



SPÓRT ÉIREANN
SPORT IRELAND

Adolescent Girls Get Active

Research Report
January 2021



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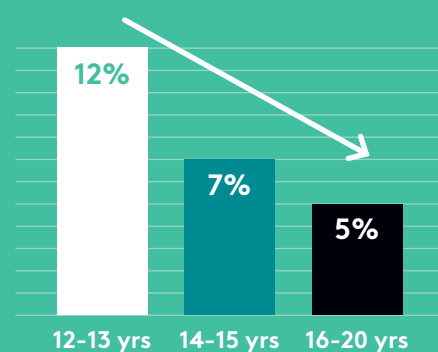
Introduction

Why adolescent girls?

Participating in sport and physical activity provides multiple benefits for physical and mental health, and for potential quality of life. However, women and girls have long been an underrepresented group in sport and teenage girls in particular take part in sport and physical activity far less than the national average in Ireland.

Evidence suggests participation plummets during adolescence with just 7% of girls age 14-15 years meeting recommended physical activity levels. Girls who are active in their teenage years and develop a love of sport are much more likely to establish a life-long relationship with sport and exercise in adulthood. Adolescence is a critical life-stage and these formative years are when attitudes and behaviours are established that shape the women they will become.

% of teenage girls meeting activity guidelines by age* ¹



* Guidelines are at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day

Research aim and objectives

Sport Ireland commissioned Women in Sport to carry out research to establish how to encourage teenage girls, particularly those currently disengaged with sport and exercise, to take part in regular physical activity and:

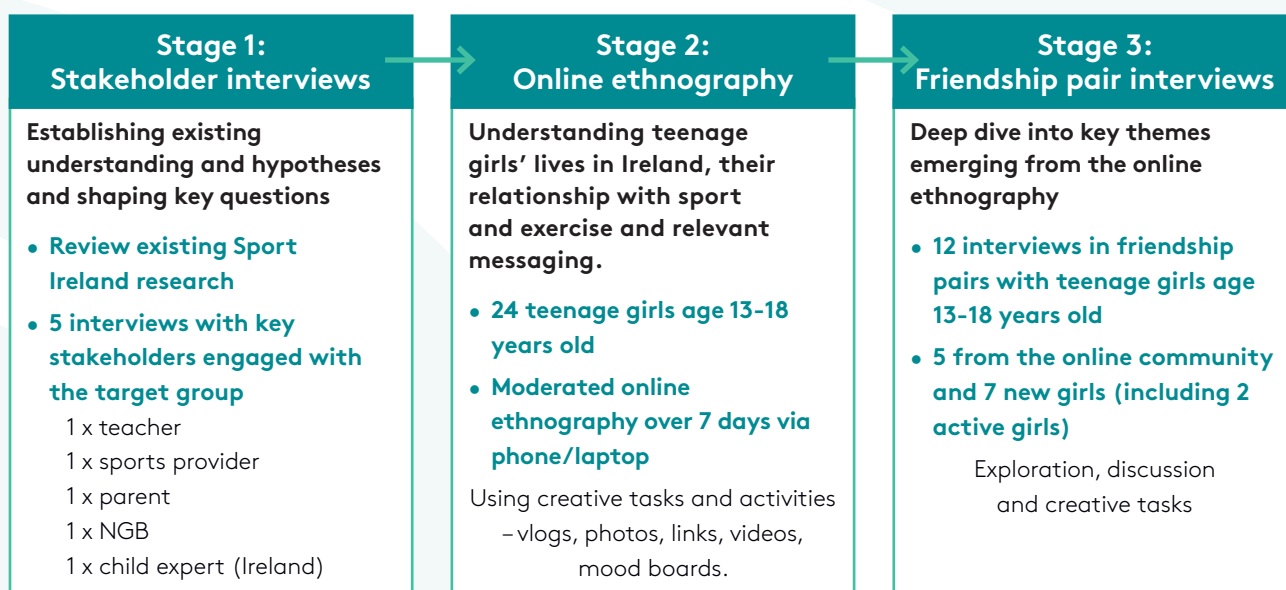
- Identify girls' needs and desires and how to connect with these with relevant sports and activities.
- Explore girls' attitudes toward sport and physical activity.
- Identify challenges and barriers in teenage girls' experiences that result in lower levels of physical activity.
- Identify communication strategies that could work to encourage participation in sport and physical activity programmes.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used for a deep exploration of teenage girls' lives, and their behaviours and attitudes to sport and physical activity. We worked with 31 teenage girls aged 13-18 years. 14 never active, 15 previously active, 2 very active.

- 15 from rural areas (Cork, Kerry, Kildare, Laois, Limerick, Louth, Tipperary)
- 16 from urban areas (Cork, Dublin, Galway, Waterford)

The research was conducted online between **August and October 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic.**



¹Source: [Sport Ireland's 2018 Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study](https://www.sportireland.ie/childrens-sport-participation-and-physical-activity-study), accessed via the Irish Social Science Data Archive: www.ucd.ie/issda.

Considerations when targeting teenage girls

Understanding the target group

Teenage girls are not a homogenous group. They have different needs, desires and levels of maturity and importantly, **different lived experiences of sport and physical activity.**

There is a broad spectrum in their levels of engagement, ranging from the completely disengaged who have had no positive experiences of sport at all, to those who have previously enjoyed sport but have gradually disengaged as they have got older.² The sport sector caters better for the actively engaged 'sporty' girls'. It is important to recognise that the 'non-sporty' or disengaged girls may need different or adapted pathways and approaches to attract and sustain interest. Deeply understanding these girls and motivations in their broader lives and keeping them at the centre of our thinking is key to creating effective solutions.

This research focuses particularly on the lived experiences of **disengaged and gradually disengaged girls.**

A spectrum of engagement



Original Framework - Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls

² Source: Women in Sport (2019) [Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls: Building Strong Foundations for their Futures](#)

Teenage girls' lives in Ireland today

Teenage girls in urban and rural areas face different challenges.

It is important to consider the differences between rural and urban lifestyles for teenage girls as this significantly impacts opportunities to take part in sport and exercise and the potential friendship circles and interest groups to tap into. Adolescence is also a time of development as teenage girls strive to work out who they are and who they want to be. Trying out new things and establishing what they enjoy, is therefore important.

Rural communities tend to focus around a more limited number of traditional sports clubs with an 'in' or 'out' culture for girls who don't play them. The isolation of rural living and reliance on parents for transport can also inhibit teenage girls' ability to be independent and spontaneous. Many feel there is a real lack of places to go and things to do in their communities and they are bored, providing a potential gap for sports and exercise to fill.

For girls living in urban areas, there are certainly more facilities and choices with better transport links, which make them more easily accessible. However, there is a fundamental lack of awareness of what is available and relevant for their age group and many more distractions compete with sport and exercise for time. It is, therefore, important to make activities both visible and appealing to attract attention.

Urban



In urban and semi-urban areas, girls meet their friends more often and have more choice and competing distractions to fill their time.

- Urban girls have more opportunity and places to go with friends and to exercise own choices.
- More facilities and provision to be active in cities, but limited awareness as not communicated well to teens.
- Competition between gyms and leisure centres in larger cities gives choice for workout spaces. Facilities in semi-urban areas often limited with only one of everything e.g. gyms, class times.
- Girls from deprived areas suffer most as they don't know where to go to be active, sport is not seen as acceptable for girls and can be too expensive to join.

We're 'northsiders' we don't have the best reputation honestly. I have a few friends in sports but they're from well off families. It's not the culture here for girls to be into sports... being sporty is rare."

– GIRL, 17

Pen-portrait: Click to learn more about Abby >

Rural



In rural areas, girls appreciate their attractive surroundings but see friends less often, have less choice and independence, and get bored easily.

- Cannot see friends without prior arrangements (no spontaneity) and rely heavily on parents. Achieve independence later.
- Lack of basic facilities such as a swimming pool, leisure centre or gym.
- Old fashioned venues lack appeal and little to no marketing of activities for teenage girls.
- Limited number of team sports dominate in rural communities, creating an 'in' or 'out' culture.

In my area there's nothing to do and nowhere to go. Teenagers are scolded for hanging out in the middle of town so somewhere to just sit and talk would be nice. Skateparks or something similar maybe..."

– GIRL, 17

Pen-portrait: Click to learn more about Niamh >

Underlying wants and needs are often similar regardless of location

A girl's environment is important, and can impact lifestyle, choices and opportunities creating the need for different approaches and marketing of solutions; however, the underlying desires and needs are often very similar, regardless of location.

A lack of social spaces for teens: There is a real need for more facilities and opportunities where girls can socialise, a space that is easily reachable and where they feel welcomed, wanted and included. Lack of stimulation, places to go and things to do with friends means teenage girls spend a lot of time at home and online, and boredom easily sets in.

There are limited opportunities for girls to try new things, learn new skills and feel good about themselves: This is not just in relation to sport and physical activity but also other extracurricular activities e.g. cinema, art, singing, drama, etc. and especially options designed for beginners. Although schools offer after-school activities, distance from school can inhibit attendance and not much is done to help to bridge the gap between pupils and communities.

School plays an important connective role for friendships: School provides wider social contact and enabling friendships to blossom and strengthen over time. Many girls, particularly in rural areas, tend to have small, fixed friendship groups as it is difficult for them to meet other girls their age outside of school. These close, long-term relationships help girls build confidence, but when conflict occurs it can be very disruptive.

'Generation Z':

Teenage girls are digital and social natives

Irish teens have grown up with fast-moving technology and social media deeply ingrained in their lives with more than half of young people spending 4+ hours a day on their phone.³ Therefore connecting with girls in this space is essential.

The lack of activities and social spaces in the 'real world' increases the time girls spend in the online world. The attraction of social media is that it enables girls to connect with friends and the wider world, provides a sense of virtual freedom, inspiration and expression, and much needed entertainment and relief from boredom. Importantly, social media reminds girls that 'there's always somebody like me out there', which gives them validation and confidence.

However, social media creates an internal confusion, a tension between what they see and what they aspire to.

As observers, girls want to be their authentic selves, like the body-positive stars and courageous influencers they admire.

As experiencers, it is almost impossible to live life as a teen without wanting to be liked, popular and admired and this includes conforming to trends that help them to fit in and look like they 'should'. Many girls have experienced online bullying and are rightfully cautious about how and who they engage with online.

#bored

I'll probably just spend the day watching Netflix.

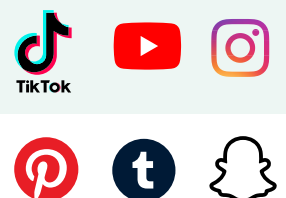
#Videogames

Played some videogames with my online friends to cure some of the boredom.

The best bit of school is seeing my friends every day. Especially the ones who live far away from me in the countryside... it's a great chance to meet with them often."

– GIRL, 15

Most popular



#TikTok

Spent countless hours scrolling through TikTok, laughing and learning new things.

³ Source: Young Social Innovators & Amárach Research (2019) [Gen Z Index – Part 2 / July 2019](#)

Girls are increasingly engaging with meaningful trends: Trends come and go at lightning speed and the idea of difference is increasingly celebrated by girls! In a traditional society, where people previously sought to fit in rather than stand out, this generation of girls appears to be attempting to change the pattern and being authentic is becoming increasingly important in a parallel world of falsity.

Authenticity and difference can also be seen in the people they follow. Girls particularly admire female influencers, who have worked through personal struggles or overcome adversity i.e. Dojo Cat, Ariane Grande, Emma Watson, as well as those who fight for the underdog, are passionate about a cause and confident enough to create change.

Micro trends

Baggy jeans, LED lights, bleached hair, colourful or special effects makeup, piercings, upcycling, sustainable fashion, the 'Alt' look.

Macro trends

Pronouns, equality, feminism, social justice, Black Lives Matter and mental health.

Body positivity is a trend teens aspire to – they follow influencers who are proud to show off their natural shape and 'perfection' is 'out'.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on girls' lives

Life is more challenging and stressful and the pandemic has amplified some of their innate needs and desires, as well as increased their awareness of the things that really matter to them.

At home:

- Girls' **social lives (and activity levels) have been severely restricted** with many parks, amenities and spaces closed - not seeing friends is having a strong impact and making friendships difficult to maintain.
- Girls are spending **even more time online** to fill their time and stay connected to family and friends.
- Girls valued spending more time with loved ones but **extensive periods at home have created tensions** and amplified their need for more space, independence and time with friends.
- Girls feel more **stressed, anxious and lost**, with nothing to look forward to.
- But girls are also more mindful of **the importance of taking care of their wellbeing**, being more active and appreciate the freedom of the great outdoors more than ever before.

At school:

- **Masks and social distancing have made interactions regimented**, awkward and tiring, meaning less relaxation and fun.
- **Social spaces are limited** and groups are separated, making socialising difficult.
- **Important end of year rituals cancelled** means girls have little to look forward to.
- **Anxiety and stress heightened due to uncertain times** – girls' sense of direction is fading and they fear for the future.
- **Girls appreciate school even more now**, for the social connection it facilitates.

I was delighted to meet up with friends I didn't meet since March. Worst bit is that some of my friendships have become a bit awkward because it's so long since we met and we've grown apart."

– GIRL, 15

What really matters to teenage girls – 5 anchors



1 Support network

A sense of place in the world



2 Independence & opportunity

Desire to grow up and find themselves



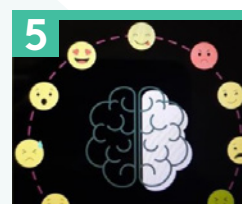
3 Socially connected

Connection, validation and inspiration



4 Moments of pride

Fuelling confidence and self-worth



5 Keeping on top of it all

Managing teenage pressures



Original Framework - adapted from Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls

*Imagery shared by girls in the online ethnography

Support network

- **Friends are central to a girls' support network** – they strongly prioritise time with friends above everything else.
- **Building strong friendships is essential for girls' development** as they gradually separate from family and learn the skills they need for their futures. More time with friends means a stronger sense of self and place in the world.
- **Maintaining close friendships can be hard when living distant from each other.** Girls feel they don't have enough time with friends and school plays an important connecting role.
- **Family provide emotional and practical support for girls but they often feel misunderstood** by adults, in part due to some parents' more traditional values.

It's hard to see my other friends as most live far away and I can only go into town once a week because we are back at school. It's very upsetting when my mom doesn't let me into town to see them."

– GIRL, 15

Independence and opportunity

- **Teenage girls strongly desire more independence, to make their own choices and discover who they are** – this is a natural need at this life stage.
- **Girls lack space and opportunities to feel free, try new things, have fun with friends and make formative memories.** This impacts negatively on their relationships and thus, their confidence.
- **Girls from rural areas and some older girls appear most affected** – rural girls must rely heavily on parents and older girls may have more responsibilities/restrictions placed on them.

Socially connected

- **Teenage girls are digital and social natives – online activities are central to their lives** and time spent online is exacerbated by a lack of social spaces and activities in the 'real world'.
- **Being online provides much needed social connection, validation,** virtual freedom and relief from boredom.
- **The obsession with selfies and appearance has had a big impact on girls.** Online bullying means some limit their social media use, running the risk of losing touch with others their age.
- **Girls follow influencers they can relate to and aspire to be like and engage with meaningful trends** such as body positivity, mental health, authenticity and being 'different'. But this is sometimes at odds with the perfection social media demands.

Moments of pride

- **Progression, achievement and a sense of direction in life are important** for teen girls to build self-esteem and self-worth.
- **Girls lack opportunities to try new things, learn new skills and feel good about themselves**, other than online or school activities which can become boring and repetitive.
- **Girls do see the value of sport and physical activity and its potential to build confidence and wellbeing** but for most, fitness simply isn't on their radar.

Keeping on top of it all

- **Adolescence is a time of great change and upheaval, and girls often feel misunderstood** by parents/adults, who struggle to fully appreciate the pressures they face.
- **Juggling the demands of teenage life can be stressful and exhausting**; increased academic pressure at school and home, managing friendships and conflicts, online interactions and expectations, and the physical and emotional challenges of puberty can all take a toll.
- **In the teenage years, girls start to learn what they want to do, versus what they must do**. Girls struggle to reconcile this with the many rules and restrictions of everyday life imposed on them, particularly in rural areas.
- **Mental health is an important subject for girls in Ireland today**. They are acutely aware of the need to take care of their mental health but often have limited means to do so.

The opportunity for sport and exercise

Sport and physical activity can fill a void in girls' lives...

- ✓ **...in connection:** girls' friendship groups are limited, but sport can help them meet new friends and deepen relationships.
- ✓ **...in space:** girls don't have sufficient space to be with their friends where they feel welcome and aren't judged.
- ✓ **...in time:** girls are bored and looking for exciting, fun things to do in their lives, especially in rural areas and since Covid-19.
- ✓ **...in girls' sense of pride and achievement:** girls struggle to find fulfilling activities through which they can learn new skills and feel good about themselves; sport is powerful when positioned right.
- ✓ **...in independence:** girls yearn for independence and opportunities to discover themselves, and making their own choices to improve wellbeing through being active can be part of this process.

We can leverage these anchors to make sport and physical activity more relevant and meaningful to girls' lives but to do so, we need to understand the barriers they face to engaging in sport and physical activity.

When I feel unproductive or sluggish, I'd go on a walk around the neighbourhood... I'm not very passionate about it but I understand its importance in my life so I do my best to add it in there every now and then."

– GIRL, 17

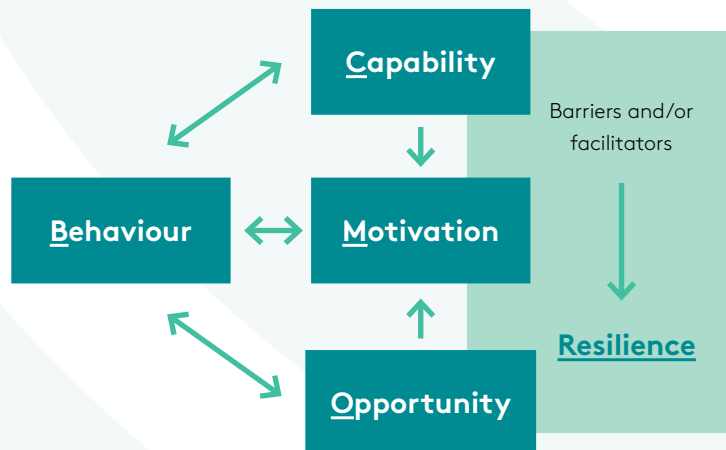
I feel like parents don't understand the pressure we are under in school and in our social life... it's hard to fit in and have a good school/friend balance."

– GIRL, 17

Perceptions of and barriers to sport and physical activity

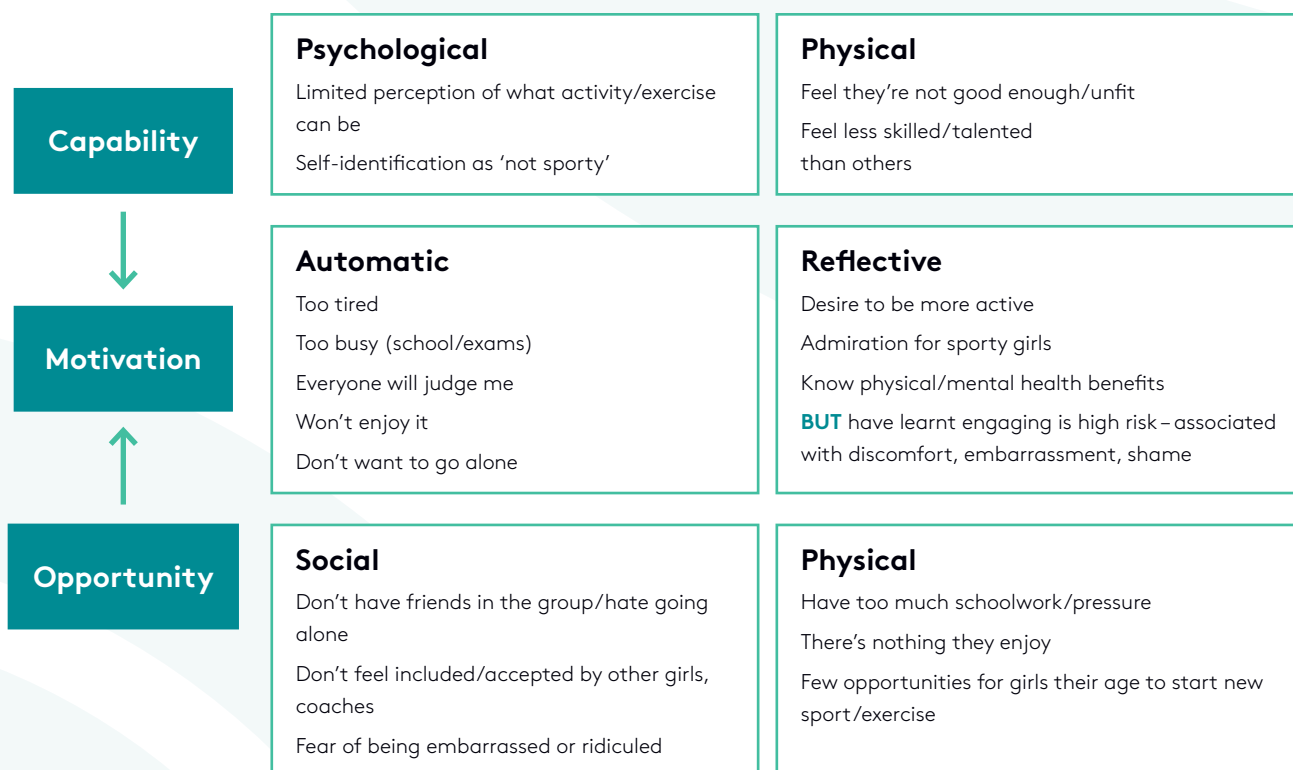
In this section, we use the COM-B model of behaviour change to explore **disengaged and gradually disengaged girls'** attitudes to sport and physical activity, and the barriers that prevent them from taking part.

The COM-B model proposes that for teenage girls to change their behaviour and become more physically active, they must have the **capability, opportunity and motivation** to do so.⁴



Overview of barriers for teenage girls

Psychological and social barriers are particularly high for teenage girls. Any interventions to support girls on their journey to being active will need to target a combination of key barriers to be effective.



⁴ Source: Michie, S., M van Stralen, M. and West, R. (2011) 'The Behaviour Change Wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions', Implementation Science, vol. 6, no. 42, 1-12

Capability

'I'm not good enough'

The most powerful barrier that prevents inactive girls from taking part in sport and physical activity is not feeling good enough to join in. This stems from both their perceptions and their experiences of competitive sport in Ireland.

- These girls have narrow, and often negative experiences of a small number of traditional (and dominant) team sports in Ireland, and think this is all that sport is and can be.
- They feel too old to start a new sport in their teens, since most girls start when very young and are more advanced in their teens (especially in Gaelic football and camogie).
- Girls associate 'sportiness' with team and contact sports, so girls who are interested in exercise do not feel targeted with sporting initiatives.

'I'm not sporty'

By ages 13-15, many girls have labelled themselves 'not sporty' and are living by this label, with few (if any) attempts to counter it. They have deep rooted perceptions of sporty girls as popular, confident, cliquey and attractive, and these stereotypes are reinforced in popular culture and in their everyday experiences of sport. Non-sporty girls therefore tend to feel less confident and good about themselves because they are not these things and do not see themselves reflected in these role models.

Consequently, 'non-sporty' girls tend to gravitate toward individual exercise and non-team based activities, where no one is relying on them to be the best, or judging them for not being good enough. However, by taking part in individual exercise girls can miss out on the social support and motivation of team sports, and therefore find it harder to maintain a regular exercise routine. A happy medium is to connect girls with others through a shared individual interest such as cycling, outdoor adventure, swimming, skating, dancing or running, and to go out in friendship groups with no pressure or commitment required.

No one wants to be bad at exercise in front of other people. It makes us look stupid, especially since other teenage girls are often so critical of others."

- GIRL, 16

Many people exercise a lot and are never called sporty. I think that because PE in school is fully focused on team sports, some people may not enjoy it and miss out."

- GIRL, 16

Opportunity

'I don't belong in sport'

When teens feel they aren't good enough and this is being reinforced, they stand out in a negative way – it makes them feel ashamed, embarrassed, exposed and isolated and they feel judged by others as 'letting the team down'. This is amplified by the teasing, embarrassment and self-consciousness girls already experience during puberty due to their changing bodies.

Inclusion and acceptance are crucial for engaging girls in sport and exercise. Girls need encouragement and reassurance from friends, other players and coaches.

- Girls want to feel like they belong, and are making a valued contribution, even if they're not the best on the team.
- Taking part should be fun and enjoyable, not fear inducing.
- Coaches sometimes favour and focus on the best players, leaving those who aren't the best feeling as if they don't matter.
- If these needs are met, excuses like lack of interest or being too busy could disappear.

I hate when I try to get the ball and fail. I feel everyone is watching me and I feel stupid for even trying when the others are far better."

- GIRL, 13

'There's no room for fun'

Inactive girls are more attracted to activities that focus on fun, enjoyment and wellbeing and take the pressure off having to be talented. There aren't enough opportunities for girls to take part and have carefree fun with friends while being active due to:

- The culture of sport in Ireland being very competitive and the required level of commitment needed, especially for team sports.
- More committed/serious players can be critical of those who are less talented and this results in cliquey behaviour and exclusion.
- When sport is largely competitive, the fun element is considered childish or not serious enough by committed players and coaches. There is not enough provision catering to different abilities and levels of competitiveness.

However, it is not competition per se that is rejected by many girls but more the fact that it's no fun when they're competing against others who are much more skilled and this can add significant pressure and fear of failure.

'There's nothing interesting I can start from scratch'

There feels to be few beginner or entry level classes and activities for teenage girls, which would level the playing field and help them build skills with others of a similar level, feel more comfortable and develop confidence.

- Most beginner classes are aimed at much younger girls, and girls their own age have been playing for many years, so teenage beginners fall through the gap.
- Even when opportunities exist, girls can't find or access them easily. It seemed far easier to find activities when they were younger (and via parents).
- When girls do find activities, they can be too difficult to get to, especially in rural areas, which means relying on others to take them.
- Existing facilities, especially in rural parts of Ireland, can be run-down, old-fashioned and unappealing to teenage girls (e.g. village halls, community centres are seen as adult spaces).

Motivation

'I know it's good for me but...'

Inactive girls understand the physical health benefits of sport and physical activity but this isn't enough to motivate them to get active when they have **low perceived capability** and **little opportunity** to do what they want to do.

- Messages about physical health make girls feel guilty and bad about themselves for not doing enough – shame is not an emotion that should be associated with being active.
- Because girls lack motivation, exercise is sporadic. Girls get most of their exercise in PE, and occasionally punctuate the week with other activities (e.g. family days out, running or cycling, walking to school/shops with friends).
- Older girls may do home workouts (e.g. yoga, weights) or some individual exercise (going to the gym, running) as they start to feel a greater responsibility for their own health and benefit from some increased independence from parents.
- Girls do value the *mental* health benefits of exercise, especially since Covid-19 restrictions.

I would like if there was encouragement for everyone, no matter how good or bad you are at a sport. I know there is meant to be but in reality only the best get attention."

– GIRL, 15

The only team sports in my area would be GAA and all the players have been playing since they were very young so it's hard to keep up."

– GIRL, 15

The worst part is pressuring myself to be healthy and to exercise because I feel like if I don't, I'm lazy or I'm not as good of a person."

– GIRL, 15

'I'd like to lead a healthy life'

Inactive girls face many blocks, but they do feel inspired when talking to their more active friends. Their friends talk about the benefits of being active and playing team sport, such as empowerment, speed and strength, achievement and goals, pride, responsibility and a sense of identity. However, these benefits need to be experienced to be believed.

- It is hard for inactive girls to really take in what their sporty friends are talking about, because of the barriers they've faced.
- Inactive girls do not always see the *effort* active girls put in – they tend to feel that everything is easier and just comes naturally to their active friends, and that their friends never need motivating by others.
- Girls aspire to be fit and healthy like their active friends, but to motivate and draw them in we need to highlight benefits they can more easily relate to – fun, enjoyment, friendships/socialising, excitement, adventure, casual/relaxed, being in nature and fresh air.

“She just sees it as a natural part of a day – like eating, dressing sleeping...nobody has to force or remind her to get ready...nobody had to motivate her.”

– GIRL, 13

Girls told us what would motivate them to be more active

- **FOCUS ON FUN** – carefree fun with friends, not too serious or competitive
- **EXCITEMENT** – more exciting/daring adventures and activities (outdoor pursuits, boxing, figure skating, ice hockey, horse riding)
- **SOCIAL & HOLISTIC** – exercise with wrap around activities and time and space to socialise, relax and share experiences
- **SMALLER GROUPS** – activities in smaller groups with friends but able to meet new people, both girls and boys in the right environment
- **DIFFERENT SPORTS & ACTIVITIES** – Less mainstream sports intrigue and feel more accessible (badminton, tennis, volleyball, hockey, dance, gymnastics, exercise classes)
- **ENTRY/TASTER LEVEL** – more entry level initiatives (all ages), free from commitment, pressure and judgement
- **ACCESSIBLE SPACES** – new and existing spaces that are safe and easy to reach (woodland paths/nature walks, cycle routes, swimming, outdoor pursuits)
- **QUALITY** – good quality, modern, teenage friendly facilities (female gyms, indoor/outdoor swimming pools, youth clubs or active space)
- **LEAD ORGANISERS** – organisers who take the lead but encourage and support all girls
- **ROLE MODELS** – relatable and wider range of visible role models who've shared their fitness journey and empathise with their anxieties

Engaging teenage girls in sport – 8 Principles for Success

By combining our exploration of girls' wider lives and what is important to them, with our understanding of their experiences and barriers in sport, we have developed 8 important principles to engage and connect with teenage girls, to support them to embrace sport and physical activity into their lives. These are particularly valuable for girls who are less engaged currently, however can also be relevant for active girls to enhance their experience and prevent them from dropping out.

Thoughts on application

Sports organisations can use these 8 Principles for Success to check and challenge existing programmes to enhance appeal and relevance for the target audience. They can also be used to innovate and develop completely new initiatives through a teenage girl lens.

Before delving into these principles, we invite you to:

- 1. Determine your target:** Decide who on the spectrum of engagement you are looking to attract.
- 2. Step into a teenage girl's world:** Connect with our pen-portraits for Niamh and Abby from our research. You can download their stories from the Sport Ireland website.
- 3. What does success look like?** Pinpoint the behaviour you wish to change by asking:
 - What is your target doing now and how do they feel about sport and physical activity?
 - How would you like them to behave and feel instead?

Pen-portrait: Click to learn more about Abby >

Pen-portrait: Click to learn more about Niamh >

8 Principles for Success



No judgement

Take pressure off performance and give freedom simply to play.



Invoke excitement

Bring a sense of adventure and discovery.



Clear emotional reward

Reframe achievement as 'moments of pride', not winning.



Open eyes to what's there

Redefine sport as more than traditional, competitive sport.



Build into existing habits

Tap into existing behaviours in other spheres.



Give girls a voice & choice

Allow girls choice and control to feel empowered.



Champion what's in it for them

Make it much more than just about health.



Expand image of what 'sporty' looks like

Create truly relatable role models who inspire.



Original Framework - adapted from Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls

1

No judgement – take pressure off performance and give freedom simply to play

Traditional sports in Ireland have strong competitive pathways, which can be too rigid for inactive and less experienced girls to engage in.

- **Broaden traditional pathways** to make them more accessible. Ask yourself: ‘what is the pathway for an inactive or less experienced girl in my sport or activity?’
- **Give girls a safe social space** to let their hair down and have fun with friends, free from judgement and serious competition.
- **Provide more opportunities for girls to be active away from mainstream sports**, where they can feel less scrutinised.
- **Create an inclusive environment** and educate coaches and volunteers to make sessions more accessible, fair and supportive. It is often not the competition per se that girls reject, but the feeling they are the ‘weak link’ and have let the team down.
- **Think carefully about the way you communicate your activity.** Use inclusive and liberating language to emphasise freedom, fun and play.



“I used to do football, but then I wasn’t really getting on the team. It just wasn’t for me, so I just decided to stop.”

– GIRL, 14

2

Invoke excitement – bring a sense of adventure and discovery

Alongside removing barriers, it is very important to consider how to create real desire and inspiration. Teenage girls in Ireland crave more excitement and adventure in their lives. There is a space to fill here, especially in rural communities where girls are seeking new experiences.

- **Adventurous activities are viewed through a different lens** – they are exciting experiences where no one is an expert, removing pressure to be the best. There’s an opportunity to create a ‘team dynamic’ in a more individually focused sport or activity.
- **Provide more opportunities in the great outdoors** – these activities sparked real interest and excitement for girls!
- **Girls are excited by the unusual and unexpected** – think unusual sports, unusual venues, combining different sports, or brand new ways of playing a traditional sport to pique their interest.
- **Unusual or adventurous activities are a form of social currency**, something interesting to talk about and share with others (the Instagram factor!). Encourage girls to celebrate being different and enjoy being unique and individual.
- **Variety is important** – It does not have to be about one single sport or activity as some girls are excited by trying different things and learning a variety of skills. Varying sessions or taking part in different activities removes the pressure of commitment and keeps girls interested and coming back.



“The outdoor adventure would be my favourite because I like how you’re not doing the same thing every time you go. You’re not staying in the same spot, you’re going to a different place doing different things... I think it will be a great way to the find new friends as well.”

– GIRL, 14

3

Clear emotional reward – reframe achievement as ‘moments of pride’, not winning

Girls desire purpose and personal reward in whatever they do. They need to connect emotionally to being active so it doesn’t become a chore and simply something they ‘must do’ but gives them positive feedback and help them feel good about themselves. This is often the glue to keep girls motivated.

- **Consider how you can support girls to feel good about themselves** in your sport or activity. For example, encouraging them to support or give back to other girls, building social or community action into activities and ways to facilitate confidence and personal growth.
- **Reframe competitiveness into their own personal challenge or goal.** Shifting achievement away from win/lose levels the playing field and enables all girls to succeed and feel proud of themselves in sport.
- **Reinvigorate and add credibility to enjoying sport/activity for its own sake** and celebrate behaviour that girls can be proud of, beyond just winning (e.g. most supportive player, most improved member, team spirit award).



If you weren’t playing with your friends, you wouldn’t enjoy it as much. It’s good as well... you know girls from other teams can be so close to each other... you meet loads of new girls and loads of new people.”

– ACTIVE GIRL, 14

4

Open eyes to what’s there – redefine sport as more than traditional competitive sport

Inactive girls can struggle with a narrow and negative experience of traditional sport, which limits their perceptions of what sport CAN BE and what they think they CAN DO. There are so many more possibilities of which they are unaware and which could inspire them to get active.

- **Modernise, update the image of ‘sport’ and challenge perceptions** – show girls they can enjoy sport and being active without the rules, regulations and lack of freedom and spontaneity they associate with traditional team sports.
- **Provide new and different sport and exercise opportunities in schools and in the community** to help girls try out different activities and find their tribe; something they can feel good at and belong to.
- **Language is powerful** – use more accessible and exciting language and imagery to open girls’ eyes to the different ways they can enjoy being active.
- **Take inspiration from further afield** – girls found American sports culture particularly exciting and aspirational!



The ideas over the last two days have made me realise that there are so many different exercises and ways to keep fit out there, that I don’t just have to do the basic stuff like running or playing hurling or soccer.”

– GIRL, 16

5

Build into existing habits – tap into existing behaviours in other spheres

Girls feel they have little space and opportunity to do things but have an inherent need to connect with others. By building into existing habits, the start point does not always have to be sport and exercise, which can make it much more accessible and motivating to those girls who are disengaged currently.

- **Tap into what is already fun and exciting for girls, with physical activity hidden inside what they already enjoy** – activity by stealth! For example, take a more gamified approach: local walks or shopping with friends could become scavenger hunts or games of community ‘tag’!
- **Build elements of girls’ online activities into your offer** – use social networking and online groups to give girls a sense of belonging and connection beyond the activity itself.
- **Recognise, reinforce and celebrate the physical activity in their existing behaviours**, which they often feel is ‘not good enough’. Avoid shaming or making them feel guilty through overt messaging about health.
- **Utilise the great outdoors on their doorstep** and encourage girls to enjoy the nature that is all around them, by getting out in it!



#localhistory

I went for a history scavenger hunt around our town and I learned more about our local area’s history.

6

Give girls a voice & choice – allow girls choice and control to feel empowered

A girl’s world is dominated by rules, restrictions and a lack of independence, and they feel they have very little to no say in what happens where they live. The teenage years are a key life-stage for allowing girls to take responsibility and make choices as they become more independent.

- **Harness the opportunity to give girls more ownership over shaping the sport and physical activity provision in their area** – initiatives designed by and for girls will help girls feel valued, listened to, more comfortable and in control.
- **BUT... it’s important to still open their eyes to the possibilities, otherwise the choice will seem narrow and unmotivating with their limited experiences.**
- **Girls organising and leading other girls**, as well as mentoring and buddying from peers, can be a virtuous circle of inspiration and support, and help change the authority dynamic. It makes them feel valued and brings a sense of positive purpose.
- **Girls admire those who fight for the underdog** – they could become a highly effective ‘lobbying voice’ for girls like them to encourage the provision of more opportunities for girls in their area. Social media provides a platform to connect girls in more remote towns and villages to work together to do this.

I found all the sports teams and camps we brainstormed very motivating since they all understand our worries and anxiety related to sports, so imagining these new establishments is really exciting and motivating.”

– GIRL, 16

You could partner them up with somebody to make sure they know what they’re doing and they’re not all by themselves.”

– GIRL, 14

7

Champion what's in it for them – make it much more than just about health

Girls know that being active is 'good for health' but this isn't always enough to motivate them.

- **Reinforce the wider value of taking part**, such as developing strong friendships, carefree fun, building confidence, learning life skills (resilience, leadership, team work), letting off steam from the pressures of school and family life.
- **Non-sporty girls often feel alone in their experiences** – connecting girls who share similar experiences can be motivating and start a movement of girls inspiring girls supported through social media.
- **Create more of a team dynamic for individual activities** by bringing girls together under a shared interest or goal.
- **Tell girls' lived experiences and journeys** through authentic storytelling, demonstrating deeper values that girls can connect with.
- **We can also motivate girls initially using the power of incentives and rewards** – e.g. freebies (clothing/water bottles), discounts from popular brands, restaurant vouchers, exclusive experiences, until they really *feel the intrinsic benefits for themselves*.

Knowing that other girls feel the same when we talk about barriers makes me feel not alone, and prompts me to possibly try something new with friends, since I know other people are in the same boat as me in terms of anxiety and fear relating to doing sports."

– GIRL, 16

8

Expand image of what 'sporty' looks like – create truly relatable role models who inspire

Girls have strong notions of what it means to be 'sporty' and label themselves as 'not sporty' from an early age, which hinders their engagement. The wider the range of activities promoted, visible and available, the more opportunity there is to broaden perceptions of what it is to be 'sporty'.

- **Girls have admiration for their 'sporty' peers but feel they don't belong** in the inner circle of traditional team sports – leverage this aspiration and widen the 'sporty' circle so all activity has value.
- **Reframe and normalise what being 'sporty' looks like** – leverage the body positivity trend to create more diverse role models that reinforce it's about what your body can do, not what it looks like.
- **Girls like to see themselves reflected back**. They like to hear and learn from others' experiences, particularly those who have overcome adversity or who they can relate to, e.g. friends, girls their age, with their body shape, or their ability.
- **Elite athletes provide much needed visibility, but they don't resonate and inspire inactive girls in the same way** as more relatable role models such as other girls, family and community members.

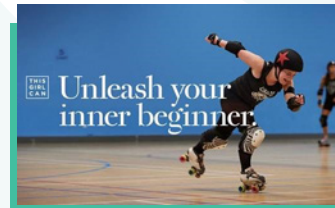


Body positivity is getting more popular and mental health awareness also... all of these young girls need to know that they are all beautiful in their own ways and that they don't have to look a certain way to be considered pretty."

– GIRL, 16

Marketing and messaging for inactive teenage girls

Marketing does not appear to be reaching inactive teenage girls and is not sparking interest if it does. Communications need to:



Inspire and excite

- Create the WOW-factor to motivate and excite girls to come with their friends.
- Create exciting shareable content (instil FOMO!) to get girls sharing and talking about it on their social channels (e.g. Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok).
- Share girls' authentic stories and journeys to inspire.
- Consider using non-sporty micro-influencers to engage online.

Sell the wider benefits

- Communicate the deeper emotional benefits (e.g. connection, confidence, fun, pride) girls can gain through your language and imagery, not just the rational benefits.

Make it easy for girls to find out about activities

- Advertise in places where girls spend their time: school, shopping centres, cinema, neighbourhoods.
- Create an online social space for teens to connect and find out about activities.
- Consider reaching younger teen girls through families, and particularly mums.

Take a local approach

- Tailor marketing to communities, e.g. local online groups and pages to connect with girls, and collaborate with schools and local facilities.

Well timed campaigns/messaging

- Target girls during key times during the year e.g. transition year, school holidays, key events during the school year and within their communities.

Messaging should leverage girls' anchors and the 8 Principles for Success

Use explicit/implicit language and imagery to emphasise key messages that:

Inspire and champion what's in it for them...

- Social space where you can hang out and have fun with friends
- Challenge and be proud of yourself
- Be different and delve into something new and exciting
- Free your mind from stress and anxiety by switching off and having fun
- Improve your wellbeing



Provide reassurance to alleviate their fears...

- For everyone, of all abilities and all ages
- A 'safe' space where others are approachable and non-judgemental
- Be spontaneous and free – no commitment or obligation
- Somewhere you can belong and meet others like you
- Supportive mentors and role models who began at your age and your level

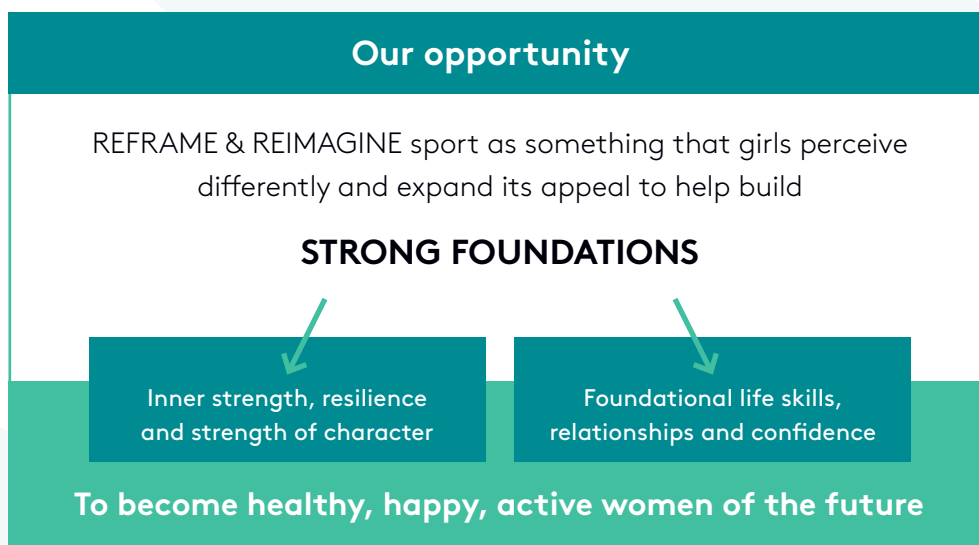
Final thoughts

Reframing sport for teenage girls

We need to fundamentally change how those teenage girls who are disengaged feel about sport and physical activity in Ireland.

- The girls' experience of sport and exercise needs to have a much more positive start-point. When girls have had largely negative experiences and are made to feel 'not good enough' this reference and fear of failure limits their engagement in wider physical activity in the future.
- It should never feel too late to join sporting activities as teenagers and we need to provide ample opportunities and encouragement to prevent girls dismissing the idea of ever being 'sporty' just because they haven't excelled or have felt excluded from traditional sports.
- Girls need to feel that they truly belong in sport. Sport and physical activity will resonate more if it is about feeling good and comfortable in their own skin, rather than always feeling compared to others.
- There needs to be creativity and inspiration in the provision of activities for all abilities, so they have more accessible, flexible and exciting opportunities to enjoy being active with friends with different pathways for different needs. We need to help girls feel less alone in their experiences of sport and physical activity and provide opportunities to connect with others like themselves and have their voices heard.

Sport and physical activity can be a powerful force to support girls' health and wellbeing and can help them on their journey to becoming self-assured, independent young women, who feel good about themselves and what they can achieve.



We have a unique opportunity in time to **REFRAME AND REIMAGINE SPORT** as something that these girls perceive differently – something that enhances their lives and provides what they need and seek in these uncertain times.

To do so, we as a sector should:

- Broaden the concept of sport so it is truly accessible and inclusive for all girls, not just the 'sporty' few.
- Provide fresh, fun experiences and opportunities for girls to try something new and exciting and feel good about themselves in the process.
- Subtly leverage girls' aspirations to feel fit and healthy and wider trends in mental health, body positivity and celebrate authenticity and difference.
- Start a movement of empowering storytelling to connect with girls in really inspiring and compelling ways.

Acknowledgments



This research was funded by The Dormant Account Fund.



This research was carried out by Women in Sport.
Registered charity number 1060267.

Thank you to:

- The girls who took part in the research.
- QualiProjects, who supported us with the research.

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