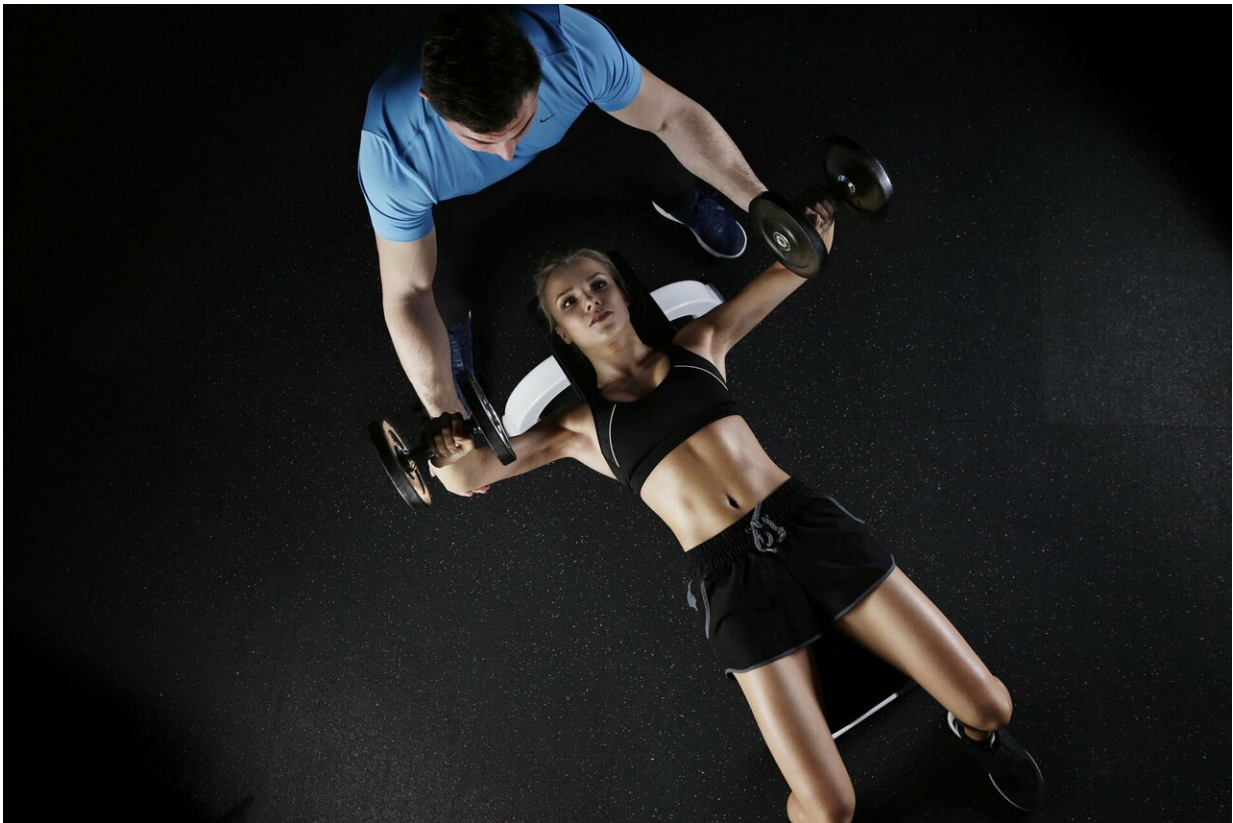


Efforts needed to keep girls in high school sports

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Girls in high school enjoy playing sports to develop friendships, strength and for the competition but are more likely to stop playing two years earlier than boys, a Flinders University analysis has found.

The researchers say high-quality coaching, assistance in balancing lifestyle priorities and highlighting the strong and competitive nature of sports is key to stemming the participation decline, which usually occurs between years 8 and 10.

"There are a number of social, psychological and physical benefits to playing sports, but we already know [girls](#) are less likely to ever take it up, and those that do, drop out at a much faster rate than boys," says Professor Murray Drummond, Director of the Sport, Health, Activity, Performance and Exercise (SHAPE) Research Centre at Flinders University.

"It's important we look to understand why these barriers exist and find solutions in order to attract and retain girls in sports."

The researchers surveyed over 2,000 South Australian girls and boys in years 8, 10 and 12, asking them about their sporting habits and attitudes towards sports, as well as gaining insight into their resilience, self-esteem and body appreciation.

This was then followed by focus group interviews with students, teachers and parents to gain a deeper understanding of the survey results.

The survey found the most played sports for girls was netball, followed by volleyball, Australian rules football, dancing and soccer (football), while for boys it was soccer (football), followed by Australia rules football, basketball, cricket and volleyball.

"Throughout the interviews it was clear that girls gained a lot of positives from playing sports, including cultivating friendships, feeling fit and strong and enjoying a sense of competition and winning," says Professor Drummond.

"This positivity was best developed when they were nurtured in a welcoming club or community environment, with the importance of quality coaches evidently very important to their enjoyment."

"It is therefore vital that support be provided to help clubs and organizations in developing coaching qualities that advance their interpersonal skill and communication as a way of retaining girls in sports."

The study also found playing sports was associated with higher levels of both resilience and body appreciation, compared to those who didn't play any sport.

"As this was true for both girls and boys, it highlights that sports can be used as an avenue for teenagers to build and maintain an appreciation for what their own body is capable of, rather than how it looks, as well as cultivating psychological resilience," says Professor Drummond.

When looking at participation rates overall, the survey found 63% of girls participated in sports versus 70% of boys, consistent with previous research, but researchers noted the differences between the two significantly changed as ages increased.

"While there was very little difference in the proportion of males (23.9%) vs females (26.4%) who did not play any sports in year 8, this gap grew in year 10, with 40% of females no longer playing any sports, compared to 30% of males," says Professor Drummond.

"In speaking with the students, the major factor for leaving sports was balancing school, work and other priorities, with girls more likely than boys to drop sports to best utilize their time."

"This leads us to recommend the creation of support materials and

programs to assist girls in maintaining their participation in sports, especially between years 8 and 10 when there is the sharpest decline."

While the authors highlight that the overall decline in sports participation as children get older is present in both genders, and something that should be addressed, ongoing action needed to be taken to address the issues associated with female participation.

"Sports can bring about so many positives for [young people](#) and given the increasing need to encourage physical activity amongst all ages, it's important we make these changes to ensure everyone who wants to take up sports feels supported to do so."

The authors have made 8 recommendations based on the study published in the journal *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*.

Recommendations:

1. State sporting policies, funding programs and organizations should intensify focus on retention practices that extend beyond promoting participation and developing inclusive environments. Funding and policies aimed at demonstrable improvements in retention practices should be given equal importance to efforts seeking to promote and grow participation particularly with respect to girls prior to year 10.
2. Strategic investment in research is required to improve efficiencies between school and community sports programs designed to promote girls' participation and retention, develop talent, and sustain longer-term involvement of players, coaches, parents and volunteers.
3. As a key retention strategy, invest in evidence-based resources for parents, teachers and adolescents that assist girls and young women to develop skills and strategies to maintain a dual

commitment between academic study and organized sports participation.

4. Investment in community and research-based projects that seek to enhance coaches' and parents' relational capabilities and pedagogic contributions to community sports to reinforce long-term attitudes and practices conducive for girls' sports participation and retention.
5. To build intrinsic motivation and positive perceptions of competence, develop an integrated and theoretically informed approach to prolong girls' and [young women](#)'s diversification (e.g., sample more than one sport) in sports into late adolescence.
6. Create multifaceted support materials and programs to assist girls to sustain a sporting trajectory between year 8 and 10 to address sharp declines in the sporting pathway.
7. Develop state-based campaign that promote the strong association between sports participation and higher body appreciation and resilience as a strategy to engage more families and girls in community and school-based sports.
8. Seek government and school-based solutions to arrest the decline in sports participation among girls in year 12.

More information: Murray Drummond et al, Girls and Young Women in Community Sport: A South Australian Perspective, *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living* (2022). [DOI: 10.3389/fspor.2021.803487](https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2021.803487)

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