



SHOULD WE
ENCOURAGE
GIRL-ONLY
SPORTS TEAMS
IN PRIMARY
SCHOOLS?





Whether we like it or not, girls' experience of sport is different to boys.

A recent survey to the Teach Primary database of 40,000 schools showed that 100% of respondents thought that boys and girls in primary schools should play sport together.

But factors such as gender stereotyping and media representation have been as damaging as the limited repertoire of sports available to young people and the way in which they've been delivered. That's without taking into account self-esteem, self-belief and confidence.

Amidst the threat of rising obesity levels and a mental health crisis, the spotlight has fallen on ways to improve the wellbeing of young people.

Sport comes with a raft of physical and mental health benefits, and while there is a sharpened focus on improving sporting participation amongst children, there is a rising wave of dissatisfaction that boys' and girls' experiences of physical activity are not equal.

This has called into question the relevance of girl-only sports teams and how effective they are. Especially since rising awareness of gender diversity has increased calls for a more flexible, gender-neutral approach to sports and PE.

So how important are girl-only sports teams? And do they have a place in today's world?

100% OF RESPONDENTS THOUGHT THAT BOYS AND GIRLS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS SHOULD PLAY SPORT TOGETHER.

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THE IMPACT OF THE LIONESSES' WIN AT EURO 2022





For the first time since 1966, an England football team won major honours at an international tournament.

The Lionesses' historic win at EURO 2022 – their first ever major tournament win – has been record-breaking in more ways than one. It's a story that gripped the nation, smashing the viewing records for women's football – with 17.4 million tuning into the BBC to watch the final – and set the highest ever attendance for the tournament at 68,871. It has debunked myths of low interest in the women's game and is already inspiring a whole new generation of young girls to play football.

The Lionesses, who have quickly become role models to thousands of young girls, have used the spotlight to draw attention to the lack of access to football girls face in school, through an open letter to the prime minister. As they point out, only 63% of girls can play football in PE lessons, and they themselves were often stopped from playing growing up, frequently having to play with the boys in the absence of any girls' team.

They call for greater investment and support from the government to ensure all girls have access to a minimum of 2 hours of PE a week, and have the opportunities to play football they were denied at school. Their open letter is only the latest instalment in a long fight for equality in football. In 2021, the FA launched the #LetGirlsPlay campaign with the goal of equal opportunities for boys and girls playing football in schools and clubs by 2024.





With the extra motivation provided by the Lionesses' win, calls to change "outdated" guidance of gender divisions and secure their legacy are getting louder – and the FA's ambitions look more achievable than ever.

This helps to create traction which, according to Laurence York, head of growth at Premier Education, is much needed: "Many sports delivered in schools can carry pre-loaded unconscious bias or events which can put pupils off before the lesson has even started. The dream is to eradicate this completely and as the Lionesses letter following the Euro 2022 success states, there should be equal access to all sports within PE lessons.

"However, another possible angle to approach this subject could be to remove the apathy that surrounds some sports and focus on the acquisition of skills rather than sport specific activities. Football is an invasion game, but there are many others, such as rugby, hockey, netball, basketball, touchball and handball. Why not deliver a term's worth of 'Invasion Games' instead of one particular sport or Net and Wall lessons instead of volleyball...?"

"One of the keys to improving opportunity could be to remove the narrow focus on one particular sport altogether and focus on the game type and the skills required to play that type of game. In fact there have been studies to suggest that a narrow focus on one sport can actually be detrimental and children should try sports of all types.

"The issue with not having enough variety in PE is that this does nothing to change the narrative and the symptom of that is attitudes towards PE will never change. Could the use of external Activity Professionals who have the skills, knowledge and expertise in a plethora of sports be the answer to creating a more equal playing field within school physical activity?"



WHAT IS THE OFFICIAL GUIDANCE ON SINGLE-SEX SPORTS?



The national curriculum does not differentiate by gender, leaving it up to schools to decide whether they permit single-sex sports.

Where schools choose to offer different sports to girls and boys, for example to respond to demand, it would be expected that they make every effort to offer a comparable sport which uses similar tactics and objectives.

This is echoed by non-statutory Department of Education guidance. The report *Gender Separation in Mixed Schools* (June 2018) states that 'schools should not generally separate pupils by reference to protected characteristics such as sex, race or faith while at school'. However, single-sex sport is permitted for 'gender-affected activity' where 'the physical strength, stamina or physique of the average girl (or boy) would put her (or him) at a disadvantage in competition with the average boy (or girl).'

In this case, the school would still have to allow girls and boys equal opportunities to participate in comparable sporting activities. Where separate teams exist for different sexes, it would be unlawful discrimination for a school to treat one group less favourably. Plus, the school would need to take into account the age and stage of development of children.

While it's to be applauded that schools are permitted to make decisions that best suit their own students, the lack of conformity across the board could suggest a disparity from one school to the next.



CAN WE TAKE LEARNINGS FROM THE SPORTING WORLD?



It is uncommon in most professional organised sports to find individuals of different genders competing with one another at elite levels, but this is primarily due to physiological differences affecting performance.

That said, it's not a hard and fast rule. It is common for mixed pairs to play in mixed doubles events in pursuits such as swimming, ice-skating and racquet sports. Plus, in equestrian sports male and female riders compete against each other in disciplines such as dressage and show-jumping.

However, in the main, it has been traditional for men and women to compete against opponents of the same sex.

**TO PROMOTE
GREATER GENDER
DIVERSITY, THE
INTERNATIONAL
OLYMPIC COMMITTEE
(IOC) INTRODUCED
SEVERAL NEW
MIXED-GENDER
EVENTS AT THE
OLYMPIC GAMES
TOKYO 2020.**



To promote greater gender diversity, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) introduced several new mixed-gender events at the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020. As well as 18-mixed gender events, four International Federations moved to gender-balanced events for the first time in canoeing, rowing, shooting and weightlifting. It was intended to provide “an exciting new competition format [which was] unpredictable and thrilling”.

In horse-racing it took until 2021 for the history books to include a female winning jockey in the Grand National. Despite the fact that the race has been in action since the 1800s (and the first female rider participated in 1977), Rachael Blackmore was the first woman to win the Grand National on Minella Times. A win that would have inspired countless aspiring female riders and jockeys to consider the competition an equal playing field.

The same applies in football. According to Rachel Pavlou, the Football Association (FA)’s Women’s Development Manager for

Diversity & Inclusion, “mixed football is an important additional choice to [England’s] female only provision”.

As a result, at the start of the 2015-16 season, the FA decided to raise the age limit at which girls and boys can play in the same teams from 16 to 18.

Leah Williamson, England’s captain at EURO 2022 youth player of the year in 2015, was only scouted by the Gunners at the age of nine because she was playing in her local boys’ team at the time.

In fact, many female professional sportswomen will have played against male competitors throughout their career. Competing against players who are bigger, quicker, stronger or taller can encourage a player to think more creatively, push harder or make faster decisions in the name of competition.



SINGLE-SEX TEAMS CAN ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION



Some children participate in a sport for social reasons such as making friends or wanting to have fun.

While for others the desire to progress in the sport is what drives them – therefore, playing against members of the opposite sex challenges them and pushes them out of their comfort zone; something they embrace in their quest to develop.

For Ben Jones, operations director at Premier Education, which provides physical activity and sport to primary schools, there is an argument for both:

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Our job is about getting children to love sport. Through extra-curricular sport sessions, PE lessons and holiday camps we try to expose children to a wide range of sports, disciplines and skills; that way there is more chance of them finding an activity they love.

“While all the sports and activities we run are inclusive, we do encounter some children who are more likely to participate if they are surrounded by children of the same gender. For example, a girl may feel nervous to play against boys in her local football club but will happily sign up for lessons if they’re for girls only.

“Ultimately our aim is to make sporting participation a happy experience, so we tailor sessions to the demands of the children and the needs of each school. Ultimately, we can do both. And in some cases, children will play in a girls’ team at school and within mixed teams for their local club. It’s whatever suits the child.”

”



THE PHYSICAL DEBATE



Often the most common argument for single-sex teams is the physical differences between boys and girls.

This argument usually makes no distinction between primary school and high school children, affirming that boys and girls should be segregated at all ages due to physical differences.

While there is no denying that the onset of puberty gives males a physical advantage over females, the margins before puberty are much closer, and, studies have shown, negligible. Others argue that post-puberty, for many sports, does it even matter?


The Women's Sport Foundation found that "Prior to puberty, there is no gender-based physiological reason to separate females and males in sports competition." Ultimately, there are few differences between boys and girls before the onset of puberty; physiological reasoning holds little weight in the argument against primary-aged children competing in sport. Physically, pre-pubescent children will not notice any difference in ability when playing sports together.

THE STUDY 'PHYSICAL FITNESS DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PREPUBESCENT BOYS AND GIRLS' FOUND MINOR DIFFERENCES IN PRIMARY-AGED CHILDREN, WITH BOYS SCORING SLIGHTLY HIGHER ON STRENGTH, SPEED AND AGILITY, WHILE GIRLS SCORED BETTER ON FLEXIBILITY AND BALANCE.



In secondary school, particularly in non-contact sports, there is still little reason to separate based on gender. For football, where much of the discussion is focused, many argue that mixed-gender teams are beneficial for both boys and girls. Former Tottenham Hotspur player Gemma Davison argued that “The boys bring out the physicality in the girls and the girls bring out the ‘when are you going to listen?’” It has been commented that, as well as giving girls more opportunities to play, mixed teams raise the physical level of girls and communication of boys, improving the skills of both. Physical differences aren’t a huge factor as long as girls are willing to participate.

Often, the reason girls play less sport after puberty has little to do with any physical changes. The FA found that the percentage of girls playing as much football as boys drops from 72% to 44% from primary to secondary school. Rather than any physiological explanation, however, it seems that access and preconceived gender stereotypes are the cause. Only 44% of secondary schools in England offer girls equal access to football in PE lessons, and according to the FA, this only worsens for extra-curriculars.



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CAMPAIGNS TO IMPROVE GIRLS' ACCESS TO SPORT





Actions are already underway to improve girls' access to sport. The FA has launched several initiatives, and with the inspiration provided by the Lionesses, they have more momentum than ever before.

Campaigns like #LetGirlsPlay and Inspiring Positive Change are both pushing for equal access to football. The latter, which was launched in 2020, has set a target of 2024 for every primary-aged girl to have equal access to football in schools and clubs.

Outside of football, there are campaigns like Girls Active, This Girl Can and Us Girls that aim to improve participation in sport for girls; these organisations are all working towards the same goal of raising awareness to drive change. The Girls Active programme, which works to develop an understanding between teachers and girls concerning PE lessons and creates an action plan based on their feedback, is a success. Participants in the programme increased the number of days in a week they spent over 60 minutes physically active by 17%.

There are initiatives funded by the government that are already underway. One such example is the Your Time programme with the aim of improving and increasing access to competitive sport and sport leadership opportunities for girls aged 8-16.



WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?



As we have seen, keeping boys and girls apart in sports teams could create a barrier to physical literacy.

Playing alongside or against children of different heights, sizes, abilities and ages teaches children to play more agilely, think more creatively and improve accuracy. It will also encourage character growth in areas such as confidence, resilience and determination.

The idea that creating a more level playing field can only be good for girls' development is a position echoed by the charity, Women in Sport.

Wendy Hawk, Head of Fundraising and Communications at Women in Sport: "Fundamental movement skills are important for both girls and boys. However, as early as five years old girls are already falling behind boys. PE lessons in primary

school play a vital role in helping girls to catch up and equip them with skills for life. Mixed sex sessions allow both boys and girls to learn from each other and help children develop mutual respect across the genders.

**AFTER ALL, BUILDING
A STRONGER,
HEALTHIER, AND
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GOOD FOR US ALL."**



“This summer demonstrated more than ever that women do have a place at the top of sport. Yet, far too many girls are missing out on the joy of sport due to these deep-rooted negative attitudes, fear of judgement and lack of opportunity. We must equip girls and wider society to recognise the value of sport and exercise to their lives. After all, building a stronger, healthier, and happier nation is good for us all.”

A research study of PE teachers was conducted in 2019 to explore psychological barriers faced by students during physical education classes. When exploring gender differences during PE, participants suggested that stereotypes were to blame. According to one of the teachers, “girls tend not to want to exert themselves in front of boys sometimes” and that is down to tradition; that boys are pictured as being sportier and that ‘girls might associate sports with the opposite gender, while also feeling inferior’.

“HAVING SEGREGATED PE LESSONS AT PRIMARY SCHOOL CAN PLAY INTO THE STEREOTYPE THAT GIRLS ARE NOT AS GOOD AT SPORT AS BOYS. IF THIS PERVASIVE NARRATIVE CONTINUES INTO TEENAGE YEARS IT CAN CAUSE GIRLS TO DISENGAGE FROM SPORT AS THEY FEEL THEY'RE NOT GOOD ENOUGH AND THAT THEY DON'T BELONG.”

Wendy Hawk,
Head of Fundraising & Communications at Women in Sport



This suggests that eroding barriers is key and that schools must work harder to break down stereotypes. Schools could increase the range of sports on offer for children to experience. Or integrate sports such as handball or volleyball which are less chained to traditional stereotypes. PE teachers should lead by example and demonstrate that boys play netball and women play rugby. Some schools have found that male teachers leading dance lessons and female teachers coaching football has been successful in encouraging pupil participation. These actions will cumulatively start to have a positive impact on feelings of inclusion, accessibility and confidence, as well as to reverse negative gender stereotypes. PE teachers should lead by example and demonstrate that both male and female teachers can coach every sport from football and dance to netball and rugby. These actions will cumulatively start to have a positive impact on feelings of inclusion, accessibility and confidence, as well as to reverse negative gender stereotypes.

In 2019, the Department for Education (DfE), Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), and Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC), published the School Sport and Activity Action Plan to ensure that sport and physical activity

are an integral part of both the school day and after-school activities. This action plan pledges that 'All sport and physical activity provision for children and young people should be designed around the principles of physical literacy, focused on fun and enjoyment, and help young people (particularly girls and less active groups) to build confidence and develop a positive relationship with sport and physical activity.'

It claims that improving equality and access to high quality sport is 'particularly important for girls, many of whom report negative experiences of sport at a young age which can leave them reluctant to take part in exercise later in life'.

"It's time to shake up PE lessons" says David Batch, Chief Executive at Premier Education. "School leaders, PE teachers, support workers and external coaches, we all have a role to play to present opportunity and equality for both sexes and, above all, make it fun – otherwise it'll be hard for young people, regardless of gender, to embrace the benefits that come with leading a physically active life."



SUGGESTIONS FOR ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION:

As teachers, educators, parents and coaches we have a responsibility to encourage girls and boys to understand that all sports are accessible.

- Try featuring both male and female PE teachers and coaches. Have the male teachers teach netball and gymnastics and female teachers coach rugby or football. It will help to break down barriers.
- Respond to demand – offer gender-specific classes if there is demand within the school. Offering gender specific after-school clubs could be a way to do this which doesn't affect mixed sports being played in curricular PE.
- Introduce sports which escape traditional gender stereotypes such as handball, dodgeball or badminton
- Run taster sessions to enable children to try new sports or play against children of different genders, ages, sizes, and abilities
- Above all, make sport FUN and remember its potential to inspire young people



WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?





Parents should talk to their children about their perceptions of sport.

Find out what they are comfortable with and ask questions such as:

- Do you enjoy your PE lessons? If not, why?
- Have you ever wanted to try a new sport? If so, what?
- Do you wish to participate in after-school sports clubs?
- Do you enjoy playing sports with boys and girls?
- Does your school offer enough sporting opportunities?

This will open up dialogue about potential barriers and indicate how parents can support their child to better engage with physical activity. It also gives a parent insight to take to the child's school should they feel that the sporting provision isn't wide or inclusive enough.

Primary school parents were canvassed as part of a survey for Premier Education in September 2022 to find out whether they were in support of equal sporting opportunities for both sexes.

100% OF PARENTS BELIEVE THAT BOYS AND GIRLS SHOULD HAVE ACCESS TO THE SAME SPORTS DURING PE

88% believe that boys and girls should play on the same sports team in primary school. It then becomes less a question of gender and more about using PE as a source of exercise, enjoyment, skills development and fun.



SUGGESTIONS FOR ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION:

All sports are for **all** children. Gymnastics and netball are for boys as much as football and rugby are for girls. We should be supportive of children wanting to play whichever sports they choose.

- Expose children to mixed-gender sports classes – it could be good for their confidence.
- Remember it's down to the individual – some children may thrive playing against opponents of the opposite sex, others will be put off.
- Increase the range of sports children are exposed to, especially to those not featured in PE lessons.
- If a child dislikes team sports explore individual pursuits such as golf or archery which promote skills development in a different way.
- Lobby the school to enhance its PE provision – suggest bringing in a specialist coach or offer a more diverse range of activities.
- Find out what open days or youth sport initiatives are available locally. This will give children an opportunity to experience something new but without financial commitment or obligation
- There is a sport for everyone! Dodgeball, boccia, lacrosse, rounders, touchball, swimming, tri-golf – the list is endless!
- Above all, make sport FUN.



FIGHTING FOR EQUALITY IN PRIMARY SCHOOL SPORTS

Improving access to sport for girls in primary school is more complex than simply encouraging girls-only sports teams.

While girls-only teams have their place in schools, mixed-teams are often beneficial for both genders. Improving participation for girls is more about creating equal opportunities, understanding and addressing the reasons for the current lack of participation, and encouragement.

With several campaigns and initiatives already launched, we are pushing towards equal access to sport for boys and girls. Potentially as soon as 2024, as many girls as boys will be playing football in primary school, and the level of participation for girls in sport will be at an all-time high.

