



Introduction

A 2014 report from the Aspen Institute’s Project Play¹ documents that the attrition rates for girls between eighth grade and twelfth grade across all sports are two to three times higher than among boys. SEA programs that want to fight this trend should keep this larger perspective in mind. Taking a “blame the quitter” approach that attributes a girl’s attrition simply to a loss of interest or desire to focus her attention elsewhere, hides the reality that our programs may be replicating and reinforcing the same societal forces that lead girls everywhere to leave sports. To recruit and retain our female athletes, and in return benefit from their participation in our programs, we need to dig deep into how to create more inclusive and engaging experiences for our female athletes. As we improve our programs to better serve our girls, we will by default create stronger programs for all players.

Overview

Below are some ways to consider increasing and enhancing the participation of girls in your programs, using the “C.A.R.L.I.E.” acronym: **Confidence, Access, Relationships, Leadership, Identity, Education.**

- ❑ **Confidence** - Be intentional about building girls’ confidence. Fear of failure or judgement by others often results in girls’ holding back and not engaging fully.
- ❑ **Access** - Recognize that, coming into our programs, girls may have had less athletic experiences; intentionally help girls develop athletic skills, give them equal (or greater) access to opportunities, and ensure that they have appropriate equipment to enable them to play (sports bras, feminine products, athletic clothing).
- ❑ **Relationships** - Help girls develop strong relationships with their peers and coaches. Have female coaches on staff.
- ❑ **Leadership** - Provide girls with opportunities to play a leadership role in your program.
- ❑ **Identity** - Reinforce and build girls’ pride in the fact that they are athletes.
- ❑ **Education** - Provide staff with education about how to best support girls.

Build Confidence and Competence

People naturally feel more drawn to participating in activities in which they feel capable of succeeding. This statement is especially true for young adolescents, whose self-confidence and ability to tolerate failure may be less developed than that of adults. Adding to this, girls

¹ Mapping Attrition among U.S. Adolescents in Competitive, Organized, School and Community Sports: <https://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/research/article-and-report/participation-opportunity/mapping-attrition-among-u-s-adolescents-competitive-organized-school-community-sports/>

are more likely than boys to underestimate their competence, leading to lower confidence levels, which impact their engagement and performance. The following are a few practical ways to consider building the confidence not just of girls, but of all players.

Plan thoughtfully. When planning practices, select and modify drills and fitness activities to appropriately challenge all players. Think about “scaffolding” and “differentiating”. Scaffolding means breaking up the learning into chunks and providing practice and coaching with each chunk. For example, with beginners, you might have them hit the ball lightly to themselves off a side wall before building to feeds from the T off the front wall; for students who struggle even with hitting to themselves off a side wall, pair them with a volunteer to redirect shots back to them and provide encouragement. Differentiating means modifying the drill or activity to meet students’ skill/fitness levels. For example, you might have the same drill happening on two courts, but add in a “condition” for the more advanced group. In fitness, when doing court sprints, you might set a minimum number that everyone has to do, and then challenge anyone who is up for doing more to do so.

Encourage a growth mindset. Teach that great athletes are great because they practice a lot, and because they view failure not as judgement about their limited potential to succeed but as helpful feedback that helps them improve. Reinforce that, through practice, athletes train their bodies to do what they need to do in competitions. Reassure students that it is okay to try their best and still not succeed; the key to success is overcoming failure, not avoiding it. When you praise students, praise not their natural ability but their effort and focus (i.e. Instead of saying, “Wow, you’re really good at this!” say “Wow, you’re working really hard at this. That hard work is going to pay off!”) When students say, “I can’t do that,” add a “yet” on to the end - “I can’t do that yet,” and help them learn how to get there. Then, be sure to recognize and celebrate them when they accomplish their goal. (See this quick video on [praise](#) to learn more).

Provide encouragement and celebrate accomplishments. Young people need to know that others believe in them and their ability to succeed. On and off court, offer encouraging words (“You can do this. You got this.”). Positive encouragement helps counterbalance the negative self-talk that students engage in (“I can’t do this. I suck.”). Help students set small goals for themselves and celebrate little accomplishments, focusing on progress over performance. For example, if you’ve been working on serves, set a goal of getting 100% of the students’ serves in during a match, instead of winning the match, against a much better player. The winning will come if the player can focus on and celebrate the small steps to getting there.

Build awareness and competence in managing emotions. Successful athletes are aware of and able to manage their inner voices and anxieties, and direct their energy into positive

channels. As noted above, many students engage in negative self-talk without even realizing it. Discuss how it's common for athletes to talk to themselves before, during, and after matches, and help them develop positive language. For example, students might tell themselves, "Next point" after every point, to remind themselves to focus on the next opportunity to win a point, rather than the point they just won or lost. Consider bringing in sports psychology interns to help you build out your program's ability to support students' mental game.

Provide additional opportunities for development. For students who are interested in improving more (whether they are at the top or the bottom of the ladder), create opportunities for additional practice. Provide "solo drills" for them to do outside of practice. Share activities they can do at home (fitness, strengthening, practicing holding the racquet, etc.). Connect them to a local YMCA or other gym where they can work on fitness. Offer extra small-group practices outside of playing time. Celebrate when they do this extra work, and help them see how it pays off in their playing.

Be intentional about student groupings. Girls and boys may be very conscious of how they look in front of one another. Consider this when planning practices. If you are putting only one girl in a group with three boys, or vice versa, be intentional about who those players are and how you will support the students of the minority gender. If you constantly put a girl in a group with all boys because they match her level, check in with her about what you're doing and why, and look for opportunities to have her play with females as well - whether an older student, a squash player from outside your program, or a volunteer.

Have separate boys and girls ladders.

Separate squash ladders by gender. Studies have demonstrated that, after puberty, girls' and boys' bodies differ in their physical strength. Boys develop more muscle mass than girls, enabling them to move faster and hit harder. Putting girls and boys on the same program ladder implies that girls should be able to overcome this physical difference. Many girls do outperform the boys, but making the comparison is unfair and unnecessary. Girls' achievements should be celebrated regardless of their performance in comparison to boys. See the SEA Best Practice Guide on [Program Ladders and Challenge Matches](#) for more details on this topic.

Barriers to Girls' Access

Creating a more welcoming program for girls starts with recognizing the barriers that exist even before girls join our programs. From early on in life, girls' access to physical activity and sports participation is often more limited than that of their male counterparts, and

even more so for girls of color. According to The Women's Sports Foundation², 53% of white girls are likely to be involved with sports at age 6 or younger, while the early entry rate for African American girls is 29%, and for Hispanic girls is 32%.

For girls of all races, parents and caregivers may, consciously or unconsciously, encourage more physical activity in boys than in girls through the activities they engage them in (playing ball versus cooking together), the gifts they give (balls versus dolls), the restrictions they put on girls to ensure their safety (not playing outside alone or walking home alone after practice), and the perceptions and messages they share explicitly or implicitly. Further ingraining these messages is the reality that there are fewer well-known female athletes to serve as role models, fewer career path options for female athletes, and fewer athletic programs available to girls in their communities. The message that girls are not serious athletes and do not have a legitimate place in sports comes through strongly.

Financial barriers may also inhibit girls' participation in sports, either because of the cost of participation or because of the need for girls to provide childcare or help supplement family income rather than play sports. Students' cultural backgrounds may also discourage or frown upon female participation in sports.

Given all of these factors, when girls join our programs, they may already be behind the boys in both their level of athletic competence (hand-eye coordination, agility, etc.), and in their confidence levels as athletes (belief that they can succeed at squash and belong on the courts). Coaches should be careful not to attribute an apparent lack of effort or participation simply to girls not caring or not being interested. Dig deeper, being thoughtful about what drives girls' disengagement and intentional about how to create environments that build and capitalize on girls' motivation to participate and compete.

In addition to being aware of external barriers (societal, financial, etc.) to girls' participation, think about what ways your program may intentionally or unintentionally restrict girls' access. Here are some questions to consider:

- During open court time, are your boys dominating the courts? Do your girls feel like they can get on court to play and practice the same way your boys do?
- What is the distribution of squash opportunities (i.e. - Do you recommend and/or send more boys to participate in advanced squash opportunities than girls (tournaments, summer squads, etc.)?)
- Where is your coaches' time spent (i.e. - Do they spend more time developing the boys?). With whom do you put your strongest volunteers?

² Her Life Depends On It III: Girls and Women of Color:
<https://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/research/article-and-report/girls-women-of-color/life-depends-iii-girls-women-color/>

- Do girls have the equipment they need to participate, such as sports bras and shorts/skirts that they are comfortable in?
- Do you have female staff and volunteers who play high levels of squash and can be role models and mentors to your girls?

Think about all aspects of your program from the perspective of access related to gender.

The Importance of Relationships

Research demonstrates that gender differences emerge in early adolescence between what girls and boys value; girls are more likely to assign a high level of importance to relationships (friendships, team, etc.), whereas boys assign a higher level of importance to competence (athletic skills, winning, etc.).³ Given the importance of relationships to girls, programs should be very intentional about creating opportunities for strong, positive relationships to develop. Below are some ways to consider doing this.

Coach-student relationship: Coaches should be proactive about building relationships with individual students. Find time to check in one-on-one, both about their development as players and about their lives outside of the courts. Use informal times to have casual conversations, and/or set up meetings to check-in with students throughout the year. When students come to practice looking especially happy or sad, ask what's going on, and then follow-up in the following days and weeks to hear updates; for example, if a student shares she is studying for a big test that week, make a note to ask her how the test went. Showing girls you care about them as people and athletes will go a long way.

Intentionally build your team: In addition to building the coach-student relationship, coaches should facilitate the development of positive relationships between team members. Lead warm-ups and cool-downs that have a team aspect involved. When doing fitness, partner students and encourage the student who is not actively doing the exercise to cheer for the one who is exercising. Encourage high fives on court; from the first day students join the program, redirect them from saying, "you suck" after a player missed a shot to saying "nice try" and offering a high-five.

Female coaches and mentors: Female athletes benefit from having female role models. When hiring squash coaches and finding volunteers, programs should be intentional about recruiting female coaches.

³ Psychology:
<http://psychology.iresearchnet.com/sports-psychology/youth-and-sports/friendships-and-peer-relationships/>

Opportunities for Contribution and Leadership

Girls are more likely to stick with our programs when they feel they are contributing to making them a better place. As girls grow up in our programs, they should have more opportunities to develop and use their leadership skills. Below are a few ways to consider increasing leadership opportunities for all students.

Coaching: Invite older students to help coach younger players, either as volunteers or as paid assistant coaches, afterschool and over the summer. Older students can be especially helpful when recruiting a new team of students; they can help welcome students to the building, get them equipment, demonstrate the values of the organization, and teach some basics on court. Having skilled older girls volunteer on court with younger ones is especially beneficial, to both the older girls who feel pride in their contributions and to the younger ones who get an athletic female role model that they can relate to and aspire towards.

Mentoring: Create mentoring opportunities between older and younger students, either for specific events or on a continuous basis. For example, you might host an organization-wide “olympics” with various stations where mixed-age-group teams compete against one another, and older students are encouraged to be positive leaders and build up younger players on their teams. For more continuous mentoring experiences, you might partner interested older students with younger ones and hold events for the mentor pairs where the group watches and discusses a movie together, goes skating together, or just plays squash together. You might also create partner pairs between your oldest and youngest students, and have the older students from time to time write letters of encouragement, decorate younger students’ lockers, or join team conversations to share their memories of important events such as their first competition or their transition to high school.

General Program Leadership: Have a select group of students who advise staff on program questions, lead initiatives and conversations with their teammates, and represent your organization externally. This group of students can help identify issues or concerns in the program, and can partner with staff to address issues ranging from student frustration with a particular aspect of the program to the low participation of girls during open court time. Programs have different names for this group - Student Leadership Council, Student Advisory Board, Ambassadors Program, etc.

Girls’ Program Leadership and Events: Have a small group of female athletes lead the charge with hosting events for female athletes. For example, they might organize a girls’

squash night, a girls' movie/theater night, a girls' self-defense class, or a girls' run. SquashBusters refers to this group as "FAST" - Female Athletes Stick Together.

Girls' Groups: Lead girls' groups to create intentional safe spaces when girls are invited and enabled to have conversations about topics that are especially relevant to them (body image, media distortions of beauty, gender stereotypes, the difference between passive, assertive, and aggressive communication, how to handle unwanted sexual advances, pregnancy prevention, etc.).

Leadership Development: Find ways to explicitly develop girls' leadership potential and skills, whether through explicit leadership training, activities that push them beyond their comfort zones in a supportive environment (public speaking classes, ropes courses, etc.), or preparation for future leadership opportunities (role models in their career of interest, practice interviewing, etc.).

Identity as an Athlete

The sooner girls assume the identity of an athlete, the more deeply ingrained this perspective becomes and the more they open up to being actively engaged on court.

Build girls' self-perception as athletes. Remind students throughout the year that they are athletes and help them embrace that identity. Buy gear that says "student athlete," like "SquashWise Student Athlete" t-shirts. Create space for girls to talk with other girls and role models about the challenges and benefits of being a female athlete. Celebrate accomplishments such as increased fitness skills, the development of new skills, and participation in competitions. Have female role models on court who make it cool to work hard.

Send affirming messages. Coaches and programs may, unintentionally, reinforce gender stereotypes and the perception that female athletes are less deserving or less capable than male athletes. Statements like, "You let a girl beat you!" and referring to modified push-ups as girl push-ups reinforce the stereotype that girls are less able than boys. Sharing only, or primarily, photos and videos of male athletes leaves girls out of the picture, as does naming groups after only, or primarily, male athletes. Regularly putting the least-skilled volunteer on court with the girls also sends a message that girls' development is not valued.

Address negative comments and concerns. Coaches should intervene when players on their team make comments that are disparaging to females, and should take seriously and respond when girls express frustration about a comment made; dismissing concerns by saying "don't worry about it" and "just ignore it" de-legitimizes the hurt caused by these

comments, silences girls' voices, and misses the opportunity to correct a wrong.

Pride in winning. Given the importance of relationships, some girls may worry about beating another player and thus making him/her feel bad. They may feel that winning, or winning too easily, is "mean." Create a space for girls to discuss these feelings of guilt and concern for others, and then help them understand how, by playing their best, they are actually helping others improve. Reinforce that the strongest athletes value having opponents who can push them, and when those opponents are also your friends, it's all the better.

Staff Education about Girl-Specific Factors

Staff members should be trained in a wide variety of topics, from the specifics of coaching squash, to large group management, to youth development, to developing students' mental game, and more. In addition to these overarching categories, staff members should also be educated about issues that impact females in particular. Below are some things that all coaches, male and female, should be aware of and comfortable talking about with students.

Sports Bras: Many girls in our programs have not played competitive sports before, and they may not have relatives who have either. As a result, they have no one to tell them about and help them purchase sports bras. Sports bras can make a significant difference in a girls' ability to both focus and perform. Exercising with one's breasts bouncing around is both uncomfortable and distracting, and increases girls' self-awareness and concern that others are watching them. To enable girls to focus on playing squash, programs need to help girls find sports bras that fit them.

Menstruation: Menstruation impacts every girl differently. Some girls have very light periods, others have heavy ones; some have minimal pain, some have a lot of pain - sometimes so much that they miss school as a result. Girls who consistently experience excessively painful periods should be encouraged to talk to their doctors, and may be prescribed birth control and pain medication to help alleviate the pain. For others, a Tylenol or Advil can help. Regardless of the level of pain, adolescence is the first time girls experience menstrual pain and, as a result, they may be particularly sensitive to it. For girls who do not want to use tampons, they may also be cautious about exercising excessively when wearing a pad for fear it will fall out or twist in a way that makes it ineffective. The best approach is to be respectful of the girls, and to connect them to staff who they feel comfortable talking with about this topic. Encourage girls to be physically active during their period and inform them that exercise can help relieve pain caused by cramps (see WebMD article on [Exercise: SOS for Menstrual Cramps](#)). Support girls in managing their

periods by keeping a supply of pads and tampons at the program and in first aid kits when traveling to tournaments.

African American Hair: For black women, straightening one's hair is an expensive and time-consuming process that can be reversed quickly by exposure to moisture, including sweat. If a student expresses concern about sweating because of her hair, don't dismiss it and roll your eyes; understand that she and her family have invested time and money in her hair so, even though she might want to exercise, there are other concerns she is balancing. There is no easy solution to this dilemma, but you can connect girls to other black female athletes to talk about how they have managed their hair. You can also create spaces (girls groups) where students can have conversations about how to navigate societal and cultural expectations of beauty.

Hijabs: In traditional Muslim culture, women cover their heads and bodies when in the presence of men. Many traditional head scarves, however, are cumbersome and uncomfortable for playing sports, leading some Muslim girls to avoid sports. Fortunately, more companies are manufacturing athletic hijabs; both Nike and Asiya make them. Girls may use these athletic hijabs and leggings to cover themselves and still play squash.

Uniforms

Many squash skirts and shorts for girls are very short, and girls may feel uncomfortable wearing them. Give girls the option to wear leggings underneath their shorts or skirts, or to wear boys' shorts (basketball shorts) that are longer.

Additional Resources

- ❑ [Actively Engaging Women and Girls: Addressing the Psycho-Social Factors](#), by the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity
- ❑ [Developing Physically Active Girls](#) by the Tucker Center at the University of Minnesota
- ❑ [The Girls' Index](#) by ROX (Ruling Our eXperiences)
- ❑ [The Women's Sports Foundation](#) website
- ❑ [Exploring Self-Esteem in a Girls' Sports Program](#) by Ellen Markowitz
- ❑ [Growth Mindset Toolkit](#) by Transforming Education
- ❑ [Here's Why Women Who Play Sports Are More Successful](#) by Fortune Magazine
- ❑ [The Confidence Gap](#), by The Atlantic
- ❑ [How Gender Stereotypes Affect Athlete Development](#), by US Lacrosse Magazine
- ❑ [Women, Gender Equality, and Sport](#), by the United Nations (an international perspective)

This guide was written by Becky Silva at the Squash and Education Alliance, with support from Jazmin Matos at the Squash and Education Alliance, and Edgardo Gonzalez and Tai Garcia at StreetSquash Harlem.