

# Increasing demand for sport and physical activity for adolescent girls in Scotland

Exploring issues, suggesting solutions

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# Introduction

**The purpose of this study was to further understanding of the demand for sport and physical activity by 10-15 year-old girls in Scotland.**

The practical guidelines in this booklet are based on an extensive literature review and research conducted with almost 1,500 girls in Scotland between September 2002 and November 2003. Research has shown that girls are less active than boys, particularly in adolescence. Furthermore, the proportion of girls taking part in sport more than twice per week declines from 61% in the 8-11 age group to 46% in the 12-15 age group. An increase in participation in sport and physical activity by girls is desirable because sport is considered a positive behaviour of value for its own sake and also because higher levels of physical activity have positive implications for health and well-being. The issue of low participation rates in sport and physical activity for adolescent girls is not new and is common in all western societies. However, this report reveals new findings that are highly relevant to the Scottish context.

The purpose of this study was to further understanding of the demand for sport and physical activity by 10-15 year-old girls in Scotland. This practical guide will assist suppliers of sport and physical activity – schools, local authorities, sport clubs, leisure centres, health clubs – in developing strategies for increasing participation by adolescent girls and for sustaining this increased activity. Many policy-makers and most providers are aware that under-participation in sport and physical activity by girls and young women is an important issue. However, systematic attempts to address this low participation are recent, driven largely by health-related concerns with inactivity and obesity.



# Shortcomings in current practice

**In the context of current policy, there are limitations in practice. Research has highlighted a number of issues.**

**These are general concerns that influence the development of sport and physical activity programmes for girls. However, the remainder of this document focuses on practical matters. It will explore the key issues, problems and challenges that affect girls' participation rates and it will offer possible solutions that address these challenges.**

## Strategic leadership

- At both the national and local level there is a perceived need for strategic leadership that will provide more specific policy guidelines and legislation for more targeted use of resources to benefit girls.
- Strategic policy guidelines would also provide a coherent framework for coordinating the efforts of diverse funding sources, which often have differing objectives.

## Understanding, best practice and support

- Although many of the issues may be broadly recognised, there is a general lack of in-depth understanding of the issues and/or the implications for provision. This booklet is one contribution to improving our knowledge base.
- There is a perceived need for a strategic support network to disseminate best practice, to provide training opportunities and to reduce the current fragmentation in provision and practice.

## Physical activity and sport

- The increasing emphasis on fitness and health and the perception that many girls do not like 'traditional' sport have led to policies aimed at increasing physical activity, rather than increasing participation in sport. The practical guidelines offered in this booklet address both sport and physical activity.
- There is some evidence that girls and young women are often seen as 'the problem'. As a result, providers, policymakers and others do not always consider that the real issues may lie with the ways sport and physical activity are made available, promoted and delivered.



- There is a need to adapt 'traditional' sports and the way in which they are delivered to make them more attractive to reluctant participants, including girls.
- Sports clubs need all participating agencies to encourage and support the provision of relevant sporting opportunities for girls.
- Both girls and sport providers commented that girls are intimidated by the behaviour of some boys. This form of behaviour can be a barrier to girls' participation, and needs to be addressed.
- Most girls report that they intend to participate in sport and physical activity in the near future. More effort should address the difficulties of translating these good intentions into participation.

## Resources

- There is a widespread demand for improving the quality and increasing the quantity of school indoor sports facilities and changing accommodation. The quality of facilities is particularly important to reluctant participants.
- The lack of staff resources and expertise (including the supposedly narrow and 'traditional' nature of PE training) may place constraints on innovation in programme design and delivery.

## Monitoring and evaluation

- The combination of an intensive period of experimentation and innovation and the general lack of awareness of 'best practice' means that there is an urgent need for systematic monitoring and evaluation to enable more effective programming and deployment of future resources.

# 01

## Sport and physical activity levels decline across the teenage years

**“Most people do hockey in third year then stop. In primary school, first and second year [they participate]. [But] it’s more competitive to get into a team when you are older.”**

Joanne and Caroline, age 15

### The Issues

- For girls this decline starts from around age 12 and continues throughout adolescence.
- Many girls said that the increased competitiveness of sport in higher years influenced them to drop out.
- In interviews girls noted that more time was spent encouraging younger girls to participate in physical activity and sport.



### Possible Solutions

- Ensure that provision of sport for older years is equal to that of younger years and that activities for older girls are promoted to the same extent. Allocate sections of notice-boards and leaflets, as well as general information areas, to particular age groups.
- Target younger children to ensure that they have a positive perception of sport as being fun and sociable before they hit the critical drop-off period.
- Try to ensure that as many girls as possible enjoy sport and activity from a young age so that when they do start to feel self-conscious and need their friends around them, there will be lots of other girls willing to take part, thus ensuring that they don’t need to go alone.
- Ensure that communication with older adolescent girls is ongoing, as they have different needs and demands than younger adolescents. Introduce a more advanced and varied recreation programme to cater for these needs.

# 02

## Many girls see sport as being too competitive

**“Higher up – the first eleven is really competitive but the lower ones are more fun.”**

**“I’m not sure competition is a good thing... you get a lot of pressure on you.”**

Sarah, age 14

**“I actually preferred it when the girls did games separately from the boys as the boys are so competitive.”**

Clare, age 12

### The Issues

- A competitive environment is considered to be a major factor in drop-out amongst girls who do not consider themselves to be good at sport.
- Girls categorised as having low levels of sport and physical activity participation were more than twice as likely as their more active counterparts to report finding sport in their school too competitive.
- 19% of the girls who found sport in school to be too competitive also felt that they were not very good at sport.
- Those who viewed sport in school as being too competitive were also more likely to report increased anxiety about their participation. They participated more because they ‘had to’ rather than because they ‘wanted to’. Research indicates that this feeling may decrease girls’ motivation to participate outside of required PE classes.
- Girls found the environment in mixed-sex activities to be more competitive.
- However, girls who were involved in and enjoyed competitive sport showed high activity levels. So, girls who do enjoy the competitive aspects of sport tended to participate more. Although competition is a barrier for many girls, it is not a problem for all girls.



### Possible Solutions

- Implement a recreational activity programme to balance and complement existing competitive school and community sports programmes. A recreational programme should feature a wider range of non-competitive health and fitness activities such as yoga and self-defence classes. A recreational programme should not replace traditional competitive sports; research shows that many girls enjoy the competition.
- Physical activity leaders should be made aware of girls’ diverse motives for participating in physical activity. Some take part for fun, others to get in shape or socialise.
- Create a climate that focuses on personal effort and rewards personal improvement; girls are more likely to show enhanced levels of interest and motivation in such a climate. Develop award schemes and prizes accordingly.
- Parents, senior students and non-specialist staff, rather than specialist coaches, could be encouraged to lead recreational activities since the focus is on recreation, not competition. Enjoyment is positively linked to participation, so ensure that the environment is fun.
- Base recreational activities and teams on friendship groups rather than on ability to ensure that girls feel comfortable in the environment.
- Many girls voiced a demand for the opportunity to participate in traditional sport training without the pressure to be part of an organised competitive team. It was apparent that, compared to girls, boys had greater access to this type of participation through self-organised sessions in local parks.
- It is important to maintain existing competitive structures for those girls who are active through sport.

# 03

## Girls see sport as a 'boys' thing' and therefore inappropriate for them

**“Yeah, because you get sweaty and dirty [playing sport] and you’re supposed to stay nice and clean.”**

Rachel, age 12

**“...like the boys are always saying all the girls are going to be rubbish, ‘look at them they can’t run’.”**

**“Boys can sometimes be cocky about things. They can sometimes be like ‘we’re better than girls at football’; maybe they are, but...”**

Sandra, age 12

**“They comment at each other. They say sarcastic stuff like ‘take the ball with you next time’ or ‘get off the pitch and let someone else have a go’.”**

Julie, age 15

### The Issues

- Only one girl in four believes that it is ‘cool’ to be sporty.
- Many girls stated in interviews that they felt certain sports would be inappropriate for girls. Sport, and in particular team games, was highlighted as a male-dominated field.
- Girls in one interview described a classmate who was ‘into sport’ as being ‘practically like a boy’.
- Only 14% of boys believe that it is important for girls to be good at sport and many of the girls interviewed complained that boys teased them when they participated.

### Possible Solutions

- Produce a leaflet/poster depicting sport as cool and enjoyable and listing all local activities. Try to get girls to produce it so they feel they have ownership of the project. Girls should be able to identify with, but also aspire to, any images of girls that are used. A number of girls stated that many images of sporting role models do not feature toned and healthy looking girls, but very muscular, elite women.
- Attempt to influence media portrayal of sport and physical activity for all types of young people.
- The culture of male dominance needs to be challenged to ensure that girls, boys and their parents recognise the need for equity in relation to sporting provision for girls in Scotland. Parents, teachers, coaches and other professionals need to pay particular attention to the language they use when talking about sport and girls’ physical activity. Avoid using language that identifies sport as a male or female activity.
- Challenge the view – among both boys and girls – that ‘sport is a boys’ thing’ by promoting an accepting attitude of all types of participants. Ensure that the behaviour of boys does not intimidate girls or discourage their participation.
- Ensure a balance of activities that are not gender-stereotyped, such as swimming, tennis and rounders.
- In mixed-sex settings avoid using sex as a basis for forming physical activity groups.
- A balance of mixed and single-sex provision, both of organised activities and access to facilities, should be developed to cater for girls and boys who feel most comfortable in or prefer either environment.



# 04

## A perceived lack of suitable venues for sport and physical activity

**“But I prefer joining clubs with my friends because then at least you know somebody and you’re not feeling out of place. I joined a gym club once and I didn’t know anyone there and I felt terrible.”**

**“When I first started... I had no one at all, and they make you go in pairs – it’s strange being with someone you don’t know.”**

Louise and Ann, age 13

### The Issues

- The importance of an appropriate venue was emphasised in interviews. Many girls stated that they would not feel comfortable attending classes in unfamiliar surroundings. The ‘comfort zone’ was limited to walking distance of school and home for many girls, particularly in urban areas.
- Sports facilities and playgrounds are often dominated by boys and girls did not feel that they could access these areas.
- Four out of five girls prefer to have a friend with them when playing sport or being physically active. Many girls reported not feeling comfortable participating without their friends.
- Many girls said that not enough sporting facilities were available to them at weekends outside of the school term.



### Possible Solutions

- There is a need to make community links for girls. For example, minibuses young people to local sports clubs or encourage clubs to use school facilities outside of school hours and particularly at weekends. Local clubs may be struggling to find facilities for their sports and might have enthusiastic and qualified coaches who could offer the expertise needed to support school programmes.
- Introduce adolescent girls to new facilities and locations, such as community centres, sporting clubs or local leisure centres, through their PE classes. Take them to these new places several times so that the location becomes a ‘comfort zone’, where they would feel welcome attending clubs or classes. It will be important to establish relationships with staff at these facilities as well.
- In rural areas introduce a scheme to encourage girls to stay after school one day per week by extending the transport options for an additional hour. Schools and local clubs could work together to ensure that a variety of taster activities are available on this day to ensure the maximum number of pupils are catered for.
- Ensure that girls and boys have equal access to space for informal recreation, such as the playground at lunchtimes or evening access to sports courts. Small spaces that require few people to play are suitable venues for informal recreation. However, research has indicated that it is necessary to organise a timetable for these areas so that they are not dominated by boys. Separating larger areas into smaller spaces ensures that more groups can access the space.
- Schools should ensure that uniforms do not inhibit participation in informal recreation at lunchtime and after school. Skirts are often impractical for informal recreation and a trouser option may help increase the levels of informal activity, such as cycling to school or activity at lunchtime.



# 05

## Attempts to provide activity for girls do not always meet their needs

**“There’s nothing really to do [at leisure centres]. I went to the gym once but they wouldn’t let me in – you have to be sixteen. They won’t let groups in either, so you can’t go with your friends.”**

Sarah, Anne and Raiyla, age 15

**“Boys have football and basketball but they put nothing on for us.”**

Catherine, age 14

**“I live like half an hour drive away from the school so any sports and clubs going on after school here I can’t take part in ’cos there won’t be any way of me getting home afterwards.”**

Amanda, age 12

### The Issues

- Girls don’t perceive activities as being promoted well, if at all.
- If activities are promoted as for ‘women only’, girls see them as being for adults and therefore not for them. In addition, many girls do not feel comfortable participating in front of adults, even if they are female, and prefer to be active only in the company of other girls of a similar age.
- Girls often feel there is a lack of activities that they find interesting, or that are targeted specifically at them.
- Activities may be held in facilities that are difficult to access. Many girls have difficulties in getting to facilities, particularly if they live in a rural or unsafe area.
- Facilities are unwelcoming or inadequate, with limited changing areas or open showers.



### Possible Solutions

- Work with local leisure centres and schools to provide a balanced programme of competitive/recreational and mixed/single sex activities.
- Hold forums for girls to discuss what they would like to do. Listening to the girls’ opinions will ensure that programmes are as effective as possible.
- Ensure that changing areas are warm and inviting at leisure facilities. Showers should be enclosed, warm and clean and there should be adequate provision of hairdryers and mirrors.
- Produce a leaflet highlighting the sport and recreational opportunities available to girls in the locality. Clubs, schools and leisure centres should all be asked to contribute. It is important for these productions to look professional.
- Highlight activities for girls on both girls-only and general noticeboards in health centres, leisure centres and schools.
- Promote girls-only as well as women’s-only activities, as many girls do not realise that women’s-only activities also cater for adolescent girls.
- Allow an opt-in, opt-out approach as a first step for low and non-participants so that they may try a variety of clubs without the pressure of continued participation.
- Encourage safe and attractive environments for physical activity by lobbying appropriate local organisations.

# 06

## Lack of importance placed on keeping fit and healthy or being good at sport

**“I think fitness is more encouraged in boys but being slim is more encouraged in girls. Being good at sport is more important for boys.”**

Rebecca, age 14

### The Issues

- Almost four girls in every five reported that keeping fit and healthy was not that important to them.
- The girls interviewed perceive a generally poor awareness of the importance of fitness and health in the Scottish population.
- Only 27% of girls believe that it is important for girls to be good at sport.
- Physical activity is associated with more positive views of oneself, including physical self-worth and general self-esteem.



### Possible Solutions

- Introduce an education campaign for girls and parents about the benefits of an active lifestyle for health, weight management, increased energy and physical well-being. These factors may be more important to girls than participation in sport for sport's sake and may attract a population with different values to take part in physical activity.
- Emphasise the important role that sport and physical activity could play in increasing confidence, physical self-worth and self-esteem.
- Promote sport and activity as fun and sociable things to do regardless of ability. The social side of sport may be more important than the development of competence for many adolescent girls.
- Highlight the numerous career opportunities for girls in sport, health and leisure activities.

# 07

## Lack of time is often perceived as a barrier to being more active

**“Well, because you have homework and stuff and you have to go home and do your homework and you have to do your chores, and then there’s like soaps.”**

Alex, age 13

**“They keep nagging at me ’cos I’m on play station too much at the weekend. They say I don’t do enough at the weekend.”**

Jane, age 14

### The Issues

- Girls cited not only homework but also jobs and chores as barriers to sport and physical recreation.
- Social activities, such as chatting with friends on computer messenger services, going out, socialising and shopping, also compete for girls’ time and displace sport or physical activity.
- Excessive TV viewing, such as more than four hours per day, may impact negatively on sports participation.

### Possible Solutions

- Interventions should target changes in priorities for adolescent girls so that they come to see physical activity as valuable and they choose to make participation a priority. Introduce an education campaign for girls and parents about the benefits of an active lifestyle for health, weight management, increased energy and physical well-being. Structural barriers such as costs, access and transport should also be considered.
- Educate parents about the need to encourage adolescent girls to be more involved in active leisure time and less involved in sedentary pursuits.
- Promote sport as being fun and sociable so that girls can do sport and hang out with their friends at the same time. Play down the sport aspect and emphasise the social aspect.
- Inform girls of the average hours spent sleeping, eating, watching TV and doing other sedentary behaviours. Focus on how this time could be spent in an active way and the associated benefits of such activity. Encourage more time outside.



# 08

## Lack of parental encouragement/modelling

### The Issues

- 24% of girls did not perceive their mothers as being supportive of their sport and physical activity participation; 33% did not perceive their fathers as being supportive.
- 74% of mothers and 64% of fathers are not regularly physically active.
- The literature review showed that both mothers' participation in physical activity and fathers' involvement and assistance were important in sustaining activity levels of adolescent girls. In addition, girls with brothers and sisters who are physically active are more likely to be active themselves, which may reflect a familial 'culture' of sport participation.



### Possible Solutions

- Educate parents and carers about the importance of a healthy and active lifestyle for adolescent girls.
- Provide suggestions for activities that the whole family can do together.
- Encourage parents and carers to act as good role models for their daughters through their own participation. Provide information about the importance of their own involvement and the links between their activity and support and their daughters' participation.

# 09

## Lack of perceived competence

### The Issues

- 35% of girls did not perceive themselves to be good at sport and this was negatively related to participation. General anxiety and self-consciousness was associated with lower perceived competence at sport. Girls who feel self-conscious are more likely to feel they aren't good at sport and do not want to participate.
- Schools are only addressing the association of low self-confidence and low participation in a limited way.
- Many girls who feel that they are not good at sport and physical activity also report that they do not enjoy it and that they take part primarily because they have to, as opposed to taking part because they want to. Many of these girls also state that they would not carry on being active if it did not help with weight management.
- Feelings of self-consciousness are common for girls taking part in sport and physical activity, but girls reported feeling less self-conscious if they participated with their friends.



### Possible Solutions

- Introduce reward structures that focus on personal improvement and participation, not just skill. Recognise equally all girls who try hard and not just those who are good at sport. Emphasise enjoyment regardless of ability and taking part for fun rather than to improve skill levels.
- Educate girls about the important role of team spirit and friendship in sport. Introduce a scheme recognising the girls who work hard to make a positive contribution to the sports environment.
- Ensure girls have the opportunity to participate in non-competitive activities, such as dance, aerobics and yoga, as well as having the opportunity to participate in traditional sports in a recreational, non-competitive way.
- Promote sport and activity as fun and sociable things to do regardless of ability or appearance, and encourage participation with friends.
- Target low-confidence girls and encourage participation in non-threatening environments with good friendship links.

# 10 Disadvantaged and minority groups have lower levels of participation

## The Issues

- Girls from ethnic minority groups undertook only 37% of the vigorous physical activity reported by white girls in this study. They also reported lower parental participation and support than white girls did.
- Research has consistently shown that young disabled people take part in physical activity and sport less frequently and their experiences are less positive than their non-disabled peers.
- Girls from families with lower family income and parental education also had lower levels of participation in physical activity.

## Possible Solutions

- Create an environment that is safe and supportive for girls from minority or disadvantaged groups by consulting with them and responding to their needs. Hold forums for girls from these groups to discuss what they would like to do. Listening to the girls' opinions will ensure that programmes are developed to meet their needs.
- Physical activity leaders should be made aware of the barriers and discrimination that girls from these groups face. Often this may include constraints within the family for ethnic minority girls and issues of self-consciousness for adolescent girls with disabilities.
- Ensure minority groups are represented in all educational and promotional material. Encourage these groups of girls to contribute to the production stages so they feel they are more involved with the project. Identify diverse role models, including Paralympians and athletes from minority ethnic backgrounds.



- Educate parents from all social groups about the need to encourage adolescent girls to be more involved in active leisure time pursuits. Introduce an education campaign for minority groups about the important contribution that an active lifestyle could make to health, weight management, energy levels, concentration, self-esteem and physical well-being.
- Encourage physical activity leaders to make modifications or adaptations to equipment and/or rules to cater for the range of participants present.
- Parents, teachers, coaches and other professionals need to pay particular attention to the language they use when talking about sport and physical activity to under-represented groups. Patronising and derogatory language should be avoided. Leaders also need to educate non-disabled peers to be aware of language they use in relation to young disabled people.
- Some single-sex activities should be included in competitive and recreational programmes to cater for ethnic minority girls who do not feel comfortable participating in sport with male leaders or participants present.
- Ensure that a range of competitive and recreational activities are available for young disabled girls, as many enjoy the competitive as well as social aspects of sport participation.
- Ensure that physical activity participation is not dependent on cost. Make varied low-cost activities available, including those not reliant on private transport.

# Further Resources

**sportscotland** is committed to promoting girls' participation in sport and physical activity. The following list of organisations offers a starting point for the dissemination of knowledge and of good practice.

**Women, Girls and Sport Officer**  
**sportscotland**  
Caledonia House  
South Gyle  
Edinburgh  
EH12 9DQ  
[www.sportscotland.org.uk](http://www.sportscotland.org.uk)

**Women's Sports Foundation**  
Head Office  
3rd Floor, Victoria House  
Bloomsbury Square  
London  
WC1B 4SE  
[www.wsf.org.uk](http://www.wsf.org.uk)  
[www.whatworksforwomen.org.uk](http://www.whatworksforwomen.org.uk)

**Institute of Youth Sport**  
School of Sport and Exercise Sciences  
Loughborough University  
Loughborough  
LE12 3TU  
[www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/sses/institutes/iys](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/sses/institutes/iys)

**Youth Sport Trust**  
Caledonia House  
South Gyle  
Edinburgh  
EH12 9DQ  
[www.youthsporttrust.org](http://www.youthsporttrust.org)

**NHS Health Scotland**  
Woodburn House  
Canaan Lane  
Edinburgh  
EH10 4SG  
[www.hebs.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.hebs.scot.nhs.uk)

**Scottish Executive Health Physical Activity Task Force**  
Health Improvement Strategy Division  
Room 2E-South  
St Andrews House  
Regent Road  
Edinburgh  
EH1 3DG  
[www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Health/health/Introduction/Introduction](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Health/health/Introduction/Introduction)

**British Heart Foundation National Centre for Physical Activity and Health**  
School of Sport and Exercise Sciences  
Loughborough University  
Loughborough  
LE12 3TU  
[www.bhfactive.org.uk](http://www.bhfactive.org.uk)

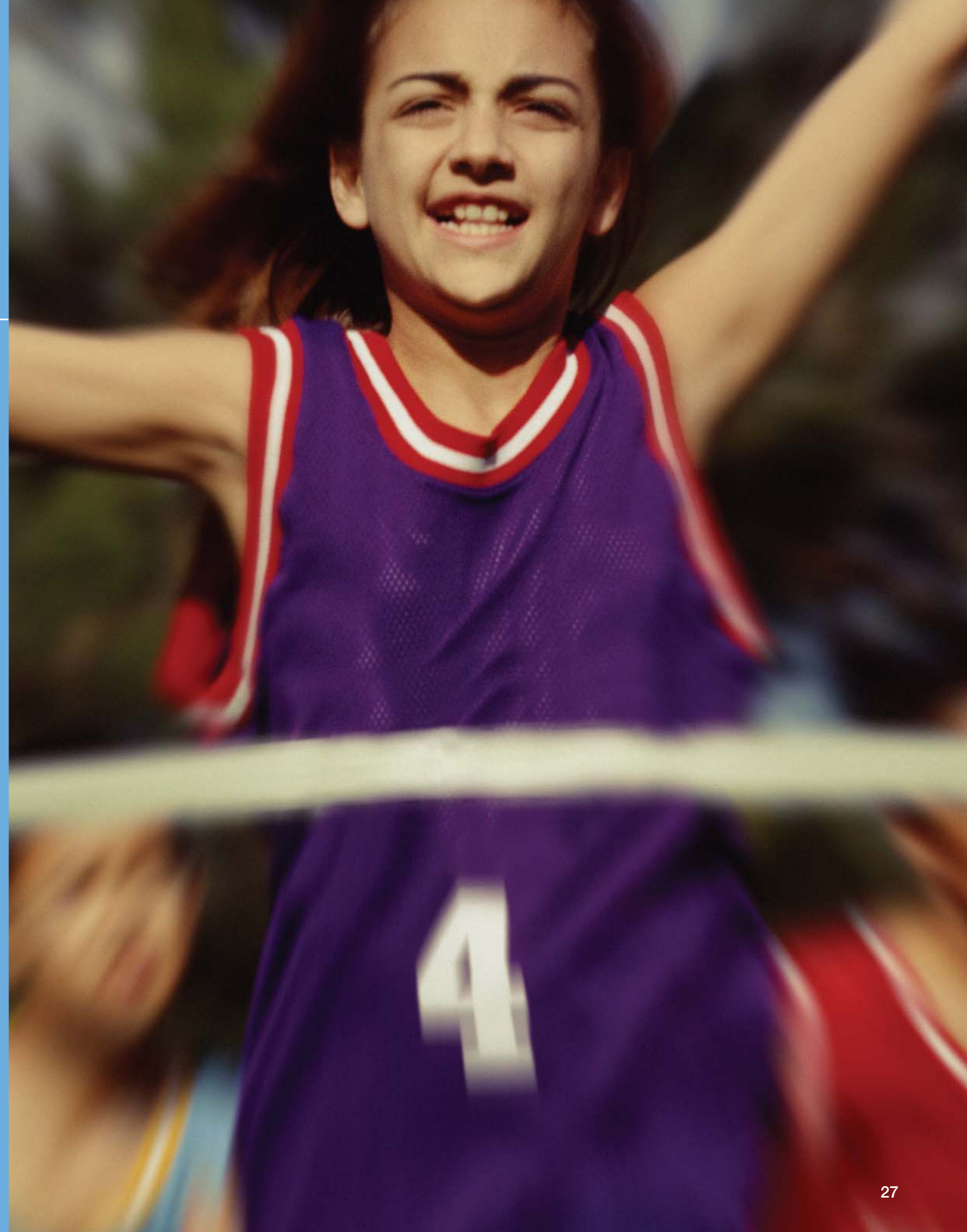
## **International organisations**

**Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity**  
[www.caaws.ca](http://www.caaws.ca)

**International Working Groups on Women and Sport**  
[www.iwg-gti.org](http://www.iwg-gti.org)

**The Women's Sports Foundation USA**  
[www.womensportsfoundation.org](http://www.womensportsfoundation.org)

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**  
[www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/index.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/index.htm)



# Find out more

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