

FEELS LIKE TEAM SPIRIT

Women have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, but experts agree that one way we can build back stronger is by teaming up

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THE EXPERTS



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Between the ages of 8 and 11, the proportion of girls participating in sport drops sharply, and by 14, only 1 in 10 girls are doing enough physical activity to benefit their health. The reasons are often lazily reported; girls aren't competitive, they lack body confidence, PE should include female-friendly activities like dance. But Stephanie Hilborne, CEO of Women in Sport, says it runs deeper than that. 'The provision of team sport for girls until very recently has been very poor. Then, puberty is a far more dramatic change physically for girls, and they lack the right support.' Hilborne cites research from Women in Sport, which found that if teenage girls had the 'perfect elder sister' who helped them find a sports bra and explained how to manage a period during sport, they would stay involved. Sue Anstiss of the Women's Sport Trust adds: 'The onset of periods can be a big deterrent, especially when much sports kit – high-cut swimming costumes, leotards, skimpy athletic shorts – have not been designed with young girls' bodies in mind.'

Then there's school uniform: skirts, tights and clunky shoes don't allow girls to run and play freely. During the pandemic, more children have been allowed to wear sports kit to school to avoid using crowded changing rooms, and this could make a big difference. 'Somebody in my team has a niece of 14 who went to school in her tracksuit', says Hilborne. 'She came home exhausted, having played netball at break, lunch and after school. Normally girls' clothes preclude them from playing sports.' Former England Rose netballer Lindsay Keable also feels we're too passive: 'We let girls give up sport too easily,' she says. 'There needs to be a conscious effort to keep girls engaged. The focus needs to be on what they enjoy.'

Healthy competition

When it comes to the notion that girls and women dislike competitive sports, Hilborne is having none of it. 'You're not born less competitive because you're a girl. It's a social construct.' It's also another lazy reading of what girls and women have *actually* expressed. Again, in research by Women In Sport, 45% of girls agreed that 'sport is too



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competitive', but it wasn't the competition element itself that put them off. 'Because everything is seen through a male lens, competition is associated with aggressive competition,' says Hilborne. 'Our research showed that teenage girls are looking for moments of pride. That isn't the same as squashing your adversary.' Keable agrees: 'The clue is in the title: *team* sports,' she says. 'Going through the highs and lows with your teammates helps your physical and mental health, regardless of being competitive.'

It's huge in terms of personal development too. 'One of the unique values of team sport is that you're trying to win something, but you'll regularly lose so you learn how to get back up, which is resilience,' says Hilborne. 'If you look at all the things that make it harder to be a woman in the workplace – unwillingness to take

risks, less resilience, fear of failure – they're all things you learn through taking part in team sports.'

Social limitations

Sense of community is a top consideration for women in terms of physical activity. 'I love the camaraderie between players, the feeling of togetherness and not having to train alone,' says Keable. Yet it's been harder for women for decades. 'We were banned from playing football for 50 years,' says Hilborne. 'The team sports we were allowed to play involved equipment, so weren't easy to transfer to the park

environment.' All men have needed for centuries to play football is a couple of jumpers to represent goalposts, but you can't carry a netball post in your backpack. This is surely part of the reason why in July 2019, 12 million ♦♦

“Going through the highs and lows with your teammates helps your physical and mental health”



people were playing grassroots football in England, while just 1.4 million were playing netball.

We also struggle to shake off the notion that we're either 'sporty' or not. 'We need to expand the image of what being sporty looks like', says Hilborne. 'The number of people in adulthood who can't catch a ball is virtually zero – that means the vast majority of people should consider themselves sporty.' She blames the fact that as a society we've squashed sport into such tight space that hardly anyone fits. Think back to your school days – there were probably two netball teams. If a team is up to 12 players filling seven positions, that's at best only 24 girls who could see themselves as 'sporty' per year group. Keable wants us to forget what happened at school. 'People change over time, so even if you didn't enjoy it as a kid, you may find you love it now – confidence comes from putting yourself out there.'

Fun and gains

Pre-pandemic the gender gap between active men and women had shrunk by 3.9%, 850,000 more women were playing football, and 50,200 took up netball. These team

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sports build self-esteem. 'We know that when girls and women are being active, their body confidence increases because they're not focussed on what people are thinking about them – they're focussed on the game,' says Hilborne, who categorises team sports as informal mindfulness. 'When you have to hit a ball or catch something you can't think about anything else, so you're totally in the present.' There are specific physical benefits too; 'sports that involve jumping strengthen your bones, while the balance and hand-eye coordination required helps women avoid fractures in older age', says Hilborne.

Anstiss wants us to look beyond the physical benefits of sport – 'a healthier heart and lungs, stronger muscles and bones, better balance and coordination' are great reasons to take part, but she also points out that 'being with others can reduce stress and loneliness'. But perhaps the most unacknowledged benefit of team sports? 'Joy. The act of playing sport with others, laughing and socialising is incredibly powerful,' she says.

Hilborne agrees, pointing out that the origin of the word 'sport' from the 14th century was 'to take pleasure, amuse oneself'. 'As women we have responsibilities piled on us,' she adds. 'But it's liberating to chuck a ball around in a gang of women. It's not about putting your body through hell – it's about joy, freedom and fun.'

Futureproofing

Unfortunately, the pandemic not only pressed pause on participation, it also added to the female burden of responsibilities, and we need to ensure that isn't a lasting legacy. 'We have about a quarter or a fifth of the leisure time of men,' says Hilborne. 'By the age of 59, half of all women are caring for an elderly relative, but that isn't true for men until they're 75. Until we get men sharing the burden, we have to stimulate a revolution just to get an hour a week to play netball.' It's a revolution we can start

from our homes, though, by prioritising our needs and asking for support; telling partners we have a two-hour training session every Wednesday, so they need to make dinner, or visit dad.

We clearly want to get back out there. Women In Sport research revealed that 82% of girls will put more effort into being active when life returns to normal, while among women in midlife and menopause, 85% are either already committed to being active, or want to be more active after lockdown.

'We're a battered nation, and team sport can be part of the recovery,' says Hilborne. 'Perhaps uniquely, because it rebuilds and recreates new positive communities.' We're trying to overturn centuries of inequality in sports, and the biggest gender gap in participation is within team sports, but that's even more reason to get some fire in our bellies and bats or balls in our hands and turn it around. **Q**