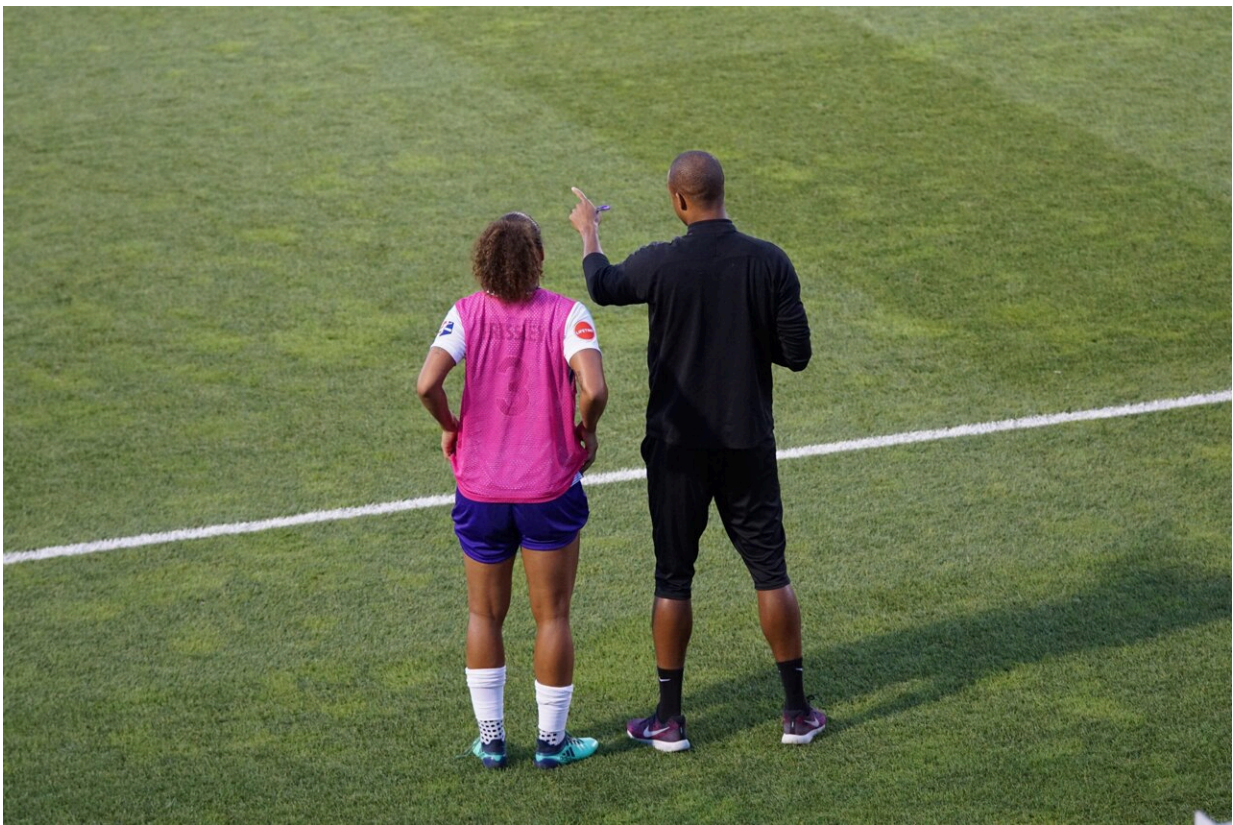


Most kids are only coached by men in junior sport—women also need to be part of the picture, say researchers

April 29 2024, by Kara Dadswell



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Ask your son or daughter, niece, or nephew to draw you a picture of a sport coach. They will most probably draw a man. Why?

Our latest research published in the [*Psychology of Sport and Exercise*](#) suggests children's beliefs are shaped by what they experience.

When it comes to sports, they mostly experience men as coaches. However, our study shows when children are exposed to more [women](#) coaches, their perceptions and attitudes shift positively, challenging the traditional image of a [coach](#).

In Australia, [women account for only 15% of accredited high-performance sport coaches](#), with similar under-representation in community sport.

So where are all the women?

Why women coaches are so scarce

Research has identified numerous reasons why few women coaches exist, with [gender bias](#) often at the center of discussions.

The historical and [dominant view](#) in society is a qualified coach is someone who is tough, aggressive and emotionally focused on competitive success—traits which are typically [associated with men](#).

This view is effectively a bias. We can be aware of the biases we hold, or they can be unconscious to us, unknowingly impacting our behavior.

Such biases [impact efforts to bring more women into sports leadership roles](#) including a coach, as they may be viewed as less capable compared to men.

[Social cognitive theory](#) suggests biases are formed through our social interactions. From a young age, children begin to categorize the world around them through their early social experiences, and [young children](#)

participating in sport can start to form schemas (preconceived ideas) of sport-related concepts (such as their coaches).

With men over-represented in coaching roles, it is no wonder children learn to associate men with coaching. This ultimately reinforces the dominant societal view that men are more suited to these roles.

This is a real problem, as [girls may internalize a belief](#) that there is no place for them in sport leadership, or worse, [toxic ideas that underpin violence against women may persist](#).

What can be done?

So, can we shift the bias? To put it simply, yes.

Increased visibility of, and experience with, women as coaches, particularly at a young age, will serve to change the idea of what a sports coach "looks like" in the mind. This can ultimately minimize the deeply ingrained societal stereotype that sport leaders are men.

In [our latest research](#), our team investigated the attitudes of 75 children (4–17 years old) and their parents towards women in coaching roles in community sport.

Across all sports, 96% of children had been coached by a man, compared to 65% who had been coached by a woman. This difference was even larger if we removed children who played netball or participated in swimming, as these were the only sports predominantly coached by women.

In a nutshell, the children were biased.

They were twice as likely to select a man's face when asked to choose

who looked like they would make the "best" coach from a series of faces of men and women.

Unsurprisingly, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree—children's attitudes, both positive and negative, towards women as coaches very much aligned with their parents' attitudes.

A reason for optimism

Our study demonstrated that despite the relatively limited experience children had with women as coaches, when they had been coached by a woman, they were happier with the prospect of being coached by a woman in the future.

In addition, children who had previously been coached by a woman (compared to those who hadn't) were three times more likely to choose a woman when asked to select the face they thought would make the "best" coach.

The bottom line is, children need to be coached by women as well as men. And the earlier, the better.

Quick tips for sports clubs

Changing attitudes and addressing biases is not a quick fix though. It requires consistent action from different angles, and time.

However, there are some simple and practical things sport clubs can implement to do their bit:

- Expose children at an early age to women coaches
- Influence positive parental attitudes towards women as coaches

- Attract and retain more women as coaches.

Sport clubs should examine the level of exposure children in their clubs have of women as coaches and consider setting targets.

Investing in the promotion of women coaches can assist in influencing parental attitudes. For example, showing images and achievements of women coaches on club promotional materials such as websites, [social media](#) and newsletters.

It's crucial to provide an inclusive and welcoming environment with opportunities for women to become and remain as coaches in sport.

We recommend viewing a checklist of recommendations in the [full research summary](#).

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