

ATHLETE IDENTITY



If sports can be a powerful vehicle to help girls reach their full potential, why do so many girls drop out of sports? Research shows that girls may face societal pressures to ‘feminize,’ or take on additional responsibilities that prohibit sports participation such as caring for younger siblings. Adolescence is a critical time when girls can lose self-confidence and be self-critical. Keeping them in the game during this period is essential. The good news is many girls continue to play sports despite these challenges because they have developed an athlete identity. These girls say, “I am a soccer player!” rather than, “I play soccer.” They see sports participation as non-negotiable. Girls who develop athlete identities are more likely to stay involved in sports through adolescence and experience all the benefits sports and coaches can provide. Here are some age-appropriate tips to help coaches support girls in becoming life-long athletes.

HERE ARE SOME AGE-APPROPRIATE TIPS TO HELP COACHES SUPPORT GIRLS IN BECOMING LIFE-LONG ATHLETES.

ATHLETE IDENTITY

Ages 5-7 (K-2nd Grade)

BUILDING A FOUNDATION

At this age, most girls love physical activity. They want to run, move and get dirty. Great coaches harness this energy by creating fun and engaging practices so girls leave excited for the next session. Coaches can help girls build motor skills through group games; sport specific skills are not as important.



COACHING STRATEGIES

- Focus on motor skills like balance and coordination.
- Sessions should feel light, fun, positive, and playful.
- Modify the size of fields and equipment to match the needs of this age group.
- Give lots of encouragement and positive reinforcement.
- Build in lots of water breaks because players can have low endurance at this age.

ATHLETE IDENTITY

Ages 8-10 (3rd-5th Grade)

THE EMERGING ATHLETE

Girls at this age still love to run and play hard, yet many are internalizing notions of what is expected of their gender expression. Great coaches respect girls' individuality and create a broad sense of what it means to be a girl. Coaches understand that diverse female role models are important. Coaches will help girls become more excited about mastery, performance and competition, while incorporating fun.

COACHING STRATEGIES

- Encourage girls to try playing different positions to help them develop a wide range of skills.
- If you are coaching a co-ed team, make sure that girls are included equally because boys can start to get territorial about sports spaces. Supportive coaches will provide girls with equal playing time to develop their skills.
- Give specific feedback on skill improvement. For example, try saying "I love your hustle, Marisol. Now make sure to get your feet into position before you bump the volleyball."
- Include low-stakes competitive games like relay races but avoid an emphasis on winning and losing



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Ages 11-12 (5th-6th Grade)

THE CRITICAL PERIOD

This is the crucial time when girls decide to stick with a sport and identify as an athlete or drop out of sports. This is when coaches should encourage girls to see that sports can be a part of their identity to help them navigate adolescence.

COACHING STRATEGIES

- Have conversations with each girl and encourage her to play. If a girl drops out, try to find out why because you may still be able to help her overcome what she is going through.
- Focus on skill development. Girls want to work hard and see their skills progress over time. Teach girls how to take care of their bodies (i.e. warm up, nutrition, strengthening). Encourage them to stretch outside their comfort zone
- Incorporate some competition and keep score. This lets the girls work towards a goal of winning a game and focuses on teamwork.



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Ages 14-18 (9th-12th Grade)

THE ATHLETE

During this time, girls are likely to see themselves as athletes.

They have years of playing experience, have developed their skills and take their sport seriously. Coaches should give them opportunities to compete, advance and perform. Girls will continue to learn from winning or losing, seek to showcase their ability during games or events, and may fully identify as athletes.

COACHING STRATEGIES

- Be available to players if they need to talk about anything and treat them as the young women they are becoming. They are looking for a trusted adult who they can talk to. Be prepared to refer them to another resource if it is a topic that you are not able to handle.
- Continue to hold high expectations and help them develop skills that translate to their lives off the field. As an example, hand out a list of team expectations on the first day of the season (i.e. be on time, be responsible for gear, give 100 percent, and maintain good grades). Review the list and allow girls to comment or add to it, fostering their sense of ownership of the team.
- Understand that girls may try out risky behaviors (i.e. experimenting with different social groups or exploring drugs, smoking and sex). Support them by giving gentle advice and educating them on topics like body image, health, nutrition, and self-defense.
- Continue to sign-up for competitions like leagues, scrimmages, and tournaments to give girls a chance to test their skills against other teams.
- Continue to organize off-field activities to build relationships between teammates.

