



# Girl Connection

FOR THOSE WHO SERVE ADOLESCENT FEMALES  
IOWA GENDER-SPECIFIC SERVICES TASK FORCE  
JUNE 2004

## Girls & Sport - Part II

In the April edition of the Girl Connection newsletter, we learned of some of the benefits of sports participation from Iowa women who had been there. Those same women had observations about the challenges as well...

"I was almost always the last chosen for team games. I didn't feel I was part of the group." Lucy, 54

"I regret quitting. I will never let my own children quit a sport to work. I was a typical teenage girl, I was sensitive to what others wanted me to do, even if they never said so." Holly, 32

"Other than required PE, they did not have sports for girls. I hated PE. It was a gruesome experience. I didn't learn the satisfaction of feeling physically competent." Diane, 51

"...when I got cut from the volleyball team in HS I blamed the fact that I was overweight. Maybe that is why I had exercise-induced anorexia followed by bulimia!" Tammy, 39

There are other challenges to consider when it comes to girls and sport. According to the 1997 President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sport report, Physical Activity & Sports in the Lives of Girls, "Harsh economic conditions, prejudice and institutional barriers have limited the participation of many poor girls, girls of color and girls with disabilities." The report also concludes, according to psychology of sport scholar, Diane Wiese-Bjornstal, that with the dramatic increase in childhood obesity, there is a need to help overweight girls conquer their fears of participation so they can become less sedentary. Sedentary behavior is not limited, however, to overweight girls. Children with disabilities are three times as sedentary as their peers and this trend becomes more pronounced as activity levels drop in adolescence.<sup>1</sup>

Poverty, institutional barriers and lack of opportunity are of concern when measured against the positive impact of girls & sports. Research has shown that "higher self-esteem was associated with engaging in physical activity even among elementary school-aged children, especially children from economically disadvantaged families and those with mental or physical disabilities."<sup>2</sup> Girls in sports are less likely than their non-sporting counterparts to become pregnant in their teens. They engage in sexual activity later in life and are more likely to use contraception when they do. Girls in sports do better academically and are less likely to use alcohol and other drugs. Clearly, the potential benefits make overcoming any barriers worth the effort. Unfortunately, girls in the juvenile justice system do not participate in sports in high numbers and therefore are not reaping these benefits.

### How can their involvement be facilitated?

First, "parents, coaches, and teachers must be aware of girls' motives for participating in sport and physical activity. Girls participate not only for competitive reasons, but to get in shape, socialize, improve skills and have fun. All motives, not just those related to highly competitive activity, must be respected and validated."<sup>1</sup> Adults must resist the win at all costs attitude, as this may not be what motivates a young woman to join.

Second, adults must recognize that not every young woman is going to be the champion of the varsity team. It is important to find a level of competition that challenges each individual without inadvertently reinforcing any existing feelings of inadequacy. This may mean taking her and her friends to the local community center for a night of volleyball rather than signing her up for the high school volleyball team.

Third, encourage young women to try out different sports so they can discover which ones they enjoy. The younger the better, so they can develop their skills and love of the game early. Gaining confidence in their physical abilities will have much farther reaching benefits than simply becoming proficient in a single sport.

Finally, it is important to recognize that although organized sports may not be her first priority, being physically active has benefits that cannot be achieved through any other type of extracurricular activity. She may gain feelings of camaraderie in other groups but in order to feel confidence in her physical capacity and to reap the physical health benefits, she must *do something physical*.

## Lessons Learned from the Team

- Loyalty to and support of others and expecting the same in return
- Making responsible decisions so you don't let others down
- Being reliable and following through on your word
- Working hard to achieve a goal and being able to have fun while doing it
- Coping with failure and winning with grace
- Self control and discipline
- Offering leadership, motivation and encouragement
- Being a good sport -when you win, when you lose and all the time in between

"Girls in sports are often emotionally healthy. They see their bodies as functional, not decorative. When a girl is justifiably proud of her volleyball spike, her batting average, her booming kick, she is considering her body as a functioning physical tool, not an object on display."

Mary Pipher,  
Reviving Ophelia

1 President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sport. (1997). Physical activity & sport in the lives of girls: Physical & mental health dimensions from an interdisciplinary approach. Washington D.C.

2 Tracy, Allison J. & Sumru, Erkut. (2002). *Gender and race patterns in the pathways from sports participation to self-esteem*. Sociological Perspectives, Vol. 45. No. 4. p. 445-466.

3 Pipher, M. (1994). Reviving Ophelia: Saving the selves of adolescent girls. New York: Ballantine Books.

# The Girl Connection

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For back issues of *The Girl Connection*, more information about the Gender-Specific Services Task Force, or if you are willing to receive future issues via e-mail to save mailing costs, please contact us:

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