

Positive, welcoming environment promotes participation of adolescent females in sports

M. M. Casey

R. M. Eime

J. T. Harvey

N. A. Sawyer

M. J. Craike

C. M. Symons

W. R. Payne

Video Abstract

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Abstract

Setting out to better understand the potential barriers limiting female involvement in sports, a recent study found that for adolescent girls, social aspects of sports clubs – such as positive and welcoming environments – were the most important factors in determining participation. Physical activity is a vital part of a healthy lifestyle. But an estimated 80% of adolescents worldwide do not meet minimum exercise recommendations. With benefits ranging from weight management to reducing the risks of cancer to improving mental health, this lack of activity is contributing to a global health crisis. Recently, much focus has been given to sports participation by young girls. This research has uncovered a troubling trend: girls are less active than their male counterparts. And this trend only becomes more pronounced with age. While past studies have investigated individual factors that may influence sports participation (such as enjoyment or feelings of competency), organization-level factors (such as sports club environment) have been largely ignored. To provide a fresh perspective, a team of Australian researchers set out to determine what environmental factors most influence adolescent girl's decisions to take part in sports. Considering both health and social aspects of sports clubs, the team recruited over 400 female students aged 11 to 17, and surveyed them at 12-month intervals over three years. This long term study found that social support was the most important factor; particularly, an environment in which the participants feel welcomed. Together with two health factors: a smoke-free setting and injury-prevention strategies, these elements appear to be major contributors in the decisions of adolescent girls to engage in sports. To encourage athletic participation, sports organizations and coaches should prioritize strategies that support positive social environments within their clubs. Doing so could have a large impact on the physical, mental, and social well-being of future generations of young women.