

# Girls and Athlete Identity

## ***Program Strategies***

While many girls play sports in their younger years, most drop out during adolescence. Why? Research shows that girls may face overt or subtle pressure from their peers and families to 'feminize,' or to take on responsibilities (e.g. studying, taking care of younger siblings) that prohibit their continued participation. One researcher describes adolescence as "a social and developmental Bermuda Triangle" in which girls "lose their assertive, energetic and 'tomboyish' personalities and become more deferential, self-critical and depressed."\* The girls who continue to play through adolescence and beyond are usually those who have developed an *athlete identity*. Being an athlete is a part of who they are. These are the girls who say, "I am a basketball player!" rather than, "I play basketball." These are the girls who see sports participation as a non-negotiable.

In order to help more girls continue life-long participation in sports- programs and coaches can support girls to develop an athlete's identity. The following pages provide information about the physical, emotional and social development of girls in different ages, along with specific strategies for programs and coaches to support girls to become life-long athletes.

It is important to remember that identity development is highly influenced by culture, geography, family influences and other factors. And while stages of development can be outlined, individual girls develop in their own way and at their own pace. We need to be responsive to their individual needs.

\*Women's Sports Foundation. The Wilson Report: Moms, Dads, Daughters, and Sports. East Meadow, NY: Women's Sports Foundation.

# Kindergarten – 2<sup>nd</sup> grade: Building the Foundation

In Kindergarten to 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, most girls love physical activity and games. They aren't worried about notions of femininity, and love to run, move and get dirty. Good programs harness this energy and make physical activity a fun experience for all. Coaches should help girls build motor skills through group games; sport specific skills are not important.

## **The Girls**

### **Physically**

- Have lots of energy but low endurance (frequent water breaks are important)
- Muscular control and hand-eye coordination improve rapidly
- May be about a year ahead of boys in physiological development

### **Emotionally - Socially**

- Need and seek adult approval – they are not yet knowledgeable or confident enough to set their own standards
- Enjoy organized games and activities
- May pick up skills faster than boys (they often have a greater ability to focus)
- Are not ready to accept losing and failure. Success should be emphasized.

## **Program Goals and Structure**

- Focus on motor skills and building a movement vocabulary
- Co-ed or single gender programs can work well
- Sessions should feel light, fun, positive and playful at all times!
- If matches are played, score should not be kept

## **Coaching Strategies**

- Modified fields and equipment (smaller fields, lower nets, smaller balls, etc)
- Fewer *drills* and more *fun, interactive activities*
- Don't talk or explain for more than 3 minutes
- Use cooperative games in which everyone wins
- Offer lots of praise and positive reinforcement
- Give kids correction feedback and teaching – but only in a positive way: “Good try Denise! Now try to catch it with your eyes open.”
- Make sure the boys are including the girls in the games

# Grades 3-5: The Emerging Athlete

In grades 3-5, girls still love to run and play hard. Yet many are internalizing and adopting stronger notions of femininity. This is fine, as long as they aren't restricting themselves and can still express themselves physically. Good programs will respect girls' individuality and create a broad sense of what it can mean to be a girl. Diverse female role models are critical at this time (hero worship is common at this age). Emerging athletes become more excited about mastery, performance and competition, but play and fun are still important.

## **The Girls**

### **Physically**

- Increased strength in arms, hands, and fingers
- Improved execution of gross motor skills such as running, jumping and throwing
- Improved endurance, but can still tire easily
- Some girls will start puberty in 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade

### **Emotionally - Socially**

- They are beginning to identify with peers, although they still look to adults for guidance
- They are still highly sensitive to criticism
- They don't want to be different from their friends
- They want to be recognized for their accomplishments
- They are inclined toward "hero worship" and can be inspired by others
- They have a greater likelihood of quitting because of perceived failure

## **Program Goals and Structure**

- Kids love team competition and performances, but scores and standings are not necessary
- Avoid high pressure situations like post-season tournaments or regional play
- Co-ed and single-sex programs are both fine

## **Coaching Strategies**

- Modified fields and equipment (smaller fields, lower nets, smaller balls, etc)
- Girls should play multiple sports and play different positions
- They like structured activities/ drills, but only if they are not expected to stay confined to one area or do one thing for a long period of time
- Don't talk or explain for more than 3 or 4 minutes
- Use fun games rather than drills to teach skills
- Offer lots of praise - along with technical instruction and feedback. Keep it positive and direct.

- Introduce low-stakes competitive games, i.e. split the group into two teams, which team can make 5 baskets first?
- In co-ed programs, make sure the boys are including the girls in the games

# Grades 6-8: The Critical Period

This is perhaps the most difficult period in the formation of a female athlete's identity. As girls experiment and adopt different female identities, they need to see that sports can be a part of that identity. A supportive movement-based program can be instrumental in helping girls to navigate adolescence. We just have to keep them playing! These girls want to belong and to be validated for the girls they are and the women they will become.

## **The Girls**

### **Physically**

- Fall behind boys in strength and speed
- By 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade, secondary sexual characteristics are usually well advanced and girls will usually have achieved 95% of adult height
- A physical need for more sleep/rest is common; young people need more rest during this time than any time since infancy

### **Emotionally - Socially**

- They identify better with peers of their own gender
- They feel pressure from their peers
- Mastery and competition or performance become more critical
- Some girls can focus their energies and attention for hours at a time (excited athletes will begin to train on their own during this phase)
- They become more self-focused, idealistic
- They seek more independence
- They will challenge the rules and reason of parents, teachers, and the world
- Failure and loss becomes more difficult to deal with

## **Program Goals and Structure**

- CONTINUE TO OFFER PROGRAMS!
- Recruitment may be more difficult as girls drop out of programs. Develop active recruitment strategies.
- Girls may choose to participate more intensively in fewer sports
- Grouping of youth (e.g. recreational vs. competitive, weight and skill) as appropriate should be considered whenever possible
- Gender segregation is strongly encouraged for competitive sports
- Gender segregation may even be a good idea for non-competitive movement programs (dance, cycling, etc) to give girls a sense of their own time and space
- They are interested in team activities and are competitive

## ***Coaching Strategies***

- There may be huge peer or family pressures to stop playing sports. Tell and show each girl how much you need her and how important she is to the group.
- Adolescent girls need free time to socialize. Plan fun team outings like bowling night, day trips, family potlucks, etc. Travel to an out of town tournament. Let the girls stay up past curfew after the last game.
- Treat the girls like athletes. Set high standards and support them in reaching those standards.
- Encourage youth to try various positions
- Teamwork and good sportsmanship taught and encouraged
- Coaches should encourage off field conditioning and nutrition

# Grades 9-12: The Athlete

High School girls who play sports are likely see themselves as athletes. Athleticism is integrated into their identities (especially for older high school girls) and they take their craft seriously. They seek opportunities to advance, compete and perform. Girls will form a strong sense of team unity and ritual- whether on a soccer team, or a dance troupe. They need mentorship, relationships and opportunities to play and advance.

## ***The Girls/ Young Women***

### ***Physically***

- Most girls reach peak of growth spurt by 14 and slow down by 15-16
- Peak performance stage
- Most teens of this age know their own abilities, skill level and talents
- Physically mature

### ***Emotionally - Socially***

- Their mature appearance and behavior may be misleading as they may be more uncertain about impending adulthood
- They are more self-reliant
- They have developed greater concern for others
- They want to be part of the group but also identified as individuals
- They want guidance from adults but more on a peer level—adult to adult
- They might experiment with drugs, alcohol, sex and other risky behaviors
- Caring for their bodies and appearance is often important

### ***Program Goals and Structure***

- CONTINUE TO OFFER PROGRAMS!
- Year-round participation should not be required by team or coach – even dedicated athletes need time off to do other things
- Coaches, teams and leagues should set up schedules that correspond with the active lifestyle of this age group
- Gender segregation is strongly encouraged for competitive sports

### ***Coaching Strategies***

- Emphasize health, nutrition and balance – watch out for rapid weight loss and over training.
- Group drills led by peers highly encouraged
- Be a mentor and friend – teenage girls will seek adult opinions and companions outside of their parents

- Support a sense of team unity
- Allow and encourage the bonding rituals of the girls