

GIRL GOT GAME

By the time girls reach 17, more than half of them will have quit sports altogether.

If your daughter wants to call quits on sports, here's what you can do to keep them in the game.

by LARA HYDE

Playing sports have a myriad of benefits, beyond just the physical. Higher levels of confidence, self-esteem and communication are just some of the positive effects of sports. Yet, by the age of 14, girls are dropping out of sports at twice the rate of boys.

IN THE PAST YEAR, Canadian women have achieved some impressive accomplishments in the world of sports. Team Canada saw its largest percentage of women ever in the 2016 Summer Olympics, and our female athletes dominated the podium in Rio—87 per cent of Canadian medal winners were women.

Yet, despite these achievements, recent statistics point to a disturbing trend when it comes to girls and sports—by the age of 14, girls are dropping out of sports at twice the rate of boys, according to the Women's Sports Foundation. By 17—according to the Always Confidence & Puberty Survey by the multinational company Procter & Gamble—51 per cent of girls will have quit sports altogether.

Being involved in sports has many benefits beyond the physical. For girls, in particular, it can give them a boost in self-esteem while fostering friendships, communication and even an athletic career. We chatted with experts and parents about why keeping girls in sports is so important and what you can do to encourage them to stay in the game.

THE BENEFITS OF SPORTS

The benefits of staying active are manifold.

We all know how important regular exercise is for our health, but for teenage girls and young women, being involved in a sport or other type of physical activity has many mental, emotional and social benefits, as well.

“The main non-physical benefit of sports is that they offer so many connections,” says Natascha Wesch, a London, Ont.-based sports psychologist and assistant professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Western University. “Girls tend to enjoy being part of a community or tribe. Being involved in a sport or other type of physical activity provides opportunities to create friendships and make social connections that are live—not like social media where you are just connecting with your phone. Participation in sports forces you to have face-to-face, human-to-human interactions where you can actually feel the person next to you.

“Being physically active also helps develop confidence,” says Wesch. “The health benefits have psychological impacts. Physical activity helps you to feel stronger and proud of what you can achieve with your body—proud of yourself.”

WHEN SHE WANTS TO QUIT

Still, even with all these positives come challenges, most notably when girls hit puberty. “Suddenly, their bodies are going through a multitude of changes, including getting their period for the first time, which can leave them feeling very exposed—especially when they’re wearing ►



a gymnastics leotard,” says Wesch.

This is why having female role models and support is so imperative.

“There is a lot of value in female coaches,” says Wesch. “As a coach, you need to be able to understand what girls are going through, physically and emotionally. Giving young girls exposure to role models is hugely beneficial.”

Stress is another factor that can make a girl want to quit sports, especially if they are playing at a high level. This is why ensuring your daughter has a good support system is paramount.

“Girls tend to be more connected with their emotions and more sensitive about what is said to them. We shouldn’t look at emotion as a weakness in sport. We can harness our emotions to make them work for us,” says Wesch.

Marlene Bruckner’s 16-year-old daughter, Tereza Vithoultias, has been diving with Club Camo Plongeon in Montreal, Quebec, for five years and just made the Canadian Junior National Diving Team. Bruckner has another daughter, Katherine, who swims competitively and a son, Nicholas, who runs track.

“My daughter is a “ball of nerves” before diving,” says Bruckner. “I always tell her ‘One dive at a time.’ Parents need to encourage their kids and not put pressure on them. Let them know that no matter what happens, you’ll always be there for them.”

SPORTS CAN SHAPE HER FUTURE

Twenty-five-year-old Taryn Wicijowski, a retired pro basketball player originally from Saskatchewan ►

and now living in Edmonton, Alberta, says that sports have shaped everything about her life.

“Through sports, I learned to work as a part of a team, how to talk with other people whose communication styles are different than mine, how to be a leader, and how to bring my best effort to everything I am involved in. Sports have given me an opportunity to travel the world and have paid for my education,” says Wicijowski, who is currently an assistant coach for the University of Alberta Pandas basketball team and is also pursuing a medical degree.

But while Wicijowski has reaped many of the benefits associated with being an elite athlete, including playing for Team Canada, the road to her success wasn’t always easy. She had to overcome a number of serious basketball-related injuries that relegated her to the sidelines for two of the four years that she was eligible to play in the NCAA.

“Learning to stay focused and positive about basketball, when the sport had been taken away from me was a major obstacle that has made me a stronger, more confident and driven woman,” she says.

SPORTS TEACH DISCIPLINE

Among the benefits Bruckner has seen in her daughters from their involvement in sport through the provincially funded Sport Etude (Sport-Study) program is the self-discipline the girls have had to develop in order to stay on top of their academic game, while spending part of

each day training. In order for student athletes to stay in the program, they must maintain a minimum 75 per cent average. In fact, numerous studies have shown that involvement in sports is linked to better academic performance, particularly in female athletes.

But for some teens, it can be hard to remain focused, especially when their non-athlete friends are hanging out at the mall and going to parties, while they have to stay on a strict regimen. “As a parent, you have to remind them of the pay-off. When they are 25 years old, they could have a scholarship or be in the Olympics,” says Bruckner.

KEEPING THE DIALOGUE ON POINT

Taryn Wicijowski’s mother, Laurice, remembers when Taryn was in Grade 10 and playing both basketball and hockey at high levels. “It was an extremely busy year for her. She came to us in the spring and told us that she wanted to quit hockey so she could dedicate her time to improving her basketball skills. She was worried that she would be disappointing her dad who loves hockey. We discussed it together and told her that it was her decision and that we would support whatever decision she made.”

“We all need to ask, ‘What is the language around sports in our home?’” adds Wesch. “Making physical activity a priority and keeping in mind that everyone is different—and celebrating those differences—will go a long way toward keeping our kids active throughout their lives.” ■