



**VICTORIA  
UNIVERSITY**

MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

---

# FACTORS RELATING TO WOMEN AND GIRLS' PARTICIPATION (RETENTION AND DROPOUT) IN SPORT

---

## Summary and Recommendations

Professor Rochelle Eime, Ms Melanie Charity, Dr Aurelie Pankowiak, Dr Jack Harvey,  
Professor Hans Westerbeek, 2023.

Project funded by the Australian Government.





## Aim

To understand factors relating to women and girls' participation, retention in and dropout of sport.

## Methods

A survey was completed by women/girls who had **dropped out of sport** as well as by women/girls **still participating**.

The sports included were gymnastics and football (soccer). The survey covered the following:

- ◆ Demographics
- ◆ Motivations to participate
- ◆ What makes playing fun
- ◆ Social support to play sport
- ◆ Health profiles
- ◆ Reasons for dropout

The above factors were compared between the retained participant group and the dropout group.

## Participants Age & Residence

- ◆ A total of **5,055** women/girls (2,016 football players 3,039 gymnastics participants).
- ◆ 33% were women (18+) and **67% were girls** (0–17 years) – 52% of all participants were girls aged 5–12 years.
- ◆ Most participants (69%) lived in **metropolitan** regions of Australia.

## Participants Retention Profiles

Of women/girls who participated in the survey **48%** had **dropped out** of football/gymnastics, and **52%** were **still participating**. The proportion of retained women and girls according to age group included:

- ◆ 52% of young girls (0–12 years),
- ◆ 56% of adolescent girls (13–17 years)
- ◆ 50% of women (18+).

# Women's sport participation and retention related factors

## Reasons for playing and enjoying sport

Women in the retention group were more motivated by social reasons and to be outdoors (football) and those who dropped out by learning a new skill and a sense of achievement.

### Women's motivations for playing sport

#### Retained

- 96% Fun/enjoyment
- 88% Physical health/fitness
- 75% Social reasons
- 60% To be outdoors
- 53% To be with friends
- 52% Mental health

#### Dropped out

- 91% Fun/enjoyment
- 73% Physical health/fitness
- 44% Learn a new skill
- 41% Social reasons
- 36% Sense of achievement
- 33% To be with friends & Performance/competition

## What makes sport fun for women

#### Retained

- 79% Socialising
- 77% Keeping fit
- 76% Challenge to improve
- 75% Playing with friends
- 51% Friendly coach

#### Dropped out

- 61% Socialising
- 58% Challenge to improve
- 57% Playing with friends
- 55% Keeping fit
- 50% Friendly coach

Women in both the retained and dropout group had fun participating in sport mainly through socialising, being challenged to improve, and keeping fit.

## Social support

Women in the retention group were significantly more likely to **have friends encourage them** to play sport (88% – retained vs 77% – dropped out) and **encourage other family members to play sport** (82% – retained vs 64% – dropped out) compared to women in the dropout group.

## Health Profiles\*

Women in the dropout group were more likely to report excellent overall health and physical health whereas those in the retention group were more likely to report very good health.

\*These health profiles are likely to be impacted by COVID-19



# Girls' sport participation and retention related factors

## Reasons for playing and enjoying sport

Girls' top motivations for playing sport were fun and enjoyment

### Girls' motivations for playing sport

#### Retained

- 96% Fun/enjoyment
- 74% Physical health/fitness
- 68% Learn a new skill
- 51% Sense of achievement
- 42% Social reasons
- 36% To be with friends

#### Dropped out

- 94% Fun/enjoyment
- 72% Learn a new skill
- 66% Physical health/fitness
- 32% Sense of achievement
- 30% Social reasons
- 23% To be with friends

## What makes sport fun for girls

#### Retained

- 79% Challenged to improve
- 70% Friendly coach
- 64% Trying your best
- 57% Playing with friends
- 51% Teamwork

#### Dropped out

- 61% Challenge to improve
- 54% Friendly coach
- 45% Trying your best
- 43% Playing with friends
- 35% Getting playing time

For girls in both the retained and dropout group, having fun playing sport was driven by being challenged to improve, having a friendly coach and trying their best.

## Social support

Girls in the retention group had **significantly more support from friends and parents** to participate than girls in the dropout group.

## Health Profiles\*

Girls retained in sport were more likely to report excellent overall health and physical health compared to those who had dropped out.

\*These health profiles are likely to be impacted by COVID-19



# Reasons for dropping out

## Overall reasons for dropping out were

- ◆ COVID-19 (26%)
- ◆ Cost (25%)
- ◆ Lost interest (25%)
- ◆ Not having fun (22%)
- ◆ Playing other sports or activities (16%)
- ◆ Unfriendly coach or official (16%)

## For women, the main reasons for dropping out were

- ◆ COVID-19 (33%)
- ◆ Cost (28%)
- ◆ Not enough time (23%)
- ◆ Not having fun (18%)
- ◆ Other lifestyle priorities (15%)

## For adolescent girls (13–17 years), the main reasons for dropout were

- ◆ Not having fun (34%)
- ◆ Lost interest (32%)
- ◆ Unfriendly coach or official (27%)
- ◆ Injuries (27%)
- ◆ Increasing age/too old (27%)

## For young girls (0-12) group, the main reasons for dropout were

- ◆ Cost (27%)
- ◆ Lost interest (26%)
- ◆ COVID-19 (26%)
- ◆ Not having fun (21%)
- ◆ Playing other sports and activities (17%)

## Dropout due to COVID-19

Participants who dropped out of sport due to COVID-19 did so primarily because of

- ◆ Government restrictions (77%)
- ◆ Personal health concerns (28%)
- ◆ Family finances (17%)



**Reasons for dropping out from sport varied across the lifespan, however common reasons in both women and girls were: the impact of COVID-19, participation cost and lack of fun/interest.**

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The following provides recommendations of key survey findings combined with key sport participation insights from peer-reviewed literature.

Access a full copy of the [Research Report](#).

## Fun, enjoyment and a social and inclusive environment

### Recommendation 1

The reasons most women/girls participate in sport is to have fun, play with friends and socialise. High performance or winning are lesser priorities, and having a friendly coach is important. It is recommended that sports develop and implement strategies that focus on the delivery of programs as a fun and enjoyable way to play and carefully consider focus on competition, commitment and winning.

### Recommendation 2

Sports clubs should consider the importance of creating opportunities to connect socially when delivering programs and competitions and utilise friendship groups, families and other social groups as platforms to increase the number of participants and club members and to retain them.

## Skill development and competency

### Recommendation 3

In regard to developing and delivering participation programs, training sessions and competitions, include strategies (delivered by qualified coaches) to allow for all women and girls to improve their skills (across skill-levels) and for all to be challenged. This requires a differentiated offering, rather than a one-solution-serves-all approach.

## Changing priorities and motivations

### Recommendation 4

It is important to consider that sport participation preferences are developing along a two-track approach. One approach is towards performance development, which inherently has an increased training and competition load. Within this more traditional approach to organising sport programs, the coaching and club environment need to continue to focus on safety and welfare of women and girls, but also on providing highly qualified coaching services.

Another approach is the development of pathways that align with those women and girls' who are motivated to participate in more flexible, less competitive sporting opportunities. Here the focus should be on playing with friends, skill development and having fun, with a lesser emphasis on rigid training and competition, that in turn comes with pressure to perform. This alternative mode of sport participation in clubs would complement the traditional competitive club-based model and affords participants more choice whilst fostering an environment that promotes lifelong involvement in sport.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## COVID-19

### Recommendation 5

It is recommended that sport organisations continue to communicate with current and past participants – acknowledging the difficulties that the pandemic has been forcing upon everyone and that sport is ready for them to return – to keep them connected and notify them of ongoing and new opportunities for participation. This should occur at a national or state level as well as at a local sports club level.

## Cost

### Recommendation 6

It is recommended that sports consider a range of cost measures to ensure that participating in the sport is available to individuals and families of low socio-economic households/communities. Such measures can include repurposing uniforms and equipment that is still in good condition or providing financial discounts to individuals and families in return for volunteering time.

## Health

### Recommendation 7

It is recommended that sport organisations more overtly communicate the research evidence that is increasingly available promoting the specific health benefits of sport participation.

