



## How to...

**Understand the impact of girls friendships, enhance them in a physical activity setting and use them to engage and retain female participants**



## *Why it's important*

As sports and activity leaders, coaches, project coordinators, and volunteers we need to better understand the role that friendship groups play in the lives of young people and especially girls. Girls see their world through the filter of friendship groups and we need to help them to effectively manage their relationships.

This guide will consider how friendship groups can influence and impact on successful women and girls physical activity exercise programmes. The guide also includes top tips on how different situations can be managed more effectively.

# Background Research

## Independent Poll

An independent poll of 1,000 young women found that nearly two thirds (63%) would shun any sport or physical activity if their friends were not involved. With over three-quarters (77%) citing the opportunity to catch up with friends as one of the main reasons for taking part in any sport or exercise, it's clear that sports organisations need to harness female friendships or risk failing to encourage new participants.

As well as the chance to socialise, the poll revealed that just being in the company of their friends has a big impact on their confidence levels when exercising, the sheer presence of friends is of huge importance and contributes to the feeling of belonging when exercising. Over two thirds of the girls surveyed (67%) say they feel more comfortable exercising with their friends compared to exercising with people they don't know. 39% of women said they would feel awkward and self-conscious without their friends, while 30% feel like everyone is looking at them.

The poll also highlighted:

- Since leaving school, 45% of girls surveyed either hardly ever or never play sport.
- When reminiscing about school sports, the following things were the most unpopular:
  - Girls didn't feel they were sporty enough (28%)
  - There was a lack of variety (27%)
  - They did liked the sports kit (27%)

## Internal Us Girls Research

Research with 100+ women and girls who take part in Us Girls and StreetGames sessions confirmed the findings of the independent poll. 80% of females agreed that they feel more comfortable exercising with their friends compared to exercising with people they don't know. They feel most comfortable when they are surrounded by their own friends, when the classes are fun and relaxed and when they are allowed to chat with friends while taking part.

83% of females attending Us Girls sessions said they usually attend with their friends, 87% said they see these same friends outside of the Us Girls sessions. 74% of respondents said they have made

new friends since joining Us Girls. These responses lead us to believe that a number of participants will attend for the first time with people they know, hence them seeing the same people outside of the sessions as well as meeting new friends who they will also socialise with.

Over half of the Us Girls participants (55%) said it was very important that the sessions they attended were female only. When asked why a number of the most common themed responses included

"It is easier to feel relaxed with all girls"

"Boys make fun of us"

"I don't like exercising in front of boys"

By understanding the impact of friendship groups we can support girls to access and enjoy sport and exercise on a regular basis.



# Factors to consider

## Understanding girls lives

*"The girls don't come for the activity; they come for the social element. To meet each other and have fun."*

### Us Girls session leader

Girls' identities in early adolescence appear to be created both within their own friendship group and between other peer groups. Girls tend to create identities that are different to other friendship groups. This often constrains their ability to take up new activities such as sport or physical activity.

In relation to physical activity this can be clearly seen in the way girls will label a specific group as 'sporty'. This often means that all other groups must be 'non-sporty' as girls aim to create unique groups that are different to all of the groups around them.

Girls also create constraining identities within their peer groups, taking on established roles. Girls appear to feel comforted in giving their friends specific traits that fit into their specific 'peer group jigsaw'. Think about the Spice Girls as a made-up example; a sporty one, a posh one, a scary one...!

In relation to physical activity, girls may feel wary about taking up any role which has not been already established and accepted within their specific peer group. This could impact the take up of volunteering or coaching roles as well as the engagement in physical activity sessions themselves.

Female participants need to feel comfort and protection from vulnerability. This may be why girls attach themselves so fiercely to their friendship groups. And why they feel so exposed when these groups are split up or broken (either through the girls falling out or when groups are mixed during activities).

How can we help peer groups to:

- Identify with physical activity as a legitimate activity for their whole group when they had not otherwise seen themselves as 'sporty'? (This is already largely successfully covered by the

implementation of Us Girls sessions in the first instance)

- Be able to mix with other friendship groups, with girls from different schools, areas, estates and girls of different ages and year groups?

How can we help individual girls within peer groups to:

- Establish themselves as individuals and engage with physical activity?
- Help them emerge from their specific role identities within their friendship groups?



Us Girls Barnsley

## The importance of friendship groups

Research demonstrates the priority that friendship groups hold during sports and activity sessions. For example, girls would demand to know the group numbers for each activity, before they even knew what the activity was. Girls' friendship groups are often taken for granted or perceived as silly or trivial. But this element of girls' lives emerges as a pivotal factor in our understanding of how girls relate to their own physicality and respond to physical activity programmes.

Observing participants at Us Girls sessions demonstrates the way that building relationships and almost continual communication is a crucial element for the girls. Programmes need to accept this as part of their session. Girls might not come to sessions if they do not have the ability to chat to each other. Girls appear, in the first instance, to need friends to 'legitimise' the activity.





StreetGames Festival

*"Getting fit' or 'fitness' can be a desirable activity...as long as their friends are also doing it."*

**Us Girls Leader**

When friendship groups or dynamics are threatened, girls feel insecure and vulnerable. Us Girls sessions need to ensure that such disruptions are managed effectively and supportively in order to ensure girls feel confident and comfortable to keep attending their sessions and to participate fully.

**Providing space for friendships to develop and regular communication**

Girls need the opportunity to chat before, during and after the activity. Girls prioritise being able to communicate with one another almost constantly. Observations of sessions and discussions with girls illustrate how conversation and an opportunity for 'chat' and 'banter' was one of the most prominent and important features for the girls. They do not appreciate having a session which is "too intense".

*"One instructor we had in was far too 'full-on' for the girls. She only played her own music ....the physical activity was just too intense. The girls are very selective about what they like."*

**Instructor from Us Girls in Goole**

An activity is too intense when they have to be so engaged in an activity that they are unable to chat to each other at the same time. For many girls group exercise classes that feature continual activity are not favoured, sessions where there are short breaks between tracks or routines were preferred as well as multi-sport sessions with opportunity for breaks.



*"Ball sports seem to be the preferred choice...girls are able to chat...they get away doing less actual physical activity."*

**Instructor from Us Girls in Newton Aycliffe**

To enhance fitness and diversify activities, session leaders should make it clear to girls where their opportunities for free time and chat will be. For example,

**"one more routine and then we'll have a quick break."**

Where a session might be considered 'intense' the instructor should ensure the girls have the opportunity to build their relationship through chat and teamwork prior to or following the session.

**How to create sessions to promote friendship development**

*"It's not like PE and this is why we like it."*

**Us Girls Participant**

This is a recurring comment across a number of Us Girls projects and sessions. Successful sessions which promote friendship development are not too 'structured' and have a relaxed and playful vibe. For example, one Us Girls project leader used to give the participants gym programmes, the girls did not like them because they did not allow them the opportunity to chat because they would be in different parts of the gym.

*"I used to give them programme cards for the gym work but the girls felt it was too structured ...now they just enjoy coming into the gym and doing their own thing without the cards."*

**Leader from Us Girls Newham.**



Girls who are most enthusiastic about their Us Girls sessions talk about it being "calm, safe and relaxed". They say that at school other girls "take sport more seriously and are more competitive".

An atmosphere which allows girls to 'mess around' enables them to continue to develop their friendships. During school lessons this is not often allowed or encouraged. Successful sessions allow girls to opt in and out of the activity of their own accord. In Us Girls sessions, participants appreciate the fact that they will not be made to do anything that they did not like or that bored them. Instructors joining in with the activity sometimes helps develop camaraderie, a team spirit and an overall friendliness of the sessions. Girls' perception of a session as 'friendly' contributed greatly to its success.

When asked what would stop them coming to sessions, girls immediately made reference to friendship issues: "If it got too bitchy"; "If I felt left out"; "If other girls came"; "If it stopped being fun". Girls talk about how they enjoy the sessions because they are non-judgemental. How they dislike PE because they are judged but how much they enjoy the Us Girls sessions because they are not judged.

*"In PE we feel less confident....but we feel confident here."*

*"Yeah cos at school...the teacher's judging you."*

*"It feels safe and relaxed...other girls (at school) are more athletic...they take sport more seriously. Here it is just friendly competition."*

**Us Girls Participants in Newton Aycliffe**

### **Girls do not need to be engaged in the activity to gain benefits**

In many ways girls' regular presence at the sessions can be enough to promote and instil a belief that they are enjoying physical activity. Several session leaders identify the need to prompt the girl back into the activity, that they would keep breaking off and chatting.



Does this matter? It is questionable whether girls should be reminded to join back into the activity. Many girls spoke about how much they appreciated the relaxed atmosphere (compared to school). To change this by 'nagging' at them may alter their experience of the session.



StreetGames Festival London

### **Friends act as a comforter for girls in areas they are not very comfortable or confident (e.g. fitness!)**

Many young women involved in Us Girls are, by their own admission, not 'sporty'. Most girls would also say they were not very fit. This traditionally discourages them from being involved in physical activity. It creates feelings of low physical self-perception and a lack of self-efficacy (they don't believe they can 'do it'). Friends act as a comfort blanket for many girls. Trying to disentangle them from this blanket too early may cause them to drop out or lose interest and enthusiasm.

*"We wouldn't feel comfortable exercising alone...it would be awkward....I like having company. It makes me feel more comfortable."*

**Us Girls Participant, Newham**

*"We are like a family...it's just like...a pack mentality!"*

**Us Girls Participant, Newton Aycliffe**

**Friends are crucial to bring girls to the sessions but can be detrimental to progress and retention**

Many of those attending Us Girls stated that they would never have come to the sessions on their own. They came with a friend or, more often, a group of friends. In one session girls spoke about their first session "we were petrified...so nervous...it was good being together, no-one would have come alone".

If a girl was referred to a programme individually it quickly becomes clear she would not enjoy coming alone and would immediately ask if she could bring her friends. Without her friends, the girl would often stop coming altogether.

Once the girls have arrived, the friendship groups need to be carefully merged and integrated with other girls' groups. If the friendship group was to break down then some of the girls may not return as they would not feel comfortable. If some of the friendship group dropped out then this would impact on others attending regularly.

If girls feel confident in themselves in the session and have made other friends across a range of groups within a session then retention and regular participation will be much higher.

*"The girls that came splintered into two groups.....in the end one group stopped coming. I emailed one of the girls but she said they weren't coming back because they had fallen out with the others..."*

**Us Girls leader, Wigan**



**Us Girls Conwy**

**Girls struggle to mix their friendship groups and across age groups**

It is vital that girls mix beyond their friendship group. If they do not, then retention and regular participation may be compromised. Mixing girls across friendship groups, across schools and across age groups needs to be done with great care. Some Us Girls projects have experienced 'tears and tantrums' when they tried to mix groups, of it 'backfiring' and of girls 'just not engaging'.

In childhood and adolescence, girls perceive a huge gap across year groups (school related). To place girls together who are in different year groups can work...if the girls have been together from the beginning. However, introducing a younger group of girls to an existing older group can create a distinct split. Older girls can find it threatening and the younger girls can feel intimidated. Session leaders can manage this by presenting different activities or segmented activities for the different groups.

*"When we knew other girls were coming we panicked...we felt less comfortable... this is our space".*

**Us Girls Participant**





Girls can also be suspicious of girls from other schools. Often more so than girls from other year groups. It is important for girls to mix across schools but, again, this has to be managed carefully. It would be beneficial for session leaders to actively manage the relationship building between girls of different schools. To give them some specific tasks to work on together and to highlight commonalities between them, for example music, fashion and other hobbies.

Cliques can also take over sessions and are intimidating for smaller groups of friends or girls who may have come on their own. One Us Girls session leader described the difficulty she had when she brought three different area groups together. She experienced a lot of tension between girls. Girls need to be guided together not forced or it can make them feel vulnerable and defensive. New girls can enter the group more effectively if they are given two or three different buddies.

*"I tried to mix up the girls last year...you know from three different Us Girls groups in the area and it just did not work at all. Also, we had a school launch last year, you know girls brought friends and cousins and the other girls did not like it...they don't like to mix beyond their original friendship groups."*

**Leader from Us Girls Newton Aycliffe**

*"The group numbers never increase... they are a tight knit group who don't like change...bringing new girls in is not necessarily something that the girls want."*

**Leader from Us Girls Goole**

**Volunteers and Us Girls Motivators can and will influence how the girls present themselves and experience the session**

A number of StreetGames and Us Girls projects use volunteers and motivators to support female participants to engage in activities. It is often helpful to have two or three volunteers or Us Girls Motivators to balance out different personalities and ensure they are seen as accessible and available to the girls. Having two or three motivators allows different personalities to 'speak' to different friendship groups. Different cliques will often associate themselves with a particular volunteer or Us Girls Motivator so it can be helpful to have more than one to prevent some girls feeling left out.

In order to encourage girls to step up in to a volunteer or Motivator role, it can be helpful for session leaders to alter the way the role is perceived. Learning from the Us Girls programme indicated that many girls were not interested in the



formal sports volunteer pathway which includes them becoming a coach or instructor. Girls are often reluctant to commit to roles where they are required to attend every week and where the role is structured. They would much prefer roles where they can volunteer on a more casual and informal basis. Many girls are also worried about how their friends will react if they take on a leadership role within a group.

Girls can inspire and motivate their friends, peers and other girls in many ways. For example some girls are great at organising for a group of friends to go for a run or on an active trip e.g. to the ice rink by finding out times and availability and texting friends to come. This informal volunteering assumes the role of an Us Girls Motivator yet does not ask the girls to step outside of their friendship group or comfort zone and feel embarrassed or intimidated.



**Conflict resolution is a very real and important role for session leaders. Appropriate time and staffing should be given where possible**

Sessions may occasionally involve an atmosphere that is fraught with tension between girls. One session leader explained that she would frequently need to stop activities in order to counsel the girls. Where this tension is present it is useful to draw on additional youth leaders, or manage staffing efficiently in order to ensure activities are still ongoing whilst girls' problems are resolved.



*"We have like six or seven arguments at least in a session."*

**Us Girls Participants, Goole**

*"The girls kick off over the stupidest things....there are rules on the wall to manage it. I know how long to let the banter go on for and when to step in. We need a staff member to do the counselling between the girls, and someone else to carry on and manage the session."*

**Us Girls Session Leader, Goole**

**Girls should be made aware of other nearby sports and physical activity sessions.**

Some conflicts between girls cannot be resolved. Session leaders often speak about friendship group divisions and arguments which often happen outside of the session. The result is that certain girls will no longer attend the Us Girls session. Where there is a conflict that cannot be resolved it is helpful for girls to be aware of other adjacent and nearby sport and exercise programmes.

In one Us Girls project, a female participant had transferred across from a nearby session because the other session was too 'bitchy'. Had she not been aware of other nearby sessions then she may have stopped attending altogether. This may have impacted on her engagement in future sports and exercise sessions.

**It is important and helpful for girls to focus on being you:**

Girls invest heavily in the identity they hold within their peer group and the identity of their group as a whole. Session leaders need to encourage girls to establish themselves and engage with physical activity as individuals and help them to emerge from their specific role within their friendship groups. This is crucial in order for girls to feel confident in the take up of new activities and opportunities and also for retention in sessions when their friends may no longer attend.





A number of Us Girls projects include activities and workshops which help the girls to focus on being individual. This however can be a difficult task. It is considered that girls already know that they should focus on themselves but are unable to act on it, because none of their friends are. Where possible, sessions need to support girls to pursue interests and activities beyond their friendship groups, now and for the future. Encouraging girls to establish themselves as individuals may also help them to escape the 'social media identity'. Girls are often fixated on how they represent themselves on social media, this social media self is created and is not necessarily accurate.



In pursuit of popularity and conformity, girls create their social media presence to fit with an ideal. Social media plays an integral part in the lives of girls today. We need to acknowledge this and consider how it plays a part in girls' self-concept and in turn their physical activity experiences. How are sport, fitness and physical activity presented within the context of social media? Often, for young women, this is presented in an 'aesthetic' rather than sporting way.

Sessions that incorporate social media are encouraged. Session leaders, volunteers and Us Girls motivators can highlight inspirational females that do not conform to the 'fit aesthetic' images of popular celebrities. Session leaders can show girls examples of achievements by women in sport who also present themselves on social media. Session leaders could identify other celebrities for girls to follow in social media who are sporting, or endurance activity based, motivational, but who still appeal to young girls.



## The perfect atmosphere to help confident friendships

Us Girls; a 'friendly' group; sessions that are 'nothing like' school PE; non-judgemental leaders; acknowledgement of body consciousness; girls being 'friends' with all of the girls (even if they are not in the same 'clique'); managing change carefully; introducing familiar ways for girls to 'motivate'; offering leadership courses to 'groups' of girls.

## Top tips

- Girls should be encouraged to come in friendship groups initially.
- During sessions friends act as a great comfort for girls in an area that they typically have low self-confidence (physical activity and sport).
- After girls have established a habit of attendance they can be encouraged to mix in twos and threes with other groups.
- When a session leader establishes that a girl has confidence, they can give girls the opportunity to step out of their groups and see themselves as individuals within the overall session and to consolidate new relationships.
- Girls find it distressing to have friendship groups mixed or deconstructed and so need prior warning that this will be taking place (e.g. later on in the programme).
- Girls need to develop new relationships over time. Girls prefer activities which incorporate conversation and 'banter'. When an activity does not allow for this, session leaders should ensure girls have enough time prior to or following the activity.
- Mixing girls from different year groups or different schools needs careful management. This needs to be overseen by a session leader and could incorporate activities which will bring together some commonalities. For example, types of music, discussions of popular TV shows or films.

- Girls appreciate humour and will often bond easily through laughter. Activities which help girls' not to take themselves too seriously and that produce laughter will enhance positive friendship development.
- Ice breaker sessions should not be reserved for an Us Girls launch or initial sessions. They should be used frequently to mix up groups and help to introduce new groups of girls into existing groups.
- Session leaders should accept where there is frequent tension between girls and accommodate this through additional staffing where appropriate. A role of counsellor would be advisable to ensure activities are able to continue.
- Girls should be made aware of nearby Us Girls sessions or similar programmes. This will enable them to continue participation even if they no longer feel able to attend their original session.
- Is it conducive to help girls to 'focus on being you'. Include activities that highlight individuality and the strengths of being an individual.
- Accept the role of social media in the lives of young women today. Consider how you can show alternative role models on social media who embrace physical activity and fitness but not purely in the aesthetic sense.

## Further information

Women in Sport: What Sways Women to Play Sport?

[www.womeninsport.org/resources](http://www.womeninsport.org/resources)

Sport England: Helping women and girls get active

[www.sportengland.org/womenandgirls](http://www.sportengland.org/womenandgirls)

