is the rabbit."
- Explain a skill using visual cues like a drawing on a whiteboard.
- · Create kinesthetic connections: "When you make a proper turn you should be able to feel this much of the wall with your foot."



Consult participants and their parents/guardians on how best to engage them if you are continuously experiencing challenges.



Invite curiosity—girls want to know the reason for doing something. Explain, teach and demonstrate to them what to do and why you want a task or skill done a specific way. When they see value in what they are doing, they will work extremely hard.4

There are many other aspects to your participants' individual identities that should be considered in the program design process. As the coach, it is important to acknowledge cultural difference and understand how that may impact a participant's capacity to engage.

EX. PRACTICE PLANNING DURING FASTING HOLIDAYS:

- · Incorporate many individual skill drills that participants can complete at their own pace.
- If you are coaching a territorial sport such as hockey, soccer or basketball, shrink the field of play to promote decision making versus endurance.
- · Provide participants with ample breaks as needed.

VALUE DIVERSE GROUPS THROUGH INTENTIONAL **CELEBRATION.**



Provide role models that reflect the diversity of your team.

- Invite a guest coach to lead a practice;
- Provide articles for your team to read about athletes who are doing great things or who have overcome challenges that perhaps your team is currently facing.



Celebrate the achievements of teams of all abilities and backgrounds.

• Attend a parasport competition with your team.



Celebrate women's achievements in- and outside of sport.¹¹ Demonstrate your interest and passion by acknowledging the achievements of women from around the world who are pushing the boundaries for equity in society.

- Hold a viewing party for a women's sport competition that wouldn't likely receive primary coverage in the media;
- Recognize the historical impact of athletes like Waneek Horn-Miller, whose societal contributions go beyond her athletic achievements.



E ENGAGE DIVERSE GROUPS WHEREVER POSSIBLE IN THE **INCLUSION PROCESS.**



FO Find an appropriate time to learn from your participants and their parents/quardians about how they feel best supported.12



Consult other coaches with lived experience on how to best support your participants and their families.



Respect the boundaries of your understanding of someone's lived experience. Do not generalize about how a group of people or presume to understand their full experience after a few conversations. Remember to listen, learn and continue to listen.





SEE ROLE MODELS. BE ROLE MODELS.

Girls who stay active in sport and physical activity are set up for lifelong success. In addition to health benefits of regular physical activity participation, sport prepares and empowers girls to be strong, confident and resilient. For girls to reap all the benefits of staying active through sport, they must see that there are attainable and meaningful opportunities for them to do so. By exposing your participants through positive interactions to local role models, they will be aware of and encouraged to continue to pursue opportunities in sport.

"I didn't know...

I could play two sports in university"

that there are pro leagues for women in Europe, Asia, etc..."

I could work in sports besides being a coach"

By introducing role models to your team, you reveal the road ahead and help to alleviate young participants' stress around the challenge of reaching the next level. Beyond the inspiration to be successful in their sport, having role models they can relate to promotes resilience when overcoming the adversity that your participants are currently facing or will likely face in the future.

I could take a break from sport and come back to it when I'm ready"



- 1. Teach your participants to recognize the role models they have in their life currently:
 - This promotes gratitude and respect for leaders outside of sport;
 - Through this activity, girls have the tools to identify both the positive and negative influences in their lives.
- 2. Frequently watch, discuss and celebrate female athletes:
 - Pro sport, university, Olympics, etc... Create opportunities for your participants to envision themselves getting to the next level by watching other girls and women.



When teaching a skill, reference or name the drill after an athlete or team who is successful at the skill:

"Play with your head up—like Christine Sinclair—so you can see the whole field."

"This drill is called Thunderbirds because UBC's women's field hockey plays great team defense."

- 3. Attend college and university competitions as a team. In addition to the fun experience, coaches are often receptive to having girls meet their team and connect with the athletes.
 - Make sure your team is prepared with questions. For example: What is it like to play at this level? What courses are you studying?
- 4. Invite women coaches, mentors, and community leaders to share their skills and expertise with your team.²
- 5. Reach out to involve female athletes from high schools, colleges and universities, on provincial/territorial, national and international teams to lead a development session.²
- 6. Encourage your participants to support less experienced participants during or outside practice.
 - Teach your team that good players impact the game through their own performance but, great players impact the game by bringing out the best in their teammates;
 - By outlining exactly how your experienced participants can offer feedback—encouraging, constructive and well timed—to their peers, you can minimize the risk of bullying and embarrassment on your team.



RE-DEFINE GIRLS' RELATIONSHIP WITH RISK TAKING THROUGH GOAL SETTING

One reason that girls often believe they don't belong in sport is a fear of making mistakes.¹³ The potential to fail in front of their peers and jeopardize those relationships is perceived as more threatening than the potential enjoyment experienced in sport.² The possibility of failure can often prevent girls from participating competitively or even attempting a new skill or sport.

Before girls will participate, compete, or enjoy an activity or sport they need to:



- Feel emotionally secure, placing high value on feelings of belonging;
- Believe they are in a socially supportive learning environment with opportunities to develop and build healthy relationships and social connections with others;¹²
- Feel competent and have the necessary skills to attempt a new skill or activity.¹³

Goal setting and achievement motivation can be meaningful ways to engage your participants in their personal and team success. With the support of their teammates, coaches and parents/guardians, participants experience both large and small accomplishments when setting goals and working toward them. In addition to greater engagement, goal setting can help your participants to redefine risk as a means of taking control of their development as an athlete—a necessary step to becoming successful at something.





LEAD A GROUP ACTIVITY THAT ENCOURAGES YOUR TEAM TO SET FIVE GOALS:



INDIVIDUAL SKILL GOAL

An Individual Skill Goal is a measurable goal based on an individual skill that is appropriate to your participant's level of experience and developmental stage. For example: A new participant's individual skill goal should involve mastering a fundamental movement skill.



INDIVIDUAL SOCIAL GOAL

A Individual Social Goal is a measurable goal based on an individual's ability to communicate to themselves in times of fear or failure. **For example:** Before every foul shot I take, I will say to myself out loud "I got this shot."



TEAM SKILL GOAL

A Team Skill Goal is a measurable goal that will be an identifier for your team. **For example:** Be the team with the most assists in the league.



TEAM SOCIAL GOAL

A Team Social Goal is a goal that aligns with your team culture and promotes social connectedness. **For example:** Always giving a high five when a player comes off the field for a substitution.



PERSONAL GOAL

A Personal Goal can be a performance goal or a social goal that is unrelated to sport. This goal will give you and other participants insights into their teammates' other interests. It promotes the development of self-worth outside of sport performance.

For example: writing 3 things you are grateful for before each school day.



KEYS TO GOAL SETTING

TREAT GOAL SETTING LIKE A DAILY ACTIVITY

- · Create easy ways for your participants to track their progress.
- · Demonstrate your interest in their improvement by regularly and casually checking in.
- · Recognize your participants' efforts to improve-not just their results.

When your participant is discouraged by their results, remind them to refer to their Individual Social goal. Highlight sport's intrinsic rewards (fun, pleasure, mastery, challenge)¹¹ and the value of their participation in developing career skills (communication, teamwork, resiliency):



- Remind your participants of their strengths or other areas where they have improved whether intentionally or as a by-product of their effort in general.
- Give opportunities and model how your participants can celebrate each other by calling out their teammates' successes, including persisting through failure. This practice also reinforces that good teammates uplift each other and are inspired—not discouraged—by each other's successes.



SOCIAL DYNAMICS: RECOGNIZE AND RESPOND TO THE SIGNS OF DISENGAGEMENT

For girls in sport, relationship development and positive team dynamics are often more important than winning. A participant's decision to disengage from sport rarely happens overnight.

To sustain girls' long-term participation, it is key to recognize the signs of disengagement early and use social connection to overcome the various causes.



When coaches have strong, supportive relationships with their participants they can more easily recognize the signs of disengagement and a breakdown in healthy team dynamics. Here are some common signs of disengagement that a participant may demonstrate before dropping out of sport all together:

- · Is regularly late to practice
- · Gives notably less effort or seems lethargic
- Has minimal interaction with other participants
- Is unable to maintain focus or retain instructions
- Is consistently disappointed after competition regardless of personal or team performance
- · Requests to sit out without a clear cause
- Perceives constructive feedback as a personal critique
- Spreads negativity to the team to validate their own experience

Retaining girls in sport directly correlates to the team dynamic. Participants will disengage if their social needs are not met.² The causes of disengagement from sport are as unique as your participants. By using the right strategies and prioritizing social connection on your team, you can gain insights about the source of your participant's change in behaviour. With this knowledge, you can guide the participant to lean on their teammates and use sport as a coping mechanism.

FOLLOW THESE 3 STEPS



BE PROACTIVE.

Establish and maintain open lines of communication so your participants are comfortable sharing with you. Create opportunities to casually check-in with participants. **For example:**

- · Before practice, ask how the participant or their family is doing
- Before and during exam season, ask your participants how they are coping with the extra workload
- Set the example by sharing a challenge you experienced earlier in the week. How did you cope? How did it impact your mood, concentration, competence? How did you overcome it?
- Provide opportunities for your participants to support each other through goal setting exercises that include check-ins and team bonding experiences
- Provide tools (for example, a workbook, a chart, etc.) for your participants to record their progress
- Dedicate time during a passive activity for participants to check in (for example, share with a partner how they believe they are progressing in their goals during a cool down lap)
- Provide opportunities for your participants to highlight their teammate's successes and efforts (for example, shout-outs before the first practice following competition)

Emphasize that shout-out topics are not limited to positive outcomes but should reference your team's values: resilience, teamwork, positive attitude, etc.



"She never stopped trying."

"She helped me when I didn't understand the drill."

"She stayed positive even when her team was losing."

Acknowledge and plan for seasonal stressors your participants might experience

First "away" tournament
 Exam season
 School sport participation



BE UNDERSTANDING.

It will be easier for some participants to approach you with a personal problem than others. By being understanding you can eliminate the fear that is often associated with vulnerability:

- Recognize your participants as people with competing priorities and changing circumstances.
- Understand that your participants are in the process of developing coping mechanisms and require your guidance.
- Remember that, if your participant is going through a difficult time, they may not be able to give your team their best effort.



BE SUPPORTIVE.

Use sport as a safe space from external issues.

- If your participant is going through a difficult time and cannot participate, encourage them to attend practice because you "need them" as they may still benefit from being present but also from being around friends and you.
 - Do not set a precedence that the participant is welcome only if they play.
 - Alternative roles for the participant can include score keeping, assisting coaches, cheering, recording stats, etc...
- Create pathways for your participant to find additional support.



At the start of the season, provide resources to your participants such as

- Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868
- Youth Line 1-800-268-9688
- Safesport Helpline 1-866-200-0796

Note: these platforms all have text options

 Understand that, because you are a neutral figure, your participant may benefit from your support in talking to a parent/guardian about their wellbeing.



USE THE TIPS FOUND IN SHE BELONGS TO SUPPORT EQUITABLE SPORT AND KEEP GIRLS IN THE GAME.

Your participants' experience in sport may not start with you, but with your influence you can point them in a new direction. As a coach, you are expected to teach sport skills that will allow your participants to compete to the best of their abilities. As a leader, you can reveal all the benefits there are for your participants to stay in sport by creating a connected, safe and fun environment for girls to learn and grow.



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