



Keeping Girls in the Game: Addressing the Decline in Sports Participation

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In this brief, Hewitt Faculty Research Fellow and P.E. Teacher Kat Miller highlights key findings from her year-long investigation into the vital role sports participation plays in girls' development.

What are the benefits for girls who participate in sports?

- Access to community, mentorship, and opportunities for social growth
- Chances to build confidence and develop a sense of self, especially the feeling of being capable, strong, and resilient
- Structured outlets for stress relief and mental wellbeing, which become especially important during the transition from middle to upper school
- Opportunities to develop leadership, teamwork, and communication skills that carry over into academics and future experiences
- A structured, purpose-driven environment that supports positive decision-making, accountability, and reduced engagement in risky behaviors

80% of female Fortune 500 CEOs played sports growing up¹

Factors That Sustain and Encourage Girls' Participation in Sports

Coaching Quality and Developmental Relationships

Effective coaches foster autonomy, competence, and belonging by encouraging athlete input, building connections, and maintaining supportive high expectations. Prioritizing development beyond performance helps athletes build confidence, resilience, and intrinsic motivation.²

Family Support and Cultural Encouragement

Because girls often receive less encouragement for physical activity than boys, intentional family engagement is especially important.⁴ Coaches and administrators can strengthen this engagement by setting clear expectations for positive family involvement and communication.

Access, Equity, and Structural Barriers

Ensuring consistent practice times, transportation, and access to athletic facilities, and prioritizing coaching continuity, are essential to sustaining student engagement. It is also crucial to address the role of "pay-to-play" opportunities that require additional financial resources, as these can reinforce inequalities among student athletes.³

Visibility and Representation

Increasing visibility of girls' sports is critical to sustaining participation. Promoting programs, encouraging attendance at games, hosting athletic awards ceremonies, and highlighting female athletes — both within schools and at the professional level — can normalize participation and strengthen girls' connections to sports.

At Hewitt

Across 13 interviews conducted with Hewitt student athletes in grades 6-10, several consistent themes emerged regarding continued participation and drop-off in sports.

Why Hewitt Girls Step Away from Sports

Students reported stepping away from sports when injured or in need of rest. This demonstrates an ability to listen to their bodies rather than push through pain, combatting broader sports culture that often prioritizes performance over wellbeing.

Students described making intentional decisions to step back when their schedules became overwhelming. Competing commitments including academic workloads, school activities (such as the musical), and extracurricular obligations (including club and travel teams) were frequently cited.

Students indicated they were more likely to leave a sport if it no longer brought them joy. This was often connected to social dynamics (e.g., friends leaving a team) or a shift in their level of interest in the sport itself.

How does playing sports make you feel about yourself?

“Sports make me feel really confident about myself, because when I get something right or achieve something, I’m like, ‘Yes!’ I’m really proud of myself and I’m able to end the game with more confidence than when I started.” - 6th Grader

Why Hewitt Girls Stay in Sports

Student athletes overwhelmingly reported feeling supported, included, and valued within their Hewitt teams. They described strong relationships with both coaches and teammates, emphasizing environments where they felt encouraged rather than judged. Notably, many students shared that they did not feel pressure to be “good enough,” and instead experienced teams as spaces for growth, learning, and enjoyment.

Opportunities to build friendships and community were also central factors. This was especially evident among middle school students participating on varsity teams, who consistently described their upper school teammates as patient, welcoming, and positive role models.

Students also highlighted the impact of sports on their confidence beyond athletics. Many shared that sports provided a sense of independence and self-assurance that carried into academic settings, particularly in group work and class participation.

Family support further reinforced participation. Students shared that their families made intentional efforts to be present, ensuring they felt encouraged and valued without excessive pressure to perform.

1 UN Women. “How to Keep Girls Playing Sport.” UN Women, 11 July 2025.

2 Scales, Peter C. “The Crucial Coaching Relationship.” *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 97, no. 8, May 2016, pp. 19–23. *Phi Delta Kappan*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721716647013>

3 COOKY, CHERYL, and MICHAEL A. MESSNER. *No Slam Dunk: Gender, Sport and the Unevenness of Social Change*. Rutgers University Press, 2018. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t6p7fx>. Accessed 10 Nov. 2025

4 Fleshman, Lauren. *Good for a Girl: A Woman Running in a Man’s World*. Penguin Press, 2023.

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Flanagan, Linda. *Take Back the Game: How Money and Mania Are Ruining Kids’ Sports—and Why It Matters*. Portfolio, 2022.

Heywood, Leslie, and Shari L. Dworkin. *Built to Win: The Female Athlete as Cultural Icon*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003.