

Study explores the experiences of girls who play on mixed sports teams

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Young people who compete in sports are often organized into single-sex teams that compete separately. But what happens when youth have the opportunity to compete together?

A group of researchers from the University of Toronto's Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education (KPE) set out to find out whether mixed teams provide girls with more opportunities to advance and compete in [sports](#)—and if they help dispel stereotypes and contribute to mutually respectful relationships.

In a paper published in the journal *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, researchers Melissa L. deJonge, Madison F. Vani and Karly Zammit worked with Professor Catherine Sabiston to explore young adult women's retrospective experiences of playing on boys' sports teams as adolescents.

"We don't know much about what happens when girls choose or need to play on boys' sport teams, which is often the case in rural and remote communities where there are not enough kids to make up separate teams," says deJonge, a Ph.D. student at KPE. "The key focus of this study was to explore these experiences, with a special focus on how the sociocultural environment may benefit or limit the sport experience and participation among adolescent girl athletes."

Eleven women in their 20s who played on boys' sports teams as adolescents were asked to reflect on their experiences. Their reflections show they perceived boys' sport environments to be superior in terms of opportunities for competition, [skill development](#) and advancement in sport. They also described having to overcome assumptions about girls' inferiority in sport that limited their inclusion in the boys' sport environment as adolescents.

"While it is possible that these findings reflect societal beliefs of boys' superiority in sport, the results may also highlight inequitable opportunities for girls' achievement and development in sport," says Vani, a post-doctoral researcher and sessional instructor at the faculty. "The women's accounts provide important implications for targeting the

ways sexed and gendered expectations and norms promote sport for boys while 'othering' the athletic girl."

Some of the study participants recalled engaging in behaviors that distanced themselves from their femininity.

"For example, some women described dressing to cover their body, not wearing makeup or nail polish and hiding their hair length," says Zammit, who completed a bachelor of kinesiology at U of T.

The results of the study highlight the complexities of navigating sex and gender in sport, and the unique challenges associated with adolescent girls competing on boys' sports teams, says Sabiston, who is a Canada Research Chair in Physical Activity and Mental Health and director of KPE's Mental Health and Physical Activity Research Center.

"While sex-integrated sport contexts have been suggested as an avenue to encourage [gender equity](#) and inclusion in sport, further efforts in research and practice are needed to disrupt prevailing stereotypes that are limiting equitable play and opportunities for girls, particularly when competing with boys," she says.

The researchers say that could include employing gender and sex inclusive behavior and [communication strategies](#) that reduce gender-based and body-objectifying commentary, enhancing the representation of women in leadership and coaching positions, and supporting the development of safe and inclusive sport environments.

"Disrupting deep-rooted assumptions of girls' inferiority in sport requires developing and implementing strategies that target individuals—like the coaches, parents or spectators—and a systems level approach that will address issues such as increasing resources allocated to women's and girl's sport to improve girls' inclusion in male-dominated

sports contexts," Sabiston says.

More information: Melissa L. deJonge et al, One of these is not like the other: The retrospective experiences of girl athletes playing on boys' sports teams during adolescence, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/2159676X.2023.2187444](https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2023.2187444)

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