

Factsheets for physical and health education teachers working with teenage girls

FitSpirit is proud to have collaborated with the Fédération des éducateurs et éducatrices physiques enseignants du Québec (FÉÉPEQ) on the publication of this guide, which aims to provide teachers with concrete solutions for promoting greater engagement in physical and health education courses (PHE) on the part of teenage girls in high school.

Only 14% of teenage girls in Canada meet the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity per day, compared to 34% among their male peers.¹ What's more, among girls who practice a sport, one in three gives up the sport before they finish high school, compared to a dropout rate of one in 10 for teenage boys.²

PHE teachers have a vital role to play in how girls experience physical activity. Through well-chosen words, a caring attitude and sensitivity, teachers have the power to transform the girls' experience and motivate them to adopt an active lifestyle for life.

Offering girls quality teaching in physical education is no small feat. In the form of factsheets, this guide invites readers to pay attention to five elements that could make the difference for teachers working with teenage girls. Ultimately, the goal is to improve the quality of the girls' experience, so that they feel confident about using physical activity, sports and the outdoors as powerful tools for feeling good and achieving their potential throughout their passage from puberty to adulthood.

We are pleased to contribute to this joint effort by recognizing the complementary and interrelated nature of quality physical and health education, extracurricular activities, sports (at school and federated, recreational and competitive), and recreational practice in order to provide rewarding environments adapted to the needs of girls.

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WARNING: Girls do not form a homogenous group. It is normal, therefore, that not all teenage girls will agree with the way we describe them throughout this document. Many boys as well as sexually and gender diverse youth may have first-hand experience with some of the obstacles referred to in this guide, and can benefit from the solutions it proposes. While certain generalizations are required to describe a category of individuals, it is important, at all times, to listen to the student and their specific needs, regardless of their gender identity.

Obstacles to physical activity among teenage girls

Below is a list of the main factors, cited by girls, that prevent them from enjoying the practice of physical activity. In several cases, these factors also cause them to abandon the practice of a sport. While some of these obstacles are individual in nature – i.e., specific to the girl herself – many stem from the environment, the supervision and the practice context. Teachers can address these factors in an effort to turn this trend around.

- **Competition** and performance stress
- **Judgment** by peers
- **Lack of confidence** in their abilities
- Limited physical and **motor skills**
- **Inadequate offer** that does not take into account their needs and preferences
- Discriminatory attitude on the part of **adults**
- Concerns and limits imposed by **parents**
- **Inappropriate language**, bullying and taunting
- Not enough **time** to change and freshen up after an activity
- Concerns about weight and/or **body image**
- Lack of **female role models**
- Presence of **boys**
- **Negative experiences**

1. Canadian Health Measures Survey 2009 to 2011 and 2012 to 2013 – combined data. Statistics Canada, 2017. (source viewed online on June 2, 2023) <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-003-x/2017010/article/54875/tbl/tbl02-eng.htm>

2. The Rally Report: Encouraging Action to Improve Sport for Women and Girls. Canadian Women and Sport, 2020. <https://womenandsport.ca/resources/research-insights/rally-report/>

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Additional resources

The following documents were viewed to consolidate the content shared on the factsheets.

Benefits of the FitSpirit approach on teenage girls and schools in its report entitled ***Fillactive, ça marche! Résultats de la recherche sur l'impact de l'approche Fillactive***, October 2023. (French only)

Chapter on Physical Education and Health in the **Québec Education Program** of ministère de l'Éducation du Québec.

ÉKIP framework for actions promoting health and well-being and contributing to student perseverance and educational success among youth.

Flagship document from Kino Québec entitled L'activité physique et sportive des adolescentes : bilan, perspectives et pistes d'action. (French only)

Report entitled **Go - Le secondaire s'active!** featuring facilitating factors, obstacles and actions aimed at integrating the practice of physical activities into public high schools in Montreal. (French only)

Results of the second edition of the **Québec Health Survey of High School Students, 2016-2017** published by the *Institut de la statistique du Québec*.



Website and social media networks of the organization **ÉquiLibre**, whose mission is to promote the development of a positive body image and create inclusive environments that value body diversity. (French only)

Website and social media networks of **La Lancée**, the movement aimed at promoting participation and leadership among girls and women in sport, outdoor recreation and physical activity in Québec. (French only)

PUBERTY

Puberty

Puberty is characterized by a number of changes that can adversely affect the pleasure that teenage girls derive from being active. Certain inconveniences associated with puberty can become quite apparent during PHE classes, when many teenage girls realize that their body is changing. They might have the impression that people are constantly watching them and feel very vulnerable. This unpleasant situation can lead them to skip subsequent courses and favour the bench over the proposed activity to avoid feeling uncomfortable again.

Important

- 1 Many teenage girls are concerned about the changes in their body at puberty. Let's not make light of those concerns.
- 2 If you are not at ease discussing these subjects, identify colleagues that teenage girls can turn to if they have any questions, need advice or want to speak to someone.
- 3 In PHE courses, adopt a respectful attitude towards body differences and the variable pace at which students grow, and use caring and non-discriminatory language.

Breasts

Two common concerns about breasts:

- bouncing
- shyness about changing in front of others.

While some girls prefer to do without, a sports bra can be as important as footwear when it comes to feeling at ease, comfortable and confident about getting active!



Body Hair

Teenage girls can be self-conscious about body hair. Shorts, bathing suits and T-shirts can expose parts of the body that they would rather hide.



Sweating

Teenage girls regularly cite the lack of time as an obstacle to the practice of a physical activity. But, above and beyond the minutes invested in practicing the activity, what they want is more time to freshen up afterwards.



Menstruation

In addition to the pain and generalized discomfort that girls often experience during their periods or premenstrual phase of their cycle, heavier bleeding can occur during physical exertion. Getting active while respecting the needs and limitations of one's body can help alleviate certain symptoms, but it can take years to come to this conclusion. Showing empathy when a teenage girl wants to stay on the bench is of the utmost importance, therefore. Rather than make her feel inadequate, listening to her and respecting the way she feels may lead her, over time, to view the PHE course as an activity that helps her feel better.



Paths for reflection

- Is the time interval following the PHE course sufficient for girls who want to freshen up before going to their next class?
- Does the course dress code allow teenage girls to wear the clothes that they prefer (leggings, long-sleeve shirt, sweat pants, etc.)?
- Does the list of school supplies include suggestions for parents concerning what their teenage girl may need to feel comfortable and confident about engaging in PHE
 - sports bra
 - personal hygiene kit
 - etc.
- Does the school locker room have a sufficient number of cabins for those who want to change in private? Is the premises clean, welcoming and safe?
- Do teenage girls who participate in lunchtime activities have permission to eat lunch during an afternoon class if the time used to freshen up leaves them with no time to eat?
- Does the school offer extracurricular activities after regular class hours so that students can participate, but also freshen up somewhere other than at school, if they prefer?

LANGUAGE

Language

Even in the form of compliments, comments about body or appearance can adversely affect self-esteem, confidence, the pleasure derived from being active, and even performance. Carefully choosing one's words is crucial, therefore, and the PHE teacher can make all the difference between a rewarding experience and its opposite. Teenage girls can be extremely sensitive to comments about their appearance or abilities, and certain words, even when meant to be funny, can reinforce stereotypes whereby boys' physical abilities take precedence, to the detriment of those of girls.

Important

- 1 Avoid any comments about weight and body shape, whether they are self-directed or directed at someone else, or stated as a generalization.
- 2 To help students feel good about themselves, comment instead on their qualities, personality traits and attitude.
- 3 Steer clear of discriminatory expressions, such as "throw like a girl", which suggests that it's normal for girls' abilities to be inferior to those of boys.

"You've lost weight, you look fit!"

It is wrong to presume that an individual's health or physical condition is based on their weight. Life habits (physical activity, nutrition, sleep, stress management, etc.) are much better determinants of health, and comments about weight have no place.

Activities for girls or boys?

Stereotypes can still seem daunting to a boy who is interested in doing an artistic activity or a girl who wants to practice a male-dominated sport. This leads youth, boys and girls, to exclude themselves from a sport in which participation is associated mostly with the opposite sex.

Physical activity to burn calories

Messaging that associates physical activity with a desire to transform one's body is ubiquitous, particularly on social media. The benefits of regular physical activity practiced in a healthy context are sufficiently powerful to be promoted without referring to calories, weight loss or body transformation.



Paths for reflection

- Do you have a tendency to compliment your colleagues or students when they lose weight?
- Do you use expressions like "girl push-up"? Or are you inclined to favour easier variations while describing them (e.g. knee push-up)?
- Do you talk about or make assumptions concerning people's physical condition based on their weight or body shape?
- Do you ever tout an exercise as a solution for getting rid of arm or belly fat or for having more attractive buttocks?

COEDUCATION

Coeducation

Coeducation involves having gender-diverse students – girls, boys, non-binary youth, trans, etc. – share the same space, participate in the same activity, or join the same team. This sheet aims to support your reflection on coeducation, with the understanding that the subject must be handled with care and tact.

Important

1 Create practice contexts that take into account obstacles to physical activity among girls. For example, many teenage girls avoid being active in the presence of boys, which can hinder their engagement and by extension their learning progress.

2 Resist the temptation to establish rules that perpetuate gender stereotypes for purposes forcing girls to integrate. For example, in team sports, rather than giving more points for a goal scored by a girl, let's require that all members of the team have scored before being allowed to count again.

3 Keep in mind that gender-diverse youth also encounter obstacles to the practice of physical activity, many of which are similar to those experienced by girls.

It's not the same with girls!

The proportion of girls who meet the recommended level of physical activity is far lower than it is for boys. Some teenage girls may have difficulty mastering basic skills, while others tend to avoid competition, with the result that many of them are not particularly fond of traditional sports. A variety of activities that meet the preferences of girls should be offered so that they, too, learn to enjoy being active for life.



Separating girls and boys not always the solution

While the presence of boys can be an obstacle for some girls, others enjoy sharing the field with them. They may be motivated by their male counterparts and appreciate their competitiveness. What's more, the non-coed approach presents a number of organizational challenges for schools, often interfering with its implementation, even when it seems more appropriate (rooms, schedules, availability of teachers, etc.). Consequently, separating boys and girls at all times is probably not the best way to meet the students' needs.



Gender identity

During adolescence, youth learn to assert their identity. In terms of gender, a young person may identify as a boy, a girl, neither or both, or may even see themselves elsewhere on the continuum. What's important is to respect each student and make them feel heard in situations involving their relationship to gender.



Paths for reflection

- Is it possible to bring together youth for certain activities based on criteria other than gender (skill level, interest in competition, age, etc.)?
- Have you tried bringing together girls in certain situations? Do you think that this is more conducive to learning? Participation? Engagement?
- Do you plan to include a certain number of girls-only activities in the regular or extracurricular schedule in order to attract those who would find them more fulfilling?
- Do you let youth decide, on occasion, whether or not they want to practice their activity as part of a mixed group?

MOTOR SKILLS

Motor Skills

Poor motor skills adversely affect the feeling of competency among many girls. What's more, it isn't rare to hear them say that fear of the ball prevents them from enjoying sports, whereas the same girls may excel at dance or enjoy hiking on weekends. Feeling incompetent in certain physical education situations can lead many to shy away from physical activities. The solution? Practice, but not in any environment, and varied means of action that showcase their abilities!

Important

- 1 Keep in mind that some fundamental or basic motor skills may not be mastered during adolescence. Several potential factors may explain this reality, including the lack of opportunities to practice these skills during childhood.
- 2 Allow students to make mistakes, and teach them to be kind to themselves. Not succeeding, even after several tries, and persevering in spite of it, can be learned!
- 3 Offer multiple options and variations so that teenage girls can choose challenges that are consistent with their abilities and progress at their own pace.

The desire to persevere

Positive and socially rewarding experiences that allow teenage girls to meet adapted objectives will inspire them to engage and persevere. Conversely, negative experiences during activities that leave them feeling inadequate or judged can hinder their future relationship with physical activity.



Varied programming

Many girls lack opportunities to try activities that might appeal to them and spark a keen desire to take up a sport. The program requirements and the availability of equipment and facilities can serve to steer physical education classes towards the practice of traditional sports that don't appeal to many girls. However, surveys show that many girls appreciate "trendy" activities or those that feature an artistic component.



Paths for reflection

- Do you give girls a chance to continue working on their basic motor skills during your class, even if they're expected to have mastered those skills already?
- Do you set aside time and provide more private spaces where girls can practice their skills without having to worry about others watching them?
- In your annual planning, do you strike a balance between means of action that call for individual skills (to perform) and those that call for collective skills (to interact)?
- Do the students have the opportunity to experiment freely when they practice movements? Do you require perfection in the execution of movements?
- Do you offer a variety of practice settings, including those that allow girls to enjoy their participation and excel more, for example settings with music, aesthetics, synchronicity or coordination?

SELF-CONFIDENCE

Self-confidence

Even when they are skilled, many girls lack confidence in their abilities in physical activity and sport. Support and encouragement from significant adults, including PHE teachers, can have a significant impact on their self-confidence. Before you think about skills teaching, however, remember that maintaining quality relationships with your students can help them keep an open mind and in turn dare to try. Ultimately, they will feel a greater sense of enjoyment and self-confidence in the activities to which they're exposed—even those that are new or difficult.

Important

- 1 The confidence to overcome physical challenges is an important determinant of regular practice and perseverance in sports.
- 2 Keep in mind that girls may be concerned about the image they project when practicing a physical activity, which can hinder their self-confidence.
- 3 Spare no effort to provide positive feedback. It can have a significant impact on a girl's intention to continue practicing a physical activity beyond puberty.

Self-confidence is the key!

Self-confidence means determining that you have the resources required to deal with a specific situation. In other words, it means believing that you are capable. Some girls possess the required abilities (actual abilities), but doubt themselves because they lack confidence (perceived abilities). Conversely, healthy self-confidence allows girls to shine and fulfil their full potential.

Fear of new things

Gladly agreeing to new tasks given by the PHE teacher requires a certain confidence in one's abilities. To approach learning situations with aplomb, there's nothing better than confronting a new challenge on a regular basis. For example, a young girl may feel very confident at the idea of playing baseball, even if she has never played, when she knows that she can apply the skills learned in a similar activity. Varying the contexts will allow all teenage girls to throw themselves into these new activities with more pleasure than fear!

A caring context and appropriate feedback

Sometimes, the practice context has a greater impact on girls' self-confidence than the nature of the activity itself. Feeling safe, in a familiar and comfortable environment that allows them to enjoy a quality experience, is a prerequisite for improving skills. In particular, girls who feel awkward or fear failure stand to benefit from constructive feedback. Encouraging students, specifically those who are trying a new activity or persevering through a more difficult task, helps foster meaningful ties between you and them.

Paths for reflection

- Among your evaluation activities, have you thought to include self-evaluation measures of your students' confidence?
- What are you doing to foster relationships of trust with your students? Have you noticed a difference in self-confidence between girls and boys in certain situations?
- Do you take the time to care for the environment in which less confident students exercise and are evaluated (learning objectives consistent with what the student feels they are capable of, a space away from prying eyes)?
- Do you adopt a caring approach with girls who are trying to develop new skills when you present them with a new practice context?
- Are you quick to recognize the progress of girls who persevere in learning new activities? Or is your focus too often on recognizing excellence?