

WOMEN AND SPORT

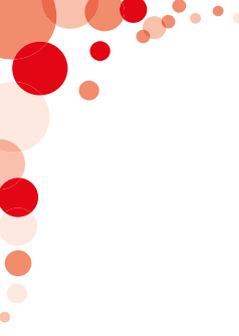
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FROM GIRL TO WOMAN: BECOMING AN ADULT;
SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS AND SPORTS
PARTICIPATION DURING ADOLESCENCE

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SUMMARY

In this text, we examine how sports participation during the transition from girl to woman is affected by the process of socialisation and identity formation that occurs during adolescence. The transition period lasts several years, starts and ends at different times for different individuals, and is a unique experience for each girl. The consequences for organised sport are also discussed.

TAKE HOME MESSAGES:

- The period of adolescence is characterised by continual questioning of what previously was accepted as self-evident.
- The processes of socialisation and identity formation accompany the physical and psychological changes that occur during puberty; sports practice can act as an arena for these processes.
- To experience participation in sport as manageable, understandable and meaningful is important if young people are to continue their involvement in competitive sport into their late teens, and beyond.
- The transition from girl to woman is unique for every girl, and is experienced differently in the context of different sports.
- Experienced and perceived physical competence are important for sports participation. Be aware of stereotypes and subordinating messages that surround female athletes—they may decrease girls' experienced competencies and ambitions.
- Allow space for girls to discuss with appropriate adults the physical and mental changes that come with adolescence.



INTRODUCTION

It goes without saying that physical activity is important for the health of children and young people and that participation in sport can improve physical and psychological wellbeing and contribute to social development. One of the main reasons many young people are involved in organised sport is to be a part of a social context. Sport offers many opportunities to cultivate social relations, friendships, feelings of belonging, physical competence and adult contact—and is also fun! According to adolescents, ‘to have fun’ is one of the main reasons that they participate in sport. Despite this ‘fun factor’, many girls leave organised sport during adolescence. Why does this happen, and how can existing patterns be challenged?

The transition from girl to woman is a complicated period for many girls. During adolescence, the body changes—in both girls and boys—in uncontrollable ways. However, not only does the body change, but also social relations become increasingly important and the need for integrity increases. Cognitive, emotional and social thinking develop as well, and a driving force to create an independent life emerges.

Sports participation involves both formal and informal learning of new skills and new ways of thinking and developing as an individual. The individual learns not only sporting skills and abilities, but also that which is expected (norms and values). This learning is related to how individuals view themselves as athletes and to the meaning they place upon participation in sport during adolescence. This text takes a socio-cultural perspective, which means that the actions and transactions of an individual are seen as choices made within a socio-cultural context and through direct and indirect communication with the surrounding environment and other individuals. Through examining this socio-cultural context, we can understand how people make meaning in their life.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Between 6 and 12 years of age, a child’s emotional and social development is characterised by the growing child’s drive to be able and to feel competent; during these years, the child often feels exactly that. The period of adolescence, however, especially between 13 to 15 years, is characterised by continual questioning of what had been seen earlier as self-evident. The adolescent can feel like a stranger to both the emotional and the physical self (i.e. the internal self and the body). Self-centeredness increases and those around may experience the individual as emotionally egocentric.

Social development and the process of socialisation continue throughout life, but the seeking for an identity is most powerful during adolescence. To be a part of or involved in a socialisation process means to develop and hold a social identity by observing and interacting with others. The socialisation process that occurs during adolescence is both a conscious and an unconscious orientation towards social practices and values that the individual or groups of individuals experience as meaningful. These values contribute to the individual’s preferences and meaning making. To truly engage with sport means placing a high cultural value on the practice. That is, the person views sport as something valuable, and chooses to develop bodily skills and competences in this area.

Sport as a social practice is defined by the activity, with its associated identity of place and norms and values. This social practice offers an arena for the process of socialisation through interactions with significant others (e.g. friends, coaches, parents). What the individual attaches value to affects how she or he orientates in the world and communicates

with others. Throughout life, individuals and groups of individuals will prefer different types of sports and sporting activities, which are all based in a collectively experienced and defined (appreciated) value, but are also affected by how these values are valued by others.

Developing an identity means to acknowledge meaning and to interpret meaning through communication with both the individual self and the surrounding environment via social interaction through actions and transactions. An individual's identity is many-faceted, and different identities will be more relevant in some contexts than in others—and can sometimes even contradict each other. For example, a girl may embody the multiple identities of sister, canoeist, handball player and dog owner, but may also wish to resemble a role model whom she admires.

Our moral and social thinking changes from a subjective mode between the ages of 6 and 8 years to encompass a twofold perspective by about 10 to 12 years of age. This change involves considering others' perspective as well as our own, the so-called third person perspective. During puberty (from 12–13 to 15–16 years of age), adolescents start to view themselves from a group perspective, as part of a social context; they develop the ability to evaluate their own actions not only individually but also through others. Hence, forming a self-identity involves an ongoing negotiation of the multiple identities held from different perspectives.

Identity is not only a way of being. It is also a way of doing; to be a certain type of person is to possess certain attributes and qualifications, and to act in ways that are valued by one's social group. As mentioned above, this interaction is continually negotiated, especially during adolescence, when gender identity is constructed within the context of social and cultural values. That which is embodied as feminine or masculine will be defined—and redefined—and expressed in the physical body. Although appearance and body image have traditionally been regarded as especially important to girls and young women, recent studies show that appearance is also important to boys and young men.

So, sport as a social practice is an arena for processes of socialisation and formation of identities. Like other social arenas, it has its own set of social hierarchies and structured relationships. Historically, the gendered sports practice has had great significance for young girls' and women's relationship with their body and their involvement in sport. As discussed above, bodies are not only individual projects; they are also relational in that the body is involved in a stream of social and biological or physiological actions and interactions. The relationship between the body and identity is salient here, including the sometimes conflicted aspects of the active body and the 'appropriate' use of the body. For example, what is—or has previously been—regarded as appropriate behaviour for a female athlete? What does it mean to be a 'sporty type'? Or to be 'girlie'? Sport developed on the basis of male norms, values and practice, often resulting in the perception of the female body as weaker than the male body and more suited to passive behaviours. To some extent, this view was accepted by women themselves (see part one of this book for further discussion of this topic).

Sport is also not practiced in isolation. To engage in sport during adolescence is not only about one's own performance. Sport is executed in front of others and is controlled by others. According to feminist research, there is a difference between looking and being looked at. Historically, women's place in a patriarchal society has meant that women have been both looked at and evaluated by the male gaze, leading to the perception that the female body and athletic performances were inferior. The legacy of this construct is that there has been, and often still is, a tendency for young women to underestimate their own capacity. Groups

of girls and young women therefore may avoid placing themselves in sporting situations in which they may be evaluated. This avoidance behaviour is probably linked to the negative attitudes of some young girls towards physical education and sport in school.

Hence, processes of socialisation, identity formation and development continue throughout life, passing through critical periods at various stages. Socialisation is a complex process involving both interaction through relationships with others and the individual's evaluation of these interactions.

THE SELF VIEWED THROUGH AN ATHLETIC LENS

As we have seen, from a socio-cultural perspective, young people must negotiate when deciding whether to resist or embrace various expressions of identity. An early study from the 1990s of girls' involvement in sport, called *Come on girls*, found that, in contrast to boys, performance was not a primary concern for girls in their attitudes towards sport. Girls also experienced negative attitudes around participation: clubs didn't seriously support girls' sports practice; girls didn't get the best or most dedicated coaches; and the performances of the girls were negatively compared to those of the boys. In addition, strategies were lacking for the development of girls' sport: girls had to move from early junior to senior level without any transition steps; thus, structural factors affected the social context surrounding their sports participation. According to the researchers, a lack of role models had great influence on coaches' attitudes and expectations of the girls' potential.

Later research has shown that a change in girls' attitudes towards participation at the elite level has occurred: both girls and boys involved at this level have a similar focus on performance and competition. For girls who strongly identify as athletes, being oriented toward winning is an important part of their athletic identity; simply being competitive or achieving their personal goals is not enough.

Compared to boys, girls have the opportunity to participate in a wider range of sports in which gender identity is not of concern. Nevertheless, their choice of sports practice is limited by stereotypic images to which young children are exposed. These sports stereotypes are often maintained by the sports movement itself; however, they are also (re)constructed by social actors such as media coverage and the commercialisation process of sport. As sport researchers state: stereotypes can survive under the cover of sports practice. In traditionally masculine sports such as ice hockey, wrestling and boxing, where aggression, face-to-face contact and opponents meeting in combat are an integral part of the practice, gender identity and sexuality are especially challenged and confronted (see Part I of this book for further discussion).

A study of the experiences of elite women wrestlers struggling to develop the dual self-identities related to the external 'wrestler's body' and the private 'female body' highlights how this process occurs in the context of the collective understanding of what constitutes femininity. To become an elite wrestler, the athlete must identify herself as a wrestler, accept strength training with weights, and transform her body in order to embody 'the attitude' and not be seen as girlish. The researchers found that the senior wrestlers had accepted, or given priority to, the athletic body, whereas junior women were more uncertain about relinquishing the priority of the private body. However, the senior wrestlers had to constantly negotiate their femininity. Strong self-confidence and self-belief were required to transcend the norm of traditional femininity in the sports context while still being able to 'do girl' in other, more private contexts.

EXPERIENCED PHYSICAL COMPETENCE AND MAKING MEANING

Health research shows that the body plays a central role in the experience of health. At the age of 11, boys and girls have similar perceived body images, but differences between the perceptions of the two sexes increase with age. Successful athletic experiences among girls have been shown to contribute to a high perceived level of physical competence. During adolescence, this perceived level of competence decreases. The causes behind this decrease are not completely clear, although a number of interrelated environmental, psychological and biological factors have been identified. Physical changes that occur during adolescence may also affect physiological performance. For example, breast development and changes in the proportion and distribution of body fat are negatively correlated with perceived physical competence (see Angelica Hirschberg Lindéns text 2.1 – From girl to woman: Becoming an adult; puberty, the menstrual cycle and the effects on physical performance.)

A high perceived level of physical competence at age 9–11 does not guarantee that this perception will remain during adolescence. However, studies show that young girls who have participated in sport have a higher perceived athletic competence than young girls who have been physically inactive. The inactive girls also had more difficulties engaging in physical activity later in life.

The type of sport has also been shown to influence adolescent girls' perceived physical competence, in that some sports may contribute to an unhealthy focus on body image and weight control in adolescent girls. In aesthetic sports, where appearance and body ideals are emphasised, negative body perceptions may develop, and girls are at increased risk of developing eating disorders. Girls assessed in sports with feminine stereotypes, such as gymnastics and figure skating, are especially vulnerable to the pursuit of the 'perfect appearance'. Feelings of not belonging may result if personal physical features don't fit the given framework. However, the opposite does not seem to occur when girls adjust to sports with masculine stereotypes (e.g. certain types of team games). As discussed earlier, a conflict between the private personal body and the athletic body may arise among adolescent girls involved in combat and power sports. Thus, the relationship between the perceived level of physical competence and the will to participate in sport is very complex.

The interaction of the surrounding environment and the aspirations of the individual acts and enacts on the individual's evaluation of experienced resources and values, as well as on the meaning attached to this engagement. A Swedish interview study examined adolescents in their late teens and their reasons for continuing with organised sport on a recreational—but still a competitive—level. The study showed the importance of experiencing the engagement as manageable, understandable and meaningful. These adolescents stressed the importance of learning and development, of feeling involved and of gaining advantages from participation (e.g. help in structuring life, increased ability to focus). Together, these factors created a feeling of coherence, and a continued feeling of 'fun'. Thus, sport engages and offers opportunities to develop various social, physiological and psychological qualities, and helps to structure life for some adolescents who remain in sport.

Dropping out during adolescence: Why?

Dropping out from sport can be understood from a range of viewpoints related to the period of transition and changes in self-perceptions, bodily changes and experienced physical competence. But dropping out can also be understood through examining sport

as a social practice in which the norms, values, structural aspects (e.g. stages of sampling and specialisation), type and character of the sport, and the prerequisites for training and development affect the individual's decisions.

In addition, factors such as residential area and socioeconomic conditions interact with sports involvement. To live in a place where sport is an essential component of the environment is a crucial factor for girls' participation in sport. If sports involvement is valued by the community and is attainable, these factors will be part of an individual's conscious or unconscious evaluation of which social context to join. Often several of the above aspects coincide. Early forced specialisation, selection of potential players restricted by young cut-off ages, and the practice of selecting only the very best from the talent pool are examples of the structure of institutionalised sport creating preconditions that affect the individual's interest in and potential for continuing in a specific sport (for further discussion, see the text 4.3 Physical activity and organised sport throughout the lifetime by Suzanne Lundvall).

Research has consistently found that the greatest loss of participants in organised sport occurs during adolescence. Social class and parental influence have long been seen as predictors for sports participation in young people. Today, however, the dropout rate in sport is also explained with reference to our postmodern society that gives birth to the desire for new expressions of self and new identity formations; young people more actively seek and choose from an increasing range of activities that are often shared through new forms of communication. Other studies take processes of socialisation as their departure point, and show how our gender concepts create a social and cultural order that restricts the available experiences of becoming or remaining a sports participant.

Today, in several of the Westernised countries, almost half of the girls participate in organised sport at the age of 15, and there is a growing tendency for girls to become more active in organised sports. About one-third of boys and girls leave organised sport before puberty—in other words, before the age of 12—and the dropout rate continues during adolescence. However, dropping out doesn't always mean that the adolescents stop participating in sport. Often they move to another sport. Players cross over from one team ballgame to another (e.g. from football to handball or floorball). Despite this transference, however, few adolescents begin organised sport after age 12.

The most common answer given by young people when asked why they dropped out of sport is 'lack of time'. Often the demands of school and homework take precedence, or the required training hours cannot be fitted into their lives. However, other reasons given are that the young people feel they are not competent enough, that they don't fit in, that they became dissatisfied with the coach or trainer, or that other interests took over. Boys, more so than girls, say that the sports practice became too serious, whereas more girls say that lack of time, discontent with trainers and not feeling good enough are the main reasons for discontinuing. Understanding the meaning of these answers on an individual level is important.

ADOLESCENCE AS A PART OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

So far, we have discussed how sports participation during the transition from girlhood to womanhood is affected by the processes of socialisation and identity formation that occur during adolescence. Young people may choose either to engage in sport during adolescence or to reduce their involvement in sport if their old identities, social relations and

practices do not match their emerging new needs. That is, young people perform a sort of cost-benefit analysis. Through this process, they decide what it will cost to fulfil their own expectations and those of others, and what it will cost to take on the role of an athlete.

What emerges as possible and attractive for a young girl (or boy) depends on what is experienced as meaningful. Here, socio-cultural factors and the individual's own acknowledgement of her resources (physical, psychological, cognitive) interplay. For example, the decision to continue with sport during and after adolescence is not only a question of socioeconomic factors, experienced skills or gender; it also involves interplay with factors such as the physical environment, significant others, family members, coaches and teachers. All these factors affect how an individual values what is on offer.

Young peoples' experiences of and feelings about sport are individual and differ from sport to sport, although sports research does describe a 'dominant' or 'most frequent' pattern. Girls and boys are continually involved in socialisation and identity work, which includes reading the (bodily) performances of others and testing their own body's capacity to learn its limits. This includes experiencing feelings of pleasure, pain, tiredness and displeasure, and what it is to work and sweat hard. Knowledge of how adolescents feel and experience is limited. In-depth studies of subjective feelings of bodily experiences, and of how these change through the transition years and affect attitudes and engagement, are even scarcer.

For many young girls, the period of adolescence strongly affects their involvement in sport, and whether they consider it meaningful enough to continue. Therefore, an important mission for trainers, sports clubs and sports organisations is to be aware of stereotypes and stigmas that surround female athletes and risk decreasing girls' experienced competences and ambitions. They should focus on counteracting negative messages and repressive ideals of how a young woman is supposed to be and act.

Involvement in sport may develop and strengthen a person's physical self-esteem (as well as provide other health effects) if what the body can do is emphasised, instead of what it cannot do or is not allowed to do. Too many, often very subtle, messages are communicated that limit girls' participation in sport. In this regard, coaches, trainers and officials in aesthetic sports such as figure skating and gymnastics have a special responsibility to counteract negative body ideals that favour delayed puberty or disturbed body images.

Although increasing numbers of girls look upon themselves as 'athletes' without a gender connotation, we have not yet reached the point where the execution of sport is seen as gender neutral. The combined media contributes to both maintaining *and* reducing the power of gender stereotypes. However, the culture of celebrities and the commercialisation of sport (i.e. sport is seen as a product) contribute in a major way to the construction and reconstruction of stereotypes that maintain the primacy of men and men's competitions over those of women.

The absence of role models in some sports does not mean they are not needed. On the contrary, role models are of great importance because young people seek others who represent themselves in some manner. Movies about sportswomen may help raise critical questions about role models and attitudes towards female athletes, and about the desirable characteristics to assume.

With the above discussion in mind, we can see reason to reflect upon how the training environment is organised. Is it organised to allow girls to discuss with appropriate adults the physical and mental changes that come with adolescence? Could shared leadership

provide opportunities for different ways of communicating during this transitional period? How could adolescent athletes become more involved in their own training routines and goal setting? What changes in training routines could be considered and why would these be appropriate and useful? Supporting young girls through their transition period by discussing the approaching changes and how to handle them is a constructive way forward.

In conclusion, stimulating young women to continue with sport during adolescence and finding ways for them to experience continued participation as manageable, understandable and meaningful is a responsibility for organised sport. To this end, the perceived physical competence and the changes that occur during adolescence must be managed within a socio-cultural context that promotes identities as human beings and athletes rather than as gender constructs. Only then, will a rich and active involvement in sport in its widest meaning be possible.

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