

RESEARCH 2 PRACTICE

<http://purposefulmovement.net/resources/>

Effectively Engaging Girls in Physical Education

Prepared by: Jodi Harding-Kuriger, Doug Gleddie & Lauren Sulz

Overview of The Problem

Sadly, girls become less active in their tween and teen years than they were in childhood, and significantly less active than boys of the same age (Lamb, Oliver, & Kirk, 2018; Robinson, 2013). This inactivity or disengagement from physical activity (PA) is quite complex. It is important to both recognize this complexity and also to include female students in the engagement conversation (Lamb, Oliver, & Kirk, 2018). Physical education (PE) classes are well situated to help young girls experience positive and enjoyable PA. Unfortunately, many PE programs fail to engage girls in meaningful ways.

Open, non-judgemental, discussions with female students help us to learn about their unique needs, interests and experiences which can lead to a culture where girls feel included in PE and PA. (Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport - CAAWS, 2012). Any strategies for engagement must meet the unique, context specific requirement of the girls' lives, their interests and their abilities (Gibbons, 2014; Beni, Fletcher, & Ní Chróinín, 2017). Girls are more likely to stay engaged, have fun and continue PA beyond the school, if they feel included, confident, competent, and if they have a sense of autonomy (Gibbons & Humbert, 2008).

The benefits of regular PA are well established and include cardiovascular fitness, psychological health, skeletal health, body composition and insulin levels (Wang & Liu, 2008). Perhaps even more importantly, PA plays a crucial role in the future health of women. If girls are physically active in their teenage years this leads to increased bone mass and a reduced risk of osteoporosis. They are also less likely to develop anxiety and depression, more likely to maintain a healthy body weight and have positive body image. (Braun, 2016).

Benefits of Physical Activity Through Physical Education

The foundations for enjoyment and lifelong participation in PA can be supported through meaningful and authentic PE programs. As a part of the PE program it is important to include an opportunity for girls to discuss and understand the benefits of PA. There are 5 main areas in which girls benefit when participating in activity: physical; psychological & emotional; social & cultural; and motor skill development (CAAWS, 2012). Some examples of physical benefits include cardio-respiratory fitness, bone health and obesity prevention. Psychological and emotional benefits are a decrease in anxiety, depression and stress. PA is also tied to improved learning and concentration (Ratey, 2008). A sense of team, improved body image and social inclusion are a few of the social & cultural benefits girls can experience through PE programs (CAAWS, 2012). And finally, through participation in a meaningful and purposeful PE program girls will improve their fundamental movement skills (FMS), better understand game strategies and tactics, and will feel more confident in being active for life (Okely, Booth, & Patterson, 2001; Teixeira, Carraca, Markland, Silva, & Ryan., 2012). "Physical inactivity is a major public health challenge in the developed world and is recognized as a global epidemic" (Allender, Cowburn & Foster, 2006, p. 826). Physical inactivity can lead to both poor physical health and poor mental health (Allender, Cowburn & Foster, 2006). As physical educators it is imperative that we assist girls in building the foundation of a love for movement - for life!

Barriers to Physical Activity and Physical Education

Research shows that there are a range of factors that prevent girls from continuing in PE past its mandatory years. These include required clothing for PE, change rooms, the presence of boys (Mitchell, Inchley, Fleming, & Currie, 2015), the activities they are required to do, and feelings of embarrassment and humiliation in PE (Flintoff & Scraton, 2006). CAAWS also identified 6 categories of barriers to PA. These include (1) Physical Barriers: lack of physical literacy and motor skills; (2) Psychological Barriers: body image, lack of confidence, and social exclusion; (3) Time: school work overload, family expectations; (4) Interpersonal: lack of social & familial support and limited female role models; (5) Access & Opportunity: cost and community infrastructure; and finally (6) Programming: the sense of no autonomy.

Suggestions for Engaging Girls in PE

The [Meaningful Physical Education](#) (MPE) approach (Beni, Fletcher, & Ní Chróinín, 2017) considers six 'features' to support meaning making for students in PE. Aligning these features with research specific to females, what follows is a working set of ideas for engaging girls in PE. Remember, the features do not stand alone - consider the [interactions BETWEEN them](#) as well!

Social Interaction - It is important to consider the all relationships in the PE setting: peer/peer, student/teacher (Beni, Fletcher, & Ní Chróinín, 2017; Lamb, Oliver, & Kirk, 2018), and class/teacher relationships. Examples of positive social interaction in PE include partnering with a friend, a mix of both teacher-chosen and student-chosen groups/teams, teachers modeling a supportive environment, and providing choice to students for participating alone or with others (Beni, Fletcher, & Ní Chróinín, 2017). While programming, teachers should also provide opportunities for the students to build connections with local recreation centres and PA opportunities. This will ensure that students have the opportunity to be active outside of school and will feel safe and comfortable in these places. As a further example of social interaction, teachers could plan a team building unit(or units!) in PE and also use intramural "Houses" or "Teams" to build connections. The last Friday of each month could be a team building or cooperative game with these teams. [Team Building activities Survivor Houghton](#)

Fun - Middle and high school students have identified fun in PE as being more important than the health benefits of participation (Kretchmar, 2007). When planning meaningful PE lessons, fun can be a lens through which planning occurs. Fun is an important motivator for students and teachers alike - of course, fun in PE will also include learning! Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU), Game-Centred Approaches (GSAs), and Sports Education (SE) have all shown positive results for providing a fun atmosphere in PE (Beni, Fletcher, & Ní Chróinín, 2017; Wallhead & Ntoumanis, 2004). As well, co-creating the PE year plan, units and activities with students will also add to the fun and increase engagement (Gibbons & Humbert, 2008). [Teaching Games for Understanding \(TGfU\)](#) [Game-Centred Approaches \(GSAs\)](#) [Sports Education \(SE\)](#).

Challenge - Providing students with the opportunity to set and meet goals is another motivating factor (Gillison, Sebire, & Standage, 2012). The goal setting should include activities of choice that have meaning to the students (Beni, Fletcher, & Ní Chróinín, 2017; Gibbons & Humbert, 2008). Equitable PE programming takes into consideration the unique needs, interests and experiences of female students. Offering novelty, variety and the opportunity to co-construct the activities will increase engagement of teenage girls in PE.

- use personal challenges to increase engagement;
- for example Fitness February or Fitness Fridays - students record their baseline fitness using an activity of choice guided by the teacher. Students then identify a goal(s) for improving each their cardiovascular fitness, their flexibility, muscular endurance, and muscular strength. Throughout the month/year students work towards their goals. At the end they redo the baseline activity to see their improvement.
- Justin Cahill has great [Fitness Challenge Calendars!](#)

Motor Competence - Physical literacy describes the motivation, confidence, and physical competence to be active for life (Whitehead, 2010). Students who do not have the physical competence or perceive a lack of competence will lose motivation and confidence while participating in PE (Beni, Fletcher, & Ní Chróinín, 2017; Carlson 1995). As students' improve their fundamental movement skills (FMS) there is an increase in motivation and participation both at school and in the community (Okely, Booth, & Patterson, 2001; Beni, Fletcher, & Ní Chróinín, 2017; Carlson 1995).

- provide the opportunity for students to work on their gross motor skills;
- using the [Passport for Life](#) students can identify what they need/would like to work on.
- Encourage peer with peer practice.

Personally Relevant Learning - Time should be set aside for students to reflect and discover the value of a physically active life and to identify barriers and work with teachers to negotiate these barriers (Oliver & Kirk, 2015). Explicit discussions and reflections regarding the connections of PE to students' lives outside of school will provide continued motivation and participation of female students (Beni, Fletcher, & Ní Chróinín, 2017). Students find PE to be more meaningful when it is personally relevant to their experiences and their community (Beni, Fletcher, & Ní Chróinín, 2017).

- Along with the [Passport for Life](#), discussions with students will provide insight into what they would like to learn in PE.
- Consider using a Google Form to collect data from students, then plan units with their interests in mind.
- Highlight and access local resources and experts (recreation centres, clubs, etc.) so that students can easily access the activities after school hours.

Delight/ Joy

The aspect of Joy or Delight can be a difficult one to grapple with. Pulling from a [previous blog post on the topic](#), we start with movement being *honoured*, not just used (Kretchmar, 2000). We want to move past a utilitarian or functional approach to movement (which does have its place) and help the girls in our programs appreciate and experience learning as potential sources of joy/ delight. Examples include (Kretchmar, 2005):

- From mechanically correct to expressive movement
- From effective to inventive to creative movement
- From movement as obligation to movement as part of your own story
- From fear and avoidance to accepting and overcoming a challenge
- From thinking to spontaneity

We can encourage these types of shifts by providing a rich learning environment for our girls to play in, creating a culture of honoured movement, reflecting on our practice as teachers and, perhaps most importantly, having girls reflect on their OWN practice and journeys of joyful movement.

Further Resources and Supports

Other research suggests that a quality PE program will emphasize female student autonomy, competence, and social inclusion. (CAAWS, 2012; Gibbons, 2014). The relationship between peers and student-teacher relationships are central to increased motivation and participation (Lamb, Oliver, & Kirk, 2018). We would recommend that PE programs be co-constructed with the female students and that there be ample opportunity for relationship building between the students and the teacher. The features of MPE (Beni, Fletcher, & Ní Chróinín, 2017) can provide the framework for planning a PE program for female students that is engaging and honors their needs, experiences and interests (Gibbons, 2014).

[Keeping Girls in Sport](#): A New Module for Coaches and Physical Activity Leaders – How to create safe and respectful environments for girls to participate in sport and PA! 10K free licenses are available.

[Changing the Game for Girls](#): “This toolkit has been designed to help PE teachers get more girls involved in PE and school sport (PESS). Published by the Women’s Sport & Fitness Foundation, the toolkit is based on new research carried out by the Institute of Youth Sport at Loughborough, involving over 1,500 primary and secondary age girls and boys, as well as their parents and teachers.”

[Fast and Female](#): “Girls drop out of sports at 6x the rate of boys in their early teens (Enoksen, E., 2011), and the top reason for their mass exodus from physical activity is the experience of a lack of social belonging. For this reason, Fast and Female’s Vision is: “A positive, empowering environment for girls in sport.” When coaches are more supportive, parents lay off the pressure, and teammates learn the *skills* to get along, the sport environment will be FUN, positive and empowering and girls will be motivated to stick with their activities.”

[Actively Engaging Women and Girls](#): The purpose of this resource is to increase awareness about the experiences of women and girls, and provide recommendations to address the psycho-social factors that influence female athlete development. Everyone has a role to play in actively engaging women and girls in sport and physical activity.

[Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity](#): “We are dedicated to creating an equitable and inclusive Canadian sport and physical activity system that empowers girls and women – as active participants and leaders – within and through sport. With a focus on systematic change, we partner with governments, organizations and leaders to challenge the status quo and to advance solutions that result in measurable change.”

References

- Allender, S., Cowburn, G., & Foster, C. (2006). Understanding participation in sport and physical activity among children and adults: a review of qualitative studies. *Health Education Research*, 21(6), 826-835. <https://doi.org/10.1093/her/cyl063>
- Beni, S., Fletcher, T., & Ní Chróinín, D. (2017). Meaningful experiences in physical education and youth sport: a review of the literature, *Quest*, 69(3), 291 - 312. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2016.1224192>
- Braun, K. (2016). Why are teenage girls less active than boys? *Health journey*, 3, 6.
- Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS). (2012). [Actively engaging women and girls: addressing the psycho-social factors](#).
- Carlson, T. (1995). We hate gym: Student alienation from physical education. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 14, 467–477. [doi:10.1123/jtpe.14.4.467](https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.14.4.467)
- Flintoff, A., & Scraton, S. (2006). *Girls and physical education*. In D. Kirk, D. MacDonald, & M. O’Sullivan (Eds.), [The handbook of physical education](#) (pp. 767–783). London: SAGE.
- Gibbons, S. (2014). Relatedness-supportive learning environment for girls in physical education. *LEARNING Landscapes*, 7(2), 139 - 150.
- Gibbons, S. & Humbert, L. (2008). [What are middle-school girls looking for in physical education?](#). *Canadian Journal of Education*. 31, (1), 167-186.
- Gillison, F., Sebire, S., & Standage, M. (2012). What motivates girls to take up exercise during adolescence? Learning from those who succeed. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 17, 536–550. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8287.2011.02053.x>
- Kretchmar, R. S. (2007). What to do with meaning? A research conundrum for the 21st century. *Quest*, 59, 373–383. [doi:10.1080/00336297.2007.10483559](https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2007.10483559)
- Lamb, C., Oliver, K., & Kirk, D. (2018): *Go for it girl! adolescent girls’ responses to the implementation of an activist approach in a core physical education programme*. *Sport, Education and Society*, [DOI: 10.1080/13573322.2018.1484724](https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2018.1484724)
- Mitchell, F., Gray, S., & Inchley, J. (2015). ‘This choice thing really works ... ’ changes in experiences and engagement of adolescent girls in physical education classes, during a school-based physical activity programme. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 20(6), 593–611. [doi:10.1080/17408989.2013.837433](https://doi.org/10.1080/17408989.2013.837433)
- Mitchell, F., Inchley, J., Fleming, J., & Currie, C. (2015). [A socio-ecological approach to understanding adolescent girls’ engagement and experiences in the pe environment: A case study design](#). *Graduate Journal of Sport, Exercise & Physical Education Research*, 3, 44–62.
- Okely, A., Booth, M., & Patterson, J. (2001) *Relationship of physical activity to fundamental movement skills among adolescents*. *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*. 33(11), 1899-1904. [10.1097/00005768-200111000-00015](https://doi.org/10.1097/00005768-200111000-00015)
- Oliver, K. L., & Kirk, D. (2015). *Girls, gender and physical education: An activist approach*. London: Routledge.
- Ratey, J. (2008). *SPARK: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*. Columbus, GA: Little, Brown and Company.
- Robinson, D. (2013). [Getting Girls In The Game: Action Research in the Gymnasium](#). *Canadian Journal of Action Research*, 14(3), 3 - 28.
- Teixeira, P., Carraca, E., Markland, D., Silva, M., & Ryan, R. (2012). *Exercise, physical activity and self-determination theory: a systematic review*. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*. 9(78). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1479-5868-9-78>
- Wallhead, T. L., & Ntoumanis, N. (2004). Effects of a sport education intervention on students’ motivational responses in physical education. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 23 (1), 4–18. [doi:10.1123/jtpe.23.1.4](https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.23.1.4)
- Wang, C.K., & Liu, W.C. (2008). Promoting enjoyment in girls’ physical education: The impact of goals, beliefs, and self-determination. *European Physical Education Review*, 13(2), p. 145 - 165. [DOI: 10.1177/1356336X07076875](https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X07076875)
- Whitehead, M. (2010). *Physical literacy: throughout the lifecourse*. London: Routledge.