



GIRLS-ONLY PROGRAM

In Canada, only five per cent of children and youth achieve the recommended 60 minutes a day of moderate to vigorous physical activity. Unfortunately girls experience even lower rates of activity than boys. (Canadian Health Measures Survey 2009-2011).

Participating in physical activity and sport can result in a wide range of benefits for girls including those that are physical, psychological and social. There are many barriers which result in declining activity.

Offering girls-only physical activity programs, particularly for those in junior and senior high schools may contribute to increased participation and provide an experience that results in sustained increases in physical activity rates.

Some of the benefits of a girls-only program are:

- Girls who are less active or lack confidence in their abilities feeling more comfortable taking part in the program;
- Easier to focus on the fun aspect of the program and minimize the competitive nature of activity which intimidates many children and youth, including girls; and
- Provide the opportunity to address issues such as self-esteem and positive body image that are specific to girls.

Offering a girls-only Kids' Run Club doesn't have to be complicated or very different from the co-ed version described in this handbook. Simply providing the opportunity for girls to be active without the influence of having boys present may be enough to enhance the experience,

especially for those girls with lower fitness levels and/or lower confidence/competence in being active. This kind of opportunity is particularly important for girls at the senior elementary and junior high levels who are entering puberty and becoming significantly less active than boys.

WHO SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN A GIRLS-ONLY KIDS' RUN CLUB?

Doctors Nova Scotia is recommending the girls-only Kids' Run Club for schools at the junior and senior high level. Participation rates at the elementary level tend to be fairly even between the sexes. The girls-only program is being targeted to the older grades in an effort to sustain participation and activity rates in girls.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING A GIRLS-ONLY KIDS' RUN CLUB

Recruiting participants for a running program can be challenging, especially those who are inactive and in particular, pre-teen and teenage girls. How the program is promoted and implemented can make a difference in how successful you are at recruiting and retaining participants. Here are some tips for achieving success:

Promote the program in person rather than by simply posting a sign. Doing small presentations to classes or at an assembly is an ideal way to provide information about the program and entice the girls to give it a try. Consider having only girls present during this presentation to avoid having the focus be on the boys who object to being excluded.



Female coaches are good role models for the girls who take part. It's important for pre-teens and teens to see that women can work hard, overcome challenges, be supportive of one another and sweat without being "gross". It may also provide a more comfortable environment for discussions around self-esteem and positive body image. Whenever possible, try to have female coaches involved in your program.

Zero talk about weight or dieting. Set a ground rule that no comments related to your own body or those of others will be permitted, whether meant as compliment or criticism. Comments such as "You look great. Have you lost weight?" or "I feel so fat in these clothes" can inspire or reinforce negative and unhealthy weight control behaviors and negative body image. Conversations around food should be focused on healthy eating rather than restricting consumption.

Focus on function not form. When girls view their bodies through a functional lens, they're more likely to be satisfied with and appreciate their body. They also report feeling more empowered and physically capable when focusing on what their bodies can do rather than how they look. Help participants appreciate their physical accomplishments such as increasing their run distances, improving running technique, pushing through rather than taking a break and running more comfortably. Celebrate these accomplishments on an individual and group level.

Reinforce the benefits of physical activity other than weight loss such as increased energy, stress reduction, increased confidence and generally feeling better.

Including girls' input in the program will give them a sense of ownership and may result in a more successful program. Some aspects they can be involved in are pick-

ing a group name, brainstorming ideas to recruit more participants, days of week and time of day the group will run, picking a running route, leading warm-up and cool-down, being pace-setter or time-keeper, picking topics they'd like a guest speaker to address and picking a final fun run to do.

Provide opportunities for other activities such as yoga, zumba, boot camp, or tae kwon do by inviting guests or visiting facilities.

Find a **local fun run** for the girls to participate in at the conclusion of the program. Having this goal will help to motivate them to continue running and will bring the program to an end with a real celebration of accomplishment. This is a very positive way to end the program, provide the girls with a sense of measurable accomplishment and may result in their being more likely to continue running and/or take part the following year.

Encourage participants to **wear sports bras** which don't have to cost a lot. Running without proper support can be uncomfortable and embarrassing.

Run as a group, progressing gradually from an easy challenge of running 2-3 minutes and walking 1 minute. Training side-by-side, despite differing fitness levels, reinforces the group support system and can make it more fun. It also provides a chance to encourage one another, especially those who find running more challenging.

Avoid a running route that involves running near other students (on school grounds or by a bus stop)

Use a **running log** to reinforce participation. Logs can be maintained by individual participants, like the one at the back of the handbook, or displayed on Bristol Board

where each runner tracks their progress or tracking the group progress (accumulated group distance towards a specific destination) on a poster.

Have **girls lead the warm-up** and cool-down activities once you've shown them what to do.

Pick a **group name** and try to obtain something to indicate membership to the group like a shirt, hat, bandana, sweatband, water bottle, etc.

Use music whenever possible such as during indoor workouts, warm-ups and cool-downs. Ask the girls for songs to add to the playlist, assuming they are appropriate.

Start and end each run with a **group chat** about how everyone is feeling in general and how they feel about their run. An easy way to do this is ask each girl to provide one or two words about how they feel before and after running.

Create a blog or **FaceBook** page the coach manages where members can find out what's going on, follow its progress and "chat" to one another. The FaceBook page would only be appropriate if your participants are 13 years of age or older. Coaches may use Twitter to broadcast information to the participants.

Arrange for **special guests** to join the girls for their run(s) or present on a topic such as nutrition, sports injuries, other types of physical activity, self-esteem, positive body image or healthy cooking. Try to provide as many positive female role models as possible in these situations.

Snacks make everything more fun. Having healthy snacks and water after each run adds

to the overall experience and is an opportunity to expose participants to healthy options. Avoid sports drinks as they are not necessary for this level of activity and reinforce consuming sugars we don't need.

Prizes can play a big role in encouraging participation. Try to obtain small prizes for weekly random draws and possibly a couple bigger prizes for the end of the program. You can use these prizes to encourage ongoing participation by providing participants with ballots for the final prizes when they come to each training run. The more times they run, the more chances they have at winning.

Get feedback from participants during the program and at its conclusion to assist with creating a successful program.

ADDRESSING CONCERNS ABOUT BOYS BEING EXCLUDED

A very normal reaction when one hears about any kind of program that deliberately excludes one group or another is that 'it's not fair'. This is a common and understandable reaction to girls-only programs. It's important to remember that research shows very clearly that boys are more physically active than girls, particularly as they age. Girls-only programs may help to increase physical activity rates of those who tend to be less active.

An option is to offer girls-only runs one or two days per week and a co-ed run on another day. This provides the coach with an excellent opportunity to compare the experiences and determine if the girls-only option is beneficial for their female students.