

# PUBERTY & SPORT: AN INVISIBLE STAGE

The impact on girls'  
engagement in  
physical activity

AUGUST 2018



# WHAT WE DID

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- ▶ **Is coming to terms with puberty having a longer-term impact on how girls engage with sport?**
- ▶ **What are the key barriers and issues girls face during this time?**

## RESEARCH METHOD

Qualitative research with girls aged 12-16 years who are going through puberty and have started menstruating.

- ▶ Triads and friendship pairs amongst 24 girls, a mix of active and inactive, mix of ethnicities from north/south.
- ▶ Literature review and expert interviews.

## TIMING

November 2017 – March 2018



# THE PROBLEM: TEENAGE GIRLS DISENGAGE WITH SPORT

Embedding good exercise habits during teenage years can support activity levels later in life. Attitudes and behaviours formed during the pubescent years are therefore critical.

## GIRLS DISENGAGE

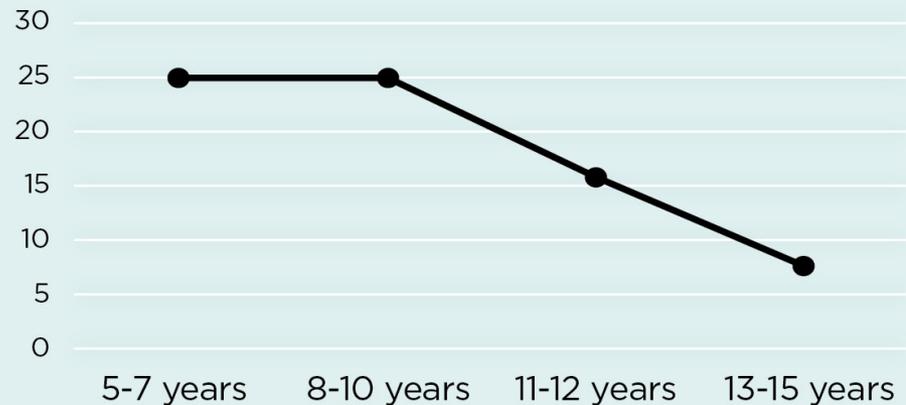
By age 13-15 years only 8% meet CMO guidelines.

Photo credit: Rushil Choudhay, Echo Your Sport



## % OF GIRLS MEETING DAILY ACTIVITY GUIDELINES\*

SOURCE: NHS Digital (2016) Health Survey for England 2015 - Physical Activity in Children



\*CMO guidelines = at least 60 mins of physical activity/day

**It is therefore vital to tackle issues around sport and activity and improve resilience at this time.**

# MOTIVATION, SELF-CONFIDENCE AND ENJOYMENT OF SPORT ARE ALL AFFECTED

Our Girls Active survey (2017) of over 21,000 girls revealed issues that influence girls' engagement with sport, which all **get worse during teenage years.**

## FOR GIRLS AGE 12-14 YEARS...

Only 41% feel happy they are doing enough exercise

**36%** unhappy with their body

**42%** avoid exercise when they have their period

Only 42% say exercise is important to their lives

**28%** do no other exercise except PE at school

Only 23% really enjoy PE

SOURCE: Women in Sport & Youth Sport Trust (Girls Active, 2017)  
Key Findings from Girls Active Survey – November 2017

Photo credit: Rushil Choudhay, Echo Your Sport

# NEED TO PROMOTE THE BENEFITS OF BEING ACTIVE

All girls are highly aware of the physical benefits of being active, but the emotional and social benefits are less widely appreciated, particularly by those who are less active.

## PHYSICAL

- ▶ Keeps you healthy
- ▶ Gives you energy
- ▶ Fresh air into lungs
- ▶ Sleep better at night
- ▶ Learn new skills and techniques
- ▶ Helps maintain a healthy weight

*“You want to go to bed early and get a good night’s sleep (after sports).”*

## EMOTIONAL

- ▶ Clears your mind
- ▶ Stops parents complaining
- ▶ Pride and achievement
- ▶ Feeling more awake
- ▶ Feeling happier
- ▶ Helps alleviate fear of failure
- ▶ Distracts from issues at home

*“If something happened at home, you can just get away for a bit if you do dance.”*

## SOCIAL

- ▶ Forms friendships
- ▶ Social skills
- ▶ New friendship groups
- ▶ Enjoyable and fun
- ▶ Helps confidence
- ▶ Learn to lead

*“When I go now, I get to know more friends, not in school but also outside school.”*

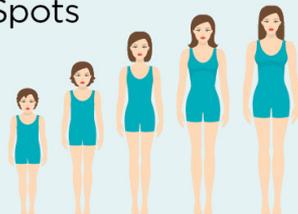
**Could more emphasis on emotional and social benefits motivate the less active girls once the trials and tribulations of puberty set in?**

# CHANGES DURING PUBERTY ARE NOT JUST PHYSICAL

- ▶ **Average age 11 years old** but can begin any time between ages 8 to 14 years old.
- ▶ Physical, emotional and psychological changes which last around 4 years.
- ▶ A time when girls become more independent and form new relationships with peers.
- ▶ Appearance and social activities such as sport are a way of expressing solidarity with friends.

## PHYSICAL

Growth  
Periods  
Changing shape  
Hair  
Spots



## PSYCHOLOGICAL

Attachment  
Identity building  
Competence



## EMOTIONAL

Mood  
Happiness  
Confidence



## IMPACT CONFIDENCE AND SELF-PERCEPTION

# GIRLS FEEL UNPREPARED FOR PUBERTY

Girls struggle to deal with their emotions and fearmongering from others during puberty, due to a significant lack of education about symptoms and effects.

## GIRLS READILY RELATE TO CERTAIN PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS...

Periods and cramps, development of breasts, leg hair, underarm hair, pubic hair, spots, weight gain/hips widening, curves, sweating, body odour.

## BUT FEEL COMPLETELY UNPREPARED FOR THE SUDDEN EMOTIONAL IMPACT...

Mood swings, anger, upset, tears for no reason, low confidence, emotional outbursts, a sense of being constantly 'watched', awkwardness, confusion, shame, fear, changing perspectives, shyness, feeling 'dirty' when on period.

Puberty education at school and at home is hit and miss; there is NO support currently in relation to managing physical exercise during this time.

“  
*They don't really tell you how to deal with the emotions.*  
”

“  
*They always talk about it in a serious way, like, you should be scared about this.*  
”

“  
*I feel like when you get to this point your self esteem just drops because you're just, like... I don't feel good, I'm not good enough at this, I'm not good enough at that, I'm not pretty enough.*  
”

# BOMBARDED WITH CHANGE AND NEW RESPONSIBILITIES

Often at the same time as puberty, girls face the upheaval of leaving primary school and coming to terms with their new responsibilities at secondary school.

## PRIMARY SCHOOL

Fun, protected, fluid friendships, parental support, belonging, less independence & responsibility



Photo credit: Dave Crosby

“  
*When I was 10, I did a lot more sport in primary because we had it like pretty much every day.*  
”

“  
*[In primary] you didn't have to worry about what you were doing... what clothes you've got on, what lessons you've got and everything... everyone's stressed out.*  
”

## SECONDARY SCHOOL

New friendships, increased responsibility & independence, workload pressure & increased expectations, physical and emotional exhaustion

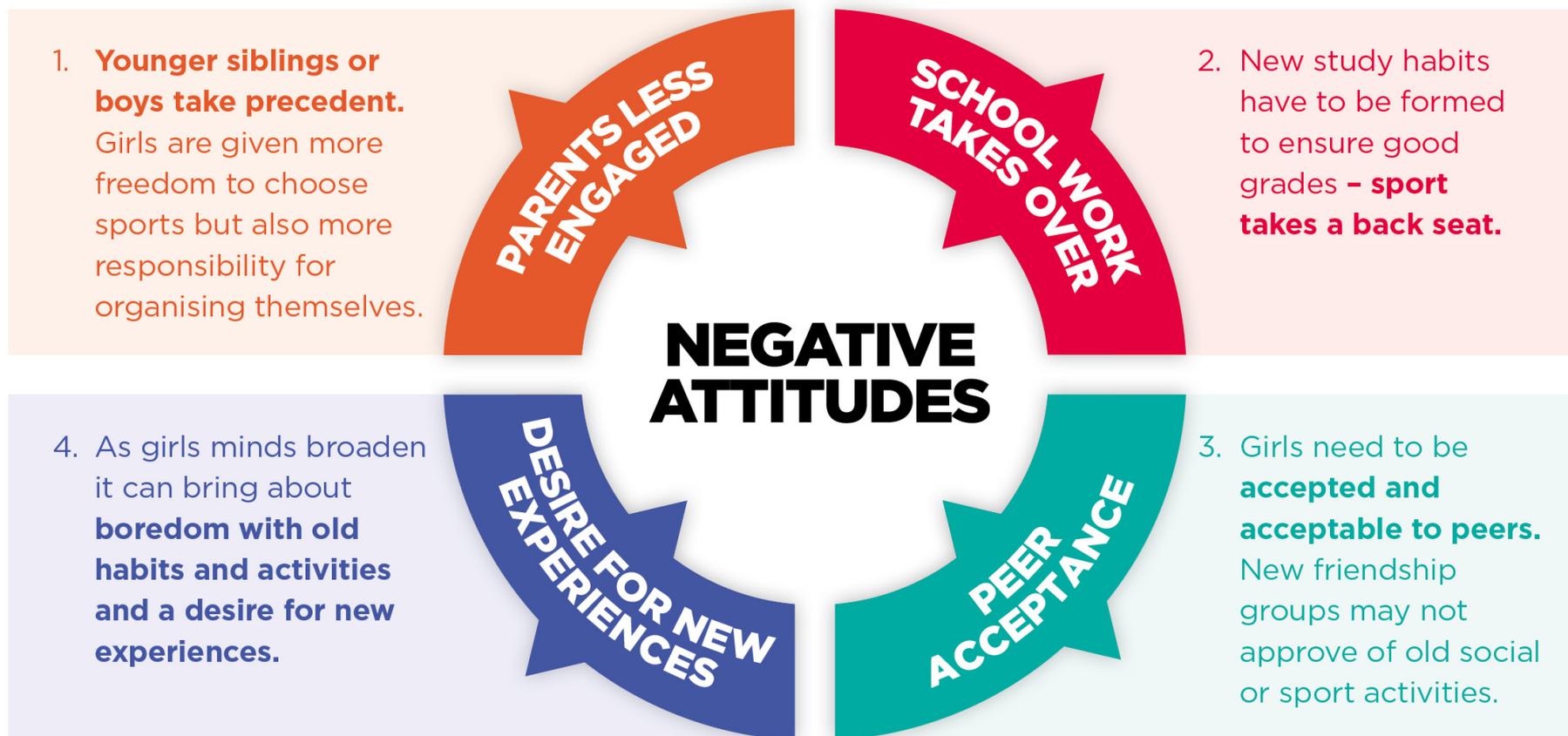


“  
*People forget you, you don't get that attention anymore.*  
”

“  
*My parents want me to do well, I want to do well, and the teachers want you to do well as well.*  
”

# THE IMPACT ON SPORT

Girls can form **negative attitudes** towards sport during puberty and their transition from a child to an adult.



## FEELINGS OF SCRUTINY, CHANGE AND RE-ADJUSTMENT

- ▶ An **'invisible stage'** where girls feel everyone is noticing.
- ▶ **Establishing adult identity** and forging new relationships with others. Activities previously enjoyed, may now seem childish.
- ▶ The perception of **'having to be good' at sport** in order to participate increases, whilst playing sport for fun, appears less acceptable.
- ▶ An upsurge of **competition and animosity** between girls.
- ▶ The sports environment is a breeding-ground for gossip.
- ▶ **New responsibilities and interests fill their time** and they become independent of parents.
- ▶ **Looking good becomes increasingly important.** Becoming 'overly sporty' can lead to negative stereotyping.
- ▶ **Coming to terms with their changing body** and periods creates anxiety.



Photo credit:  
Rushil Choudhay, Echo Your Sport

## SPORT IS ASSOCIATED WITH NEGATIVE FEELINGS

I don't like being watched

*I hate sports day. Everyone's watching you. I hate being in front of people.*

I'm not good enough

*When you're younger it's just friendly... nice to go out, see your friends, play and just have a kick about... but people get more competitive.*

I feel judged

*You might not be doing it right and they're all just looking at you and then they say something.*

Physical changes

*Starting to need a bra... I was so embarrassed.*

Too much going on and focus on schoolwork

*I seem to be doing more school stuff now, GCSEs and everything... I used to go out on my bike before, just for fun without even knowing it was exercise.*

[Click here to see girls talking about the issues they face during puberty](#)



## UNWITTING TARGETS ON AN INVISIBLE STAGE

Puberty presents opportunities for others to notice and comment on how a girl is changing. Lacking a sense of belonging leads to a **strong fear** of being targeted for being 'different' or 'inadequate'.

### GIRLS FEEL JUDGED ON THEIR...

#### APPEARANCE

**34%**

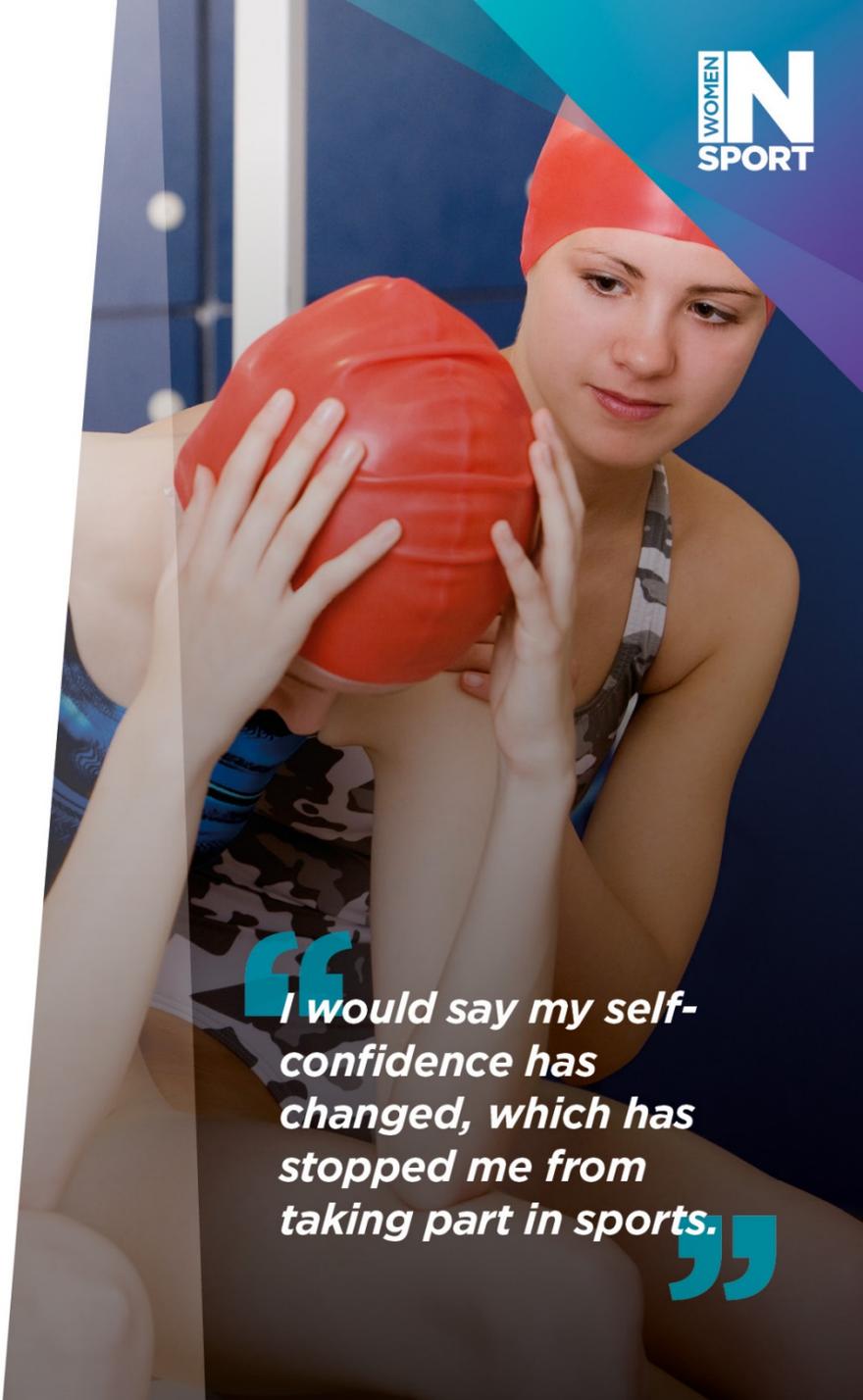
don't take part  
because they don't  
like being watched\*

#### ABILITY

**35%**

don't take part  
because they are  
not confident\*

Sport is the perfect stage for more **MOMENTS TO BE TARGETED** and more **OPPORTUNITIES TO FAIL** – girls are more likely to drop out if their inadequacies are brought into the spotlight.



*I would say my self-confidence has changed, which has stopped me from taking part in sports.*

SOURCE: \* Women in Sport & Youth Sport Trust (Girls Active, 2017)  
Key Findings from Girls Active Survey – November 2017

## ANIMOSITY & COMPETITION

### FROM OTHER GIRLS

As girls struggle with the changes of puberty, low self esteem leads some to spread gossip and negativity.

**PE/sport changing room becomes a prime area for girls to criticise** others and highlight awkward puberty moments (e.g. sanitary pads showing, unshaven legs/armpits).

“*I wish someone told me earlier about how girls compete about who looks better.*”

### FROM BOYS

As girls mature, some compete with one another to impress boys.

Girls want to appear ‘feminine’ and attractive but also **‘good enough’ at PE/sport so as not to be mocked** for being incompetent.

“*Boys are more in the picture and you feel like you have to look good for the boys.*”



# HOW ELSE DO GIRLS BECOME 'TARGETS' IN SPORT?

## 1. PERFORMANCE

Those who don't excel in physical activity tend to feel an enhanced sense of failure during puberty and may decide it's more comfortable to give up.

“*Sports day, I was up all night because I was really worried about it so I stayed off school... if you muck up or don't win everyone's going to laugh at us, I don't want to do it anymore.*”



## 2. PRACTICALITIES & SYMPTOM SHAMING

Bra's, deodorant, shaving and skin care are a long period of trial and error where failure and teasing is always around the corner.

Sweating, body hair and spots can become unwanted topics of conversation during physical activity where they are more on 'show'.

“*People use it, they bully people about it.*”



# HOW ELSE DO GIRLS BECOME 'TARGETS' IN SPORT?

## 3. SPORTS KITS

PE/sports kit can be revealing, unflattering and uncomfortable. Kits can reinforce feelings of being in the spotlight; girls feel objectified and that others are watching/judging changes in their body.

“*I don't like wearing cycling shorts because I feel it would make my thighs look even bigger than they already are.*”



## 4. NEGATIVE ATTITUDES

Sports are often sociable and about being a team player, so moodiness and poor self esteem do not go down well amongst more active peers.

“*When you're really moody... they might say, "Oh, why did you come when you're just going to be mean?"*”



## COPING WITH THEIR MONTHLY PERIOD

- ▶ A significant barrier to girls being more active, due to:
- ▶ Being irregular and hard to predict when a girl starts.
- ▶ **Strong fear of leakage** and being 'found out'.
- ▶ Little time to shower/wash after exercise in school leads to worries about hygiene and smell.
- ▶ Embarrassment of asking others for help.
- ▶ Feeling weak and/or in pain.
- ▶ Lack of **coping resources and confidence** in their ability to manage periods during sport.

**As girls try to manage periods this can lead to long term absences and habits that are difficult to reverse.**

*You kind of drift yourself off from doing anything, 'oh, I can't, I've got plans'... you try and find something, like you're busy but you're not.*

*I'm worried in case it's gone through while I'm doing PE.*



# HOW DO GIRLS THINK & FEEL DURING THEIR PERIOD?

'I can't move too much in case I leak'

'Am I the only one?'

**Fear & anxiety**

'I can't be bothered'

**Stomach cramps & bloating**

'I need to rest'

**Emotional & low mood**

**Embarrassed & ashamed**

**Low confidence**

'Everyone will make fun of me'

**Feel dirty & unhygienic**

'I need to hide it from everyone'

**Physically & emotionally drained**



[Click here to view a day in the life of 12 year old Amy.](#)

**AS GIRLS TRY TO MANAGE PERIODS THIS CAN LEAD TO LONG TERM ABSENCES AND HABITS THAT ARE DIFFICULT TO REVERSE**

## BEING TOO 'FIT' LEADS TO NEGATIVE STEREOTYPING

Girls felt being 'too fit' was not a positive quality to have – there is a **lot** of pressure on them to get their body image 'right'.

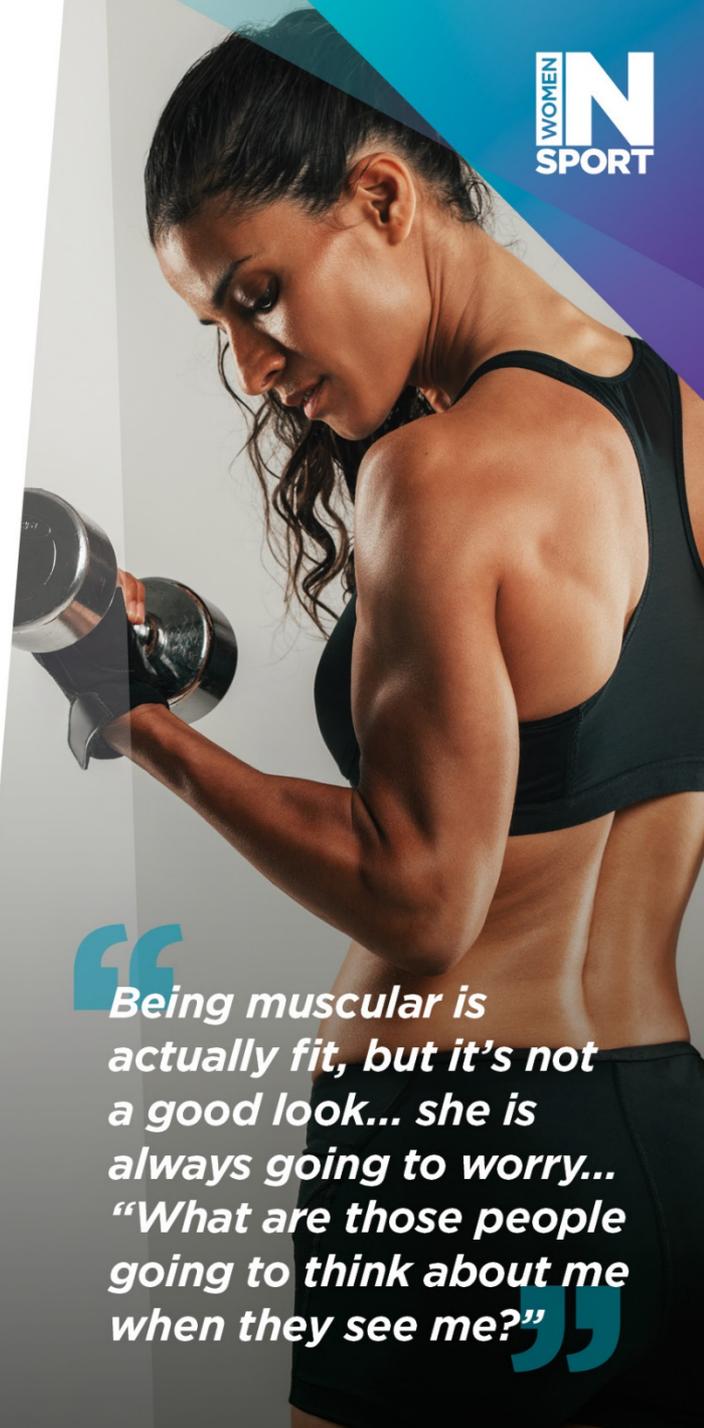
### PHYSICAL FITNESS IS MORE FOR BOYS:

During puberty boys get stronger; they want six-packs, muscular legs and to stand out as the strongest.

### PHYSICAL FITNESS FOR GIRLS:

Girls who are 'too sporty' lack **femininity** and **attractiveness**. They should look skinny and attractive whilst having the stamina and ability to compete, but not so much that they look wiry, muscular or manly!

**THIS IS A TOUGH NEW TERRITORY FOR GIRLS TO NEGOTIATE WITHOUT GUIDANCE!**



“*Being muscular is actually fit, but it's not a good look... she is always going to worry... “What are those people going to think about me when they see me?”*”

# HOW DO GIRLS DEVELOP RESILIENCE TO STAY ACTIVE?



## RESEARCH SUMMARY

- ▶ **Puberty is a confusing time** – girls feel unprepared for their changing emotions and periods are a significant barrier to taking part in sport.
- ▶ **Puberty is a significant turning point for girls** – attitudes formed during this time are important and long-lasting;
  - **Puberty can be a cause for reducing or stopping exercise altogether.**
  - **Even previously active girls can lose their enthusiasm during this time.**
  - **For already inactive girls, puberty simply presents yet another reason not to do exercise.**
- ▶ **There is a distinct lack of support about puberty, in relation to sports and exercise**, as girls struggle to deal with unexpected psychological and emotional issues as well as managing the physical aspects.
- ▶ **Sport needs to evolve with girls as they mature** – girls need activities and experiences that are in keeping with their emerging identity and coping resources for puberty and sport.

## RECOMMENDATIONS: MAKE EXERCISE SAFE

**S**upport – Empower girls to take control of their health and well-being, make their own decisions, and support their confidence and self-esteem. Ensure sport aligns with and helps them to establish their new adult identity and growing independence, as they mature.

**A**lleviate – Normalise puberty and alleviate fears of being the ‘only one’ – reinforce the fact that it does not have to stop you being active. Promote the emotional and social benefits sport brings, which can help minimise the anxiety of coming to terms with their changing body, periods and emotions and help them cope better.

**F**acilitate – Make playing sport for fun more acceptable. Create fresh opportunities for girls to discover new sporting experiences, without feeling the pressure to be good. Consider how to facilitate this away from the school environment as a ‘safe’ place to experiment, to minimise the ‘invisible stage’ and sense of scrutiny girls experience.

**E**ducate – Support girls initially to navigate the specific challenges that periods and physical changes present, when participating in physical activity. Educate girls about puberty and reinforce the positive impact of keeping active to help prevent them choosing to miss out.

## WHAT NEXT?

**2018 - 2019:** Women in Sport will be using the themes uncovered in this research to design new solutions and initiatives to support girls. This will be through collaboration and co-creation sessions with sports organisations and teenage girls.

Photo credit:  
Rushil Choudhay, Echo Your Sport

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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