

Issue 19 | 4 October 2025

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Encouraging girls to utilise leadership traits developed through sports

Key insights from recent research:

- New research from Temple University (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) shows that **girls gain valuable leadership skills from sporting involvement.**
- While girls are comfortable using these leadership skills, **this is dependent on the context and situation.**
- Encouraging positive engagement with sporting activities is crucial. This can be supported through the engagement of **high quality coaches at the youth athlete level.**
- It is important that coaches are gender-aware and appropriately trained to understand the nuances impacting girls' engagement with sport and their success in it.

It has long been proven that participation in sports can help young people develop leadership skills, but when girls are faced with a clear unconscious gender bias from referees and spectators, how do they balance using these skills against attitudes that seemingly assign different levels of acceptability to the same behaviour from adolescent boys and girls?

Researchers from Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, have explored this challenge by talking to 90 female athletes aged 14 to 18 years to understand how they feel about displaying the leadership traits they have gained through athletic engagement and what can be done to support girls in this area.

Research has already shown the benefit of sporting participation for young women's development of leadership skills. Girls' schools provide students with excellent opportunities to pursue sports and other athletic activities in a safe, supportive environment. Associate Professor Gareth Jones, from Temple University, points out the very need for this type of environment. Girls told Jones that even when they feel like they have developed traits of being a leader, they are treated differently. As Jones says, 'referees will let men be a bit more physical. But when women athletes do the same, they will get whistled, which shows there is this unconscious bias in play for young women when they express those traits'.

This leads to several important questions for schools and sporting teams. It goes beyond what leadership skills young women gain from youth sport and opens the door to ask how 'masculine' leadership norms — praised in boys and men — shape girls' experiences. Understanding how

girls feel about the need to balance their skill development with how they think they are perceived can impact the way schools approach and deliver sporting opportunities to students.

This project showed that when girls gained beneficial leadership skills and traits from sporting involvement, they were comfortable utilising these skills, but only in certain settings. Understanding the how and why behind this is important in order to develop interventions that can further enhance girls' development of leadership skills. It is also an opportunity to provide girls with the necessary knowledge to challenge pre-existing masculinities and stereotypes in society.

There are two parts to the challenge of encouraging female leadership through sporting engagement. The first is the development of leadership skills in a space that is influenced by long-standing cultural norms and stereotypes surrounding masculinity. The second is the gendered nature of leadership itself, and the impact this can have on girls exploring their skills in this area. Girls' schools play a vital role in supporting student leadership development. Girls recognise that traits such as assertiveness are important if they want to be a successful leader. Yet as the researchers point out, girls try to change how they present these traits because they are concerned that they will 'potentially come across the wrong way' to observers.

Girls clearly feel these leadership traits are acceptable in sports, but that there are limits on this acceptability. This includes not only assertiveness, but characteristics such as charisma and independence. Other traits include empathy and the ability to engage with interpersonal relationships effectively. This second set of traits, often referred to as "communal traits", are typically more associated with female athletes, while independence and assertiveness are traditionally considered more acceptable for men.

Girls feel that if they act with the same traits considered acceptable in male athletes, there is an unconscious bias displayed by referees and observers that is applied to their actions. This leads to girls feeling that they need to mask the leadership traits they have developed. While girls recognise the importance of traits such as assertiveness for being a leader, as teenagers, many are actively seeking to reduce, limit or "soften" these traits depending on the context or scenario they are facing. They were also acutely aware of feeling that they need to balance their actual leadership skills with how they are perceived when seeking leadership opportunities. This is a crucial part of girls' leadership development because sport experiences can influence girls' perceptions of leadership in other areas and environments.

The opportunity for girls to engage with leadership skills via sport is undoubtedly beneficial. It allows girls to acquire skills they may otherwise not have an opportunity to develop. However, girls in this study felt that certain traits are seen to be "natural" for boys and not for girls. This included a broader perception that they would need to act differently in order for their leadership to be considered appropriate. Girls also felt that there was an accepted standard that as females they must work harder than male athletes to achieve the same respect and recognition of their leadership skills.

The researchers suggest various interventions that can support girls in this area, many of which are already being encouraged by girls' schools. This includes the development of peer networks and gender-aware environments for leadership growth. It is important for schools and educators

to champion female athletes and leaders, and encourage engagement with positive female leadership and role models. Fostering girls' capacity to pursue sporting leadership opportunities and providing the skills to increase engagement and decrease self-doubt is critical. This includes supporting girls as they learn and demonstrate skills that are considered traditionally masculine, with a focus on transitioning these skills into other areas beyond the sporting environment. Girls who are actively seeking leadership positions such as coaching also need to be supported with training that does not reinforce traditional masculinities and stereotypes.

One of the broader interventions suggested by the researchers is to encourage girls to enact their leadership traits across a range of domains to challenge the common belief that while they can act like a male athlete, "they are still a woman". They suggest this be achieved by engaging high quality athletic coaches at the youth level. This includes the need to consider how coaching is framed, including the language used and the way this can impact girls' perceptions of their skill development. Coach education is important, which the project leaders indicate is a critical factor in addressing this challenge. The engagement of coaches that are gender-aware and understand the nuances impacting girls' engagement with sports in a male-dominated field must be prioritised. This is an important part of an overall approach to provide support for girls as they develop skills that are considered traditionally masculine, and learn to confidently transition these skills into other areas beyond the sporting environment.

References

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