

RALLY REPORT INSIGHTS

Rallying for Girls' Mental Health

The Benefits of Safe and Healthy Sport Participation

Mental health is an essential part of everyone's overall health and wellbeing. It includes how people feel about themselves and the direction of their lives, and their ability to cope with life's challenges.

Recent data suggests that mental health concerns among Canadian youth are on the rise.¹ This is particularly true for girls and gender-diverse youth who face unique challenges in adolescence such as declining confidence, increasing body dissatisfaction and disordered eating.²



THE ROLE SPORT PLAYS IN MENTAL HEALTH

Sport participation can play an important role in supporting positive mental health. In [Rally Report 2022](#), we asked more than 4,500 Canadians about their experiences playing and leading sport. When it comes to the mental health benefits of sport participation:

78% 

of girls who participate in sport report positive mental health (compared to 68% of those who do not participate).

76% 

of girls said that sport participation enhances their mental and emotional health.

76% 

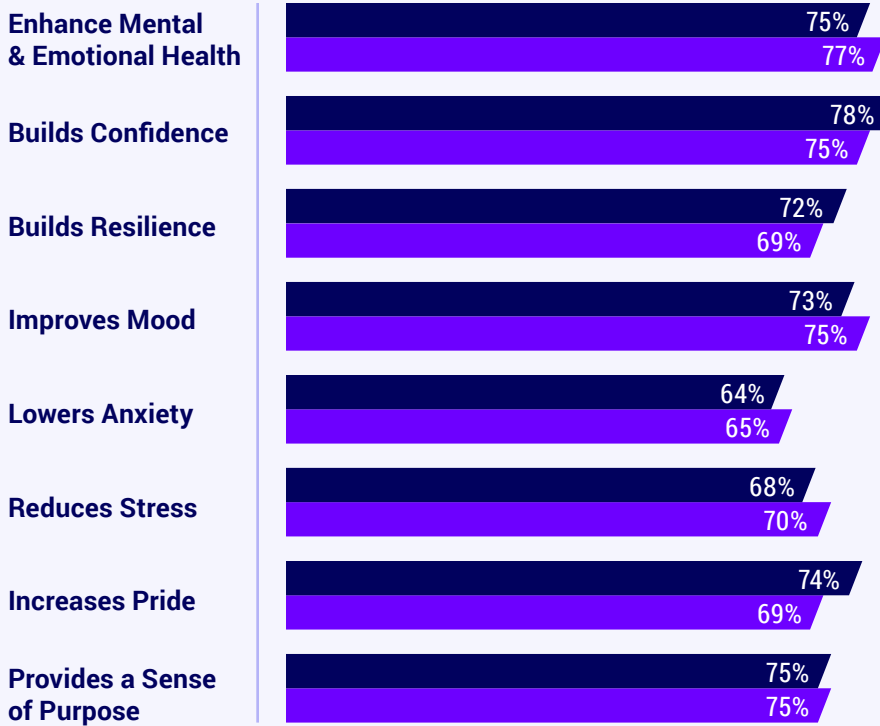
of girls said that sport participation builds confidence.

1 Canadian Institute for Health Information. [Children and youth mental health in Canada](#). Accessed April 19, 2023.



2 Canadian Women's Foundation. [The facts about barriers girls face](#). Accessed April 19, 2023.



BENEFITS OF SPORT PARTICIPATION



For all girls and gender-diverse youth to access the mental health benefits of sport, we first need to ensure they can participate in quality, safe sport. Unfortunately, girls face major barriers to sport participation and **by adolescence, only half of girls participate in sport**. By working to understand and address the barriers girls face, we can start building a better sport system and ensure they can access the related mental health benefits of sport participation.

 GIRLS AGED 6-12 YEARS
 GIRLS AGED 13-18 YEARS

WHY SPORT PARTICIPATION ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH

Coaches and decision-makers play a critical role in enabling girls' full participation in sport. They also have a responsibility to support girls' mental health.

ONLY 41%

of sport leaders feel well-equipped to talk about mental health with girls. Even fewer sport leaders feel comfortable discussing mental illness.

ONLY 1 IN 10

girls are comfortable speaking to their coaches about their mental health and wellbeing.

WHILE 50%

of sport leaders feel equipped to speak to girls about sport-related stress, most girls (67%) don't feel comfortable approaching their coaches on this topic.

The data points to a clear need for sport leaders to receive education on supporting youth mental health and training on how to build trusting and healthy environments where girls feel comfortable seeking support.



Providing meaningful support for girls and gender-diverse participants with intersecting identities is especially important. Those who identified as having a disability, 2SLGBTQIA+, or as being from lower-income homes reported overall lower mental health. We also know that they face unique barriers to fully participating in sport.

RALLYING FOR GIRLS' MENTAL HEALTH: TAKING ACTION

We all have a role to play when it comes to creating better, safer sport that supports and promotes girls' mental health and wellbeing. We call on:

1 SPORT ORGANIZATIONS TO TRAIN COACHES AND ACTIVITY LEADERS in gender equity so they understand and can meet the needs of girls and women.

To support mental health, this includes:

1. Training coaches and activity leaders on how to build social connections to keep girls and gender-diverse participants in sport so they can reap the mental health benefits of participation.
2. Helping coaches and activity leaders build knowledge of mental health with resources such as the Coaching Association of Canada's Mental Health and Sport Resource Hub.

3 BOARD MEMBERS to become gender equity champions.

To support mental health, this includes:

1. Learning how gender equity and inclusion are essential elements for better, safer sport.
2. Supporting administrators to adopt a person-first approach to sport that prioritizes mental health and the overall wellbeing of participants over other outcomes.

2 SPORT ORGANIZATIONS TO TRAIN ADMINISTRATORS AND STAFF on why and how to apply a gender equity lens to everyday decision-making.

To support mental health, this includes:

1. Learning how to centre the needs of girls, women, and gender-diverse participants by creating channels for them to provide feedback and have a voice in decision-making.
2. Taking an intersectional approach to gender equity and mental health by asking who is centred and reflecting upon whose perspectives are being considered when working on solutions.

4 FUNDERS AND GOVERNMENT to provide long-term consistent investments in gender equity with clear progress targets.

To support mental health, this includes:

1. Investing in programs and initiatives that promote girls' participation in quality, safe sport and physical activity such as Same Game Challenge or the Gender Equity LENS e-Learning Module.

If we're going to be successful in building a better, safer sport system that supports positive mental health, we must consult women and girls. It is our responsibility to ask better questions, listen intently and value what they are telling us.

Canadian Women & Sport can support sport organizations and leaders to take action.

Visit www.womenandsport.ca to learn more.