

Girls in sports at record high, yet many not active enough, report says

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A report released to be released on April 14 by the University of Minnesota's Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport shows that girls are participating in sports in record numbers, but their participation in physical activity outside of organized sports is declining, especially as they move from childhood into adolescence.

The report, *Developing Physically Active Girls: An Evidence-based Multidisciplinary Approach*, summarizes the most recent research pertaining to the physical, psychological, social and cultural benefits girls derive from participation in sport and physical activity, the barriers that prevent them from reaching their full potential and the kinds of environments in which girls learn how to develop and foster the best parts of themselves both on and off the playing fields.

“The research within the report confirms that many good things are happening when it comes to girls and physical activity. Girls are participating in organized sports more than ever and at all levels -- from organized youth sports, to interscholastic sports and up through Olympic competition,” said Nicole LaVoi, researcher and associate director of the Tucker Center and a report author.

The report outlines the benefits girls' reap from physical activity such as:

- Regular physical activity can improve health and reduce girls' risk of obesity and chronic diseases such as Type II diabetes,

osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease.

- Girls' participation in physical activity can result in positive youth development, including social, psychological and motor skill benefits.
 - Athletic girls perform better academically and have lower dropout rates than do their non-athletic counterparts.
 - Girls participate not only for competitive reasons, but to get in shape, socialize with their peers, develop physical skills and to have fun.

However, despite the breadth of knowledge specific to girls' physical activity and the variety of positive outcomes that can accrue through participation, many barriers, stereotypes and gender inequities are firmly in place that limit girls, according to the report.

“Poverty substantially limits many girls’ access to, and participation in, physical activity and sport, especially for girls of color who are overrepresented in lower socioeconomic groups. So while some girls are physically active, many girls fail to meet minimal standards of physical activity needed to accrue developmental and health benefits, or worse, they are completely sedentary. There remains a great deal of work left to be done,” LaVoi said.

The report also found:

-- Girls' participation rates in all types of physical activities consistently lag behind those of boys and girls' dropout rates are higher.

-- Girls' experiences are shaped by the quality and expertise of the adults who make decisions, manage, govern, deliver and coach physical activity programming, many of whom have minimal -- if any -- formal training.

-- Outdated, stereotypical standards of femininity and masculinity continue to influence the extent to which girls participate in or shun physical activity.

-- Female athletes continue to be trivialized through the popular media's widespread sexualization of women.

-- Traditional models of physical education organized around competition, team sports, power, strength, aggression and which focuses on the "motor elite" rather than skill development, disadvantage girls (and boys) who are less skilled to begin with, which may contribute to a lack of enjoyment and a shunning of lifelong participation in physical activity.

What can be done to ensure that all girls have opportunities to increase physical activity?

“The United States as a whole -- from parents and coaches to school administrators and community leaders to policy makers -- needs to make a commitment to eliminating the barriers girls in this nation face when it comes to engaging in sports and physical activity,” said Mary Jo Kane, director of the Tucker Center. “Physical activity is not an ‘add-on’ but rather is a core value and principle for healthy and effective living.”

The Tucker Center report is designed to provide a road map that puts the nation on the path to ensuring that every girl has ample opportunity to fully engage in sport and physical activity. “Often, research done by sports scholars sits on the shelves and practitioners -- such as coaches, parks and recreation directors, and physical education teachers -- view the research as having no practical application,” said University of Minnesota Associate Professor Diane Wiese-Bjornstal, another of the report’s authors. “This report aims at bridging the gap between theory and practice by detailing the best sports and activity programs for girls and how to implement those programs.”

Source: University of Minnesota

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