



# ***CHANGING THE***

# ***GAME***

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## **A Playbook for Girls' Sport in Saskatchewan**

**Section 1: On the Field:**

**Creating Programs**

**Where Girls Thrive**

 **SASK SPORT**

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## Introduction

To build better programs, we first need to understand the girls we want to help. This guide gives you real strategies for designing programs and creating a positive social environment. This will help you create a space where every girl feels like she belongs and can succeed.

## Gender Equity is Equity for All

When leaders learn the skills to make sport better for girls, they are learning tools that work everywhere. Being inclusive isn't just for the playing field; it matters in schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods, too. As these leaders use their new skills, the entire community becomes more welcoming for everyone. This shows that building a better sport environment doesn't just help athletes—it builds a better world for all of us.

### A Note on Language

Throughout this guide, we often use the term “women” as a broad term. We want to be clear that this is intended to be an inclusive term that includes girls, transgender women and gender-diverse individuals, such as nonbinary and Two-Spirit people. Our goal is to create a welcoming sport system for everyone.



## Continue the Journey

This guide is just one part of the picture. To explore how to support women in other roles within sport, check out the other guides in this series:

- **Section 2:** Beyond the Sidelines: A Playbook for Welcoming Women into Sport
- **Section 3:** On the Field of Play: Women as Technical Leaders in Sport
- **Section 4:** From the Sidelines to the Boardroom: Empowering Women in Sport Leadership
- **Section 5:** The Organizational Playbook: Strategies for Growth and Sustainability

## Dig Deeper

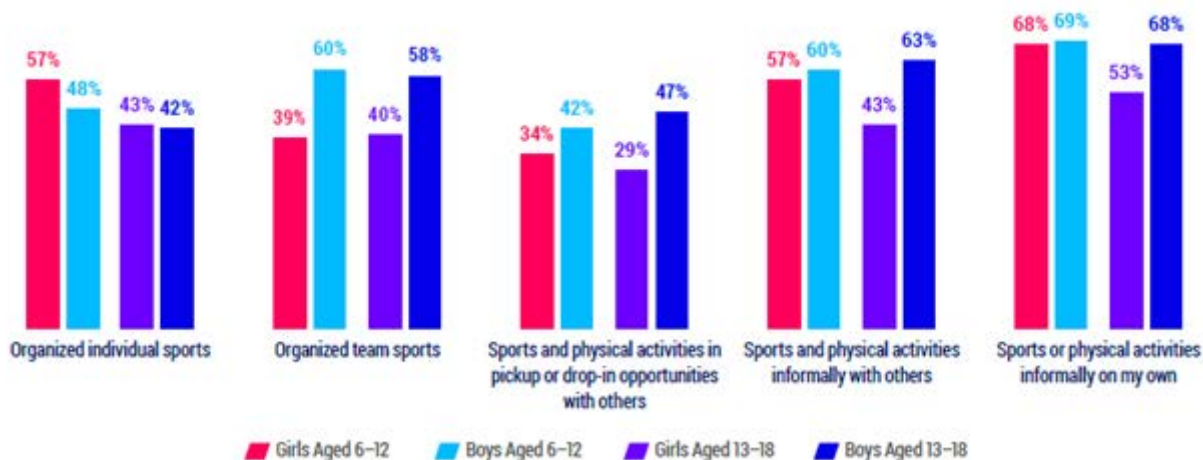
This guide is your starting line. To help you keep going, we have gathered a collection of helpful tools, reports, and websites. Check out the “Dig Deeper: Useful Resources” section at the end of this guide to find more ways to build your knowledge and take action.

## Part 1: The Landscape: Understanding Girls' Sport Today

### Girls' Sport Participation

Great work is being done to get girls into sport, but girls still play less than boys. Even though there is still a gap, girls' participation has been going up steadily since 2016.<sup>4</sup> This shows that if we focus our efforts, we can create places where more girls can play.

*Percentage of Canadian Youth Reporting Weekly Sport & Physical Activity Participation*



### The Teenage Drop-Off

One of the biggest challenges is keeping girls involved as they get older. As girls enter their teen years, they tend to do less physical activity. Younger girls (ages 6 to 12) play informally just as much as boys. But as they become teenagers, they are less likely to keep playing.<sup>4</sup> The biggest drop happens around age 16. During their late teens, more than one in five young women quit sport entirely.<sup>4</sup>



#### Keep Them in the Game

To understand why girls play and ensure they remain active long after the competition ends, check out the [Keeping Girls in Sport eLearning](#) from Respect Group Inc.

### The Power of a Positive Start

Starting organized sport at a young age helps build a habit of being active for life. Girls who play organized sport are more likely to also play for fun, like joining games with friends.<sup>4</sup> This helps them develop physical literacy—the skills, confidence, and desire to be active.

#### Diversity is Key

On average, girls participate in four different sports throughout the year.<sup>6</sup> This shows that girls like having options. Offering meaningful choices is a key way to attract and keep girls in sport.

## Understanding Her 'Why': What Motivates Girls in Sport

To make programs girls like, we need to know what they value. Adults often focus on winning or long-term skills. But for girls, the reasons are often about what is happening right now and who they are with.

### It's All About Fun, Friends, and Fitness

When girls are asked what they enjoy most about playing sports, the answers are clear. The primary drivers are centered on personal enjoyment and connection, not just the final score.<sup>4</sup>

- **Fun and Enjoyment:** This is the number one reason girls play. Two in five girls say the simple fun of playing is what motivates them.<sup>4</sup>
- **Socializing:** Sport is a powerful way to build and strengthen friendships. One in four girls are motivated by the chance to socialize with their friends.<sup>4</sup> This sense of team support and bonding is one of the strongest factors for keeping girls engaged.<sup>20</sup>
- **Health and Wellness:** Girls also recognize the benefits of being active. One in five participate because they appreciate the opportunity to stay fit and healthy.



### Rethinking Competition

Competition is part of sport, but it isn't the main reason most girls play. Only one in ten girls list winning as a top reason for playing.<sup>4</sup>

This doesn't mean girls don't want to try hard. It means they view competition differently. For them, a good competitive experience happens when they are also having fun with friends and learning new skills.<sup>4</sup> The goal isn't just to win. It is to work with an opponent to help everyone do their best.<sup>13</sup>

### Striking the Right Balance

Good programs find a balance between competing and connecting. The main goal should be giving girls what they want most: fun, learning skills, and time with friends. When these are in place, healthy competition makes the experience better instead of taking it over.<sup>7</sup>

### Barriers to Participation

Many things shape a girl's path in sport. By understanding the roadblocks, we can design programs that remove them.

## Common Roadblocks to Participation

When girls are asked what makes it difficult to participate in sports, their answers often point to these challenges:

- **Time Commitment:** One in three girls find it hard to balance sport with school and part-time jobs.<sup>4,20</sup>
- **Fatigue and Injury:** One in three girls say being tired or injured makes it hard to play.<sup>4</sup>
- **Cost and Household Income:** One in five girls say cost is a big hurdle.<sup>4</sup> Family money matters a lot. 62% of girls from households making over \$100,000 play sports. Only 44% of girls from households making under \$50,000 play.<sup>6</sup>
- **Confidence:** One in ten girls worry they aren't good enough to play.<sup>4</sup>
- **Parental Involvement:** Girls whose parents are active in sport are three times more likely to play themselves.<sup>6</sup>
- **Location:** Younger girls (6-12) in cities play slightly more than girls in rural areas (59% vs. 54%).<sup>6</sup>
- **Challenges for Newcomers:** Girls who are new to Canada face extra challenges. Only 18% meet physical activity goals, compared to 28% of girls born in Canada. They may face barriers with language, cost, and transportation.<sup>14</sup>

## The Social Environment

The social feeling of a place matters just as much as the practical stuff.

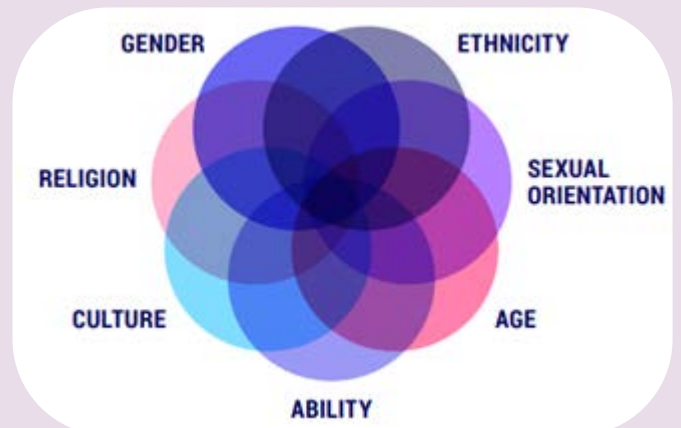
- **Feeling Judged:** Fear of judgment stops many girls from playing. Girls report that comments about their appearance, clothing, or religious attire make them not want to participate.<sup>4</sup> These aren't just jokes. Comments about a Black girl's hair, a 2SLGBTQIA+ girl's style or a Muslim girl's hijab can signal to a girl that she doesn't belong.<sup>4</sup>
- **Perception Gaps:** Sometimes, adults don't understand why girls play. Coaches might think girls are only there to chat, when the girls actually value competition too.<sup>15</sup> This can lead to programs that aren't challenging enough.

## Check Your Assumptions

The best way to know what girls need is simple: ask them and listen. Give them chances to give feedback. This helps you build a program that really works for them.

## Understanding Intersectionality

Intersectionality means understanding that a person's experience is shaped by many different parts of their identity happening at once. For example, a Black girl does not just experience barriers because she is a girl or just because she is Black. She experiences unique barriers because she is both a girl and Black. She might deal with sexism and racism at the same time. To be truly inclusive, we need to consider individuals' intersectional realities to support their development as sport participants.



## Part 2: The Environment: Fostering a Culture of Belonging

### Creating A Positive Social Environment: Where Belonging Comes First

The social environment is the most important factor in keeping girls in sport. For many boys, if they try hard and perform well, they fit in. For many girls, it's the opposite. Fitting in comes first. A girl needs to feel safe and accepted before she is willing to try hard and perform well.<sup>7</sup>



### Building the Foundation of Belonging

A good team culture must be built on purpose.

- **Get Girls to Set the Tone:** Before the season starts, talk to the team. Ask them what inclusion looks like (Ex. high fives) and what exclusion looks like (Ex. ignoring someone).<sup>7</sup>
- **Partner with Parents and Guardians:** Have a meeting before the season. Remind parents they are role models. Set clear rules for how to behave on the sidelines.<sup>7</sup>
- **“Walk the Talk”:** As a leader, you must act the way you want them to act. Plan activities that help them bond, tell stories that cheer great teammates and demonstrate the club’s values. Address mean, homophobic, transphobic, or racist language immediately.<sup>7</sup>



#### Building Connection

Create social connections and better engage girls with the practical recommendations found in [She Belongs: Building Social Connection for Lasting Participation in Sport](#) from Canadian Women & Sport.

### Strategies for Fostering Social Connection

Making time for connection is just as important as running drills.

- **Social Time:** Build free time into practice. Encourage chatting during warm-ups. Use small drills that require communication and teamwork.<sup>7</sup>
- **Team-Building Activities:** Plan events like pizza nights, scavenger hunts or watching a women’s event together, whether that’s a university or pro women’s game or a different age group in your club.<sup>20</sup>
- **Peer Mentors:** Connect new or younger girls with older athletes in a “big sister” program. Have older athletes come to younger athletes’ practices to help with the warm-up. This really helps girls who might feel out of place, like newcomers or those from lower-income households.<sup>6,20</sup>

## Overcoming Social Barriers

- **Redefining Risk:** Many girls are afraid to make mistakes in front of friends. Help them set goals so they see “risk” as a way to learn.<sup>7</sup> Praise their courage and effort, not just their success.
- **Male-Dominated Spaces:** In sports usually played by boys, girls can feel lonely.<sup>15</sup> Leaders must stop sexist comments immediately. Build a culture that celebrates all our differences. You should also bring in female role models to show girls they belong.
- **Spotting Disengagement:** A girl rarely leaves sport overnight. Watch for signs like being late, trying less, isolating herself, or taking feedback personally.<sup>7</sup> When you see this, connect with her. Don’t criticize her.

### 3 Steps to Re-Engage an Athlete

When you notice a girl pulling away, act with empathy.<sup>7</sup>

- **Be Proactive:** Establish open lines of communication from the start.
- **Be Understanding:** Recognize that it can be hard to be vulnerable and approach the conversation without judgment.
- **Be Supportive:** Remind the athlete that the sport program is a safe space and ensure she knows she is valued as a person, not just a player.

## If She Can See It, She Can Be It: The Power of Female Role Models

Role models are powerful. Half of all girls are inspired by coaches who look like them.<sup>4</sup> If girls don’t see female leaders—including women with disabilities, Indigenous women, Black and Brown women, and 2SLGBTQIA+ women—they might think sport is only for men.<sup>15</sup>



### More on Leadership

To learn more about supporting women as coaches and officials, see *Section 3: On the Field of Play: Women as Technical Leaders in Sport*.

## Practical Ways to Connect Girls with Role Models

As a leader, you can create opportunities for girls to see and interact with female role models.

- **Celebrate Women’s Sports:** Watch the Professional Women’s Hockey League, Northern Super League or Women’s National Basketball League together.<sup>2</sup> Include racialized and Para athletes in who you celebrate. Seek out sports you don’t traditionally see on TV. Organize watch parties or attend local events.
- **Real-Life Role Models:** Invite local women—coaches or athletes—to visit and talk to your athletes.
- **Connect Skills to Stars:** When teaching a skill, name it after a female athlete. For example, the “Brittany Hudak”, “Christine Sinclair”, “Paige Crozon”, or “Summer MacIntosh” drill.<sup>13</sup>
- **Mentorship:** Offer opportunities for older and younger athletes to interact.<sup>20</sup>
- **Teach Leadership:** Teach your experienced players how to give encouraging feedback to others.<sup>7</sup>

### Be the Role Model You Needed

Don’t forget the most immediate role model they have: you. By coaching, officiating or volunteering, you are showing girls that women have an important place in sport.<sup>6</sup>

## Creating A Body-Positive Environment

Sport can help girls feel strong and capable.<sup>4</sup> But for some, especially teens and girls with disabilities, it can make them feel bad about their bodies.<sup>4</sup> We want to create a space where every girl feels comfortable in her own skin.

### The Power of Words

Comments about bodies can hurt confidence.<sup>4</sup> The best strategy is a “Body Talk Free Zone.” Leaders and parents should avoid comments about weight or shape. Even compliments about an “ideal” body type can be harmful.<sup>1</sup>

This is very important for girls with disabilities, racialized girls, girls who wear religious attire like a hijab, or 2SLGBTQIA+ girls. Comments about their bodies or clothes can make them feel like they don't belong.<sup>4</sup>



### Body Confidence Tools

[BodySense](#) (Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport): An interactive eLearning for athletes of all genders on how to navigate body image.

[Body Confident Sport](#): An online program that helps you recognize and tackle negative body image in athletes.

## A Note About Nutrition

Food is fuel for sport. Leaders can support athletes by providing healthy snacks at practices or games. Focus on how nutritious food gives the body energy to play and perform, rather than talking about weight or calories. This positive approach helps athletes build healthy habits and keeps them energized.

## Practical Tips

- **Function, Not Form:** Praise what the body does (strength, skill), not what it looks like.<sup>1</sup> Praise effort, skill development, strength and teamwork.<sup>1</sup>
- **Comfortable Uniforms:** Give girls choices for what they wear to practice and games.<sup>1</sup> Stay away from white, especially for shorts and pants. Ensure that plus-sized sizes are available.
- **Listen to the Body:** Teach girls it is okay to rest if they are tired or on their period.<sup>1</sup>
- **Be a Model:** Show a healthy relationship with your own body and of others on your team.<sup>1</sup>

## Supporting Girls Through Puberty and Menstruation

Puberty and periods are normal, but they are hard to talk about in sports. By talking openly and providing support, we can help girls feel comfortable.<sup>4</sup>

Nearly half of teenage girls say their period hurts their participation. They worry about pain, low energy, or leaking through their clothing.<sup>4</sup> But sport can actually help with period health.<sup>4</sup>



### Normalizing the Conversation

[Take Action on The Menstrual Cycle](#) (Canadian Women & Sport): A guide that aims to tackle the taboo and help normalize the menstrual cycle in sport environments.

## How to Help

- **Provide Products:** Keep pads and tampons in washrooms and change rooms, at front desks of facilities and the medical kit.
- **Better Uniforms:** White shorts or tight clothes can cause anxiety about leaks. Offer dark-coloured, comfortable options.<sup>4</sup>

## Stop the Stigma

Don't make jokes like "She must be on her period." This is hurtful.<sup>4</sup> Understand that energy levels change, and that doesn't mean she isn't committed.

## Action Steps for Leaders

You can help normalize the menstrual cycle in your sport environment. Here are five key actions to take:<sup>3</sup>

- **Ensure Access:** Provide a variety of free products in case they are needed.
- **Normal Talk:** Use correct words. Don't shame.
- **Support:** Help girls find ways to modify activities when needed. Sitting out should not be the only option.
- **Get Educated:** Learn more about menstrual health and share that with your participants. Organizations like Power to Play Period offer resources for coaches.
- **Health Literacy:** Encourage girls to track their cycles to build understanding of their overall health.<sup>3</sup>

## Engaging Families

Family is a girl's first team. Most girls start sports because a family member plays.<sup>15</sup> Getting families involved helps keep girls in the game.

## Bridging the Knowledge Gap

Some parents don't feel ready to talk about things like body image or mental health.<sup>4</sup> Also, families new to Canada might not know how sports leagues work here or may come from cultures without a tradition of encouraging girls' participation. You can help by sharing information and resources clearly.

## An Indigenous Perspective on Community

The [Aboriginal Coaching Modules](#) teaches that good relationships with families and communities are key to respect and fair play.<sup>9</sup>

## Strategies for Engaging Families

- **Pre-Season Meeting:** Meet parents and guardians early to build trust and set a positive tone for the season.<sup>9</sup>
- **Explain Your Approach:** Tell parents and guardians your goals and your approach to coaching. Be clear if you focus on effort, personal improvement or winning.<sup>7</sup>
- **Sideline Rules:** Be clear about what you expect from supporters when they attend practices and competitions. Share your club's Code of Conduct, give examples on how to cheer positively and be clear about how people should interact with officials.<sup>9</sup>
- **Community:** Create fun volunteer roles for parents or host family days.

## The Power of Words: Inclusive Language

Inclusive language means using words that make everyone feel welcome.

- **Family Diversity:** Use "parents" or "guardians" instead of "mom and dad." This includes single parents, grandparent-led, foster families and 2SLGBTQIA+ families.<sup>18</sup>
- **Gender-Neutral:** Say "everyone", "athletes" or "team" instead of "guys." Opt for "player-to-player" instead of "man-to-man."<sup>17</sup>
- **Avoid Hurtful Words:** Ableism is discrimination based on the belief that people without disabilities are superior.<sup>10</sup> Don't use words about disabilities as insults (like "lame" or "crazy").<sup>10</sup>
- **Person-First:** Say "an athlete with a disability" rather than "disabled athlete." Always ask what a person prefers.



### Words Matter

To create a sense of belonging for everyone, consult the [Inclusive Language Guide](#) from the Ottawa Sport Council. It supports you and those around you in fostering an inclusive environment through the words you use.

## Simple Swaps for Inclusive Language

### Addressing Harmful Language as a Team

When you hear language that leaves people out or is mean, it is important to step in.

- **Make it a club issue:** Remind the group about the standards you all agreed to.
- **Focus on the impact, not the intent:** Even if a person didn't mean to be hurtful, their words still cause pain.
- **Encourage teammates to help:** Remind athletes that they represent the club and what it stands for.

## Person-First Language

Words matter. Generally, it is best to use "person-first" language. This means putting the person before their condition, like saying "an athlete with a disability" instead of "a disabled athlete." This reminds us that they are a person first. Note: Some people prefer "identity-first" language (like "Autistic person" or "Deaf person"). The most respectful thing to do is simply ask the individual what they prefer.

## Part 3: The Program: Designing for Engagement and Access

### Designing Programs Girls Love

The best programs are designed with girls, not just for them. This is called Human-Centered Design.<sup>19</sup> Girls say they want:<sup>4</sup>

- Clear information on how to join.
- Programming and activities designed specifically for them.
- Stories that celebrate girls and women.
- Leaders and coaches who make them feel they belong.
- Actions that support diversity and inclusion.



### Program Design

To help sport leaders create a fairer and more welcoming environment for everyone, join the [Same Game Challenge](#) from Canadian Women & Sport.

## Key Elements of a Quality Program

- **Skills:** Focus on learning skills. This is the key to building competence and confidence.<sup>6</sup>
- **Social:** Make time to build healthy social connections.<sup>6</sup>
- **Feedback:** Give positive praise. Give corrections and constructive feedback privately.<sup>6</sup>
- **Safety:** Make sure girls are safe because the program matches their abilities. Make sure the space is safe and accessible.

## Offering Options to Attract More Girls

Although many girls are looking for high-commitment, high-competition sports, girls are looking for other options too.<sup>11</sup>

- **Be Truly Inclusive:** Create a “no-cuts” team where every girl who wants to play, gets to play, especially girls aged 10-16.
- **Require Less Time:** A schedule with fewer practices and competitions works well for busy girls and helps more of them join.
- **Don’t Forget the Basics:** Some girls don’t get the opportunity to try sport and enter the sport late. Offer extra support in learning the basics to help them advance their skills.
- **Build a Community, Not Just a League:** Create a welcoming feeling across the club where players and teams support each other.

## Solving the “Competitive vs. Casual” Dilemma

One of the biggest challenges is meeting the needs of both highly competitive girls and those with a more casual approach on the same team.<sup>4</sup> When numbers are too low to split into multiple teams, this can cause frustration.

- **Learn Girls’ Goals:** Focus on individual goal-setting and set goals collaboratively at the start of the season.
- **Use Drills with Progressions:** Use station-based drills for different skill levels.
- **Partner with Neighbouring Communities:** In sports with tiered leagues, ensure that there is a place to play for every level of competition, even if that means it’s a community down the road.
- **Offer Extra Options:** For those who want more, offer additional opportunities to train and compete.

## Mixed-Gender Participation

Mixed-gender programs (boys and girls together) can be an excellent way (or might be the only way) to create more chances to participate, but need intentional design and planning to ensure an equitable experience.

- **Sidelined Girls:** Sometimes boys don’t pass to girls.<sup>17</sup> Coaches must watch for this and stop it. Check in with female participants, and establish rules to ensure balanced participation.
- **Safety:** Set clear rules about physical contact and consent.<sup>17</sup> Address incidents and enforce consequences for inappropriate behaviour.<sup>18</sup>

## 8 Recommendations for Better Mixed-Gender Sport

The Play for All report from Sport for Life provides eight evidence-based recommendations for creating truly inclusive mixed-gender programs:<sup>17</sup>

1. Provide mandatory coach training on gender socialization and stereotypes.
2. Have open discussions about physical contact, boundaries, and consent.
3. Combat homophobia and transphobia explicitly.
4. Deconstruct the notion of “boys’ sports” and “girls’ sports”.
5. Offer meaningful competition matched to skill level.
6. Provide choices between mixed and single-gender participation where possible.
7. Create both mixed and single-gender moments within programs.
8. Base practice groups on developmental needs and skills, not just gender.

## Creating Inclusive Opportunities for Girls with Disabilities

Our commitment to sport for all includes creating welcoming and accessible environments for the approximately 14% of Canadians who live with a sensory, intellectual or physical disability.<sup>16</sup> Whether a girl is born with a disability or acquires one later in life, she deserves the same opportunity to learn sport skills, be active, and feel a sense of belonging.

## Pathways to Participation

Participation for girls with disabilities can follow different pathways, depending on the individual’s goals and needs. The two primary approaches are:

- **Mainstream Integration:** Many girls with disabilities can and should be included in mainstream community sport programs, often with simple adaptations to activities, equipment or rules.
- **Para Sport Programs:** For some girls, a para-specific program is a better fit, offering specialized coaching and a pathway to competitive para sport.

The most important step is to have an open conversation with the girl and her family to determine the best starting point.

## The Importance of Awareness and First Contact

Many potential athletes and their families are simply not aware of the opportunities available to them. Sport organizations must be proactive in developing awareness plans and sharing information with the community. A welcoming and positive first experience is the key to keeping a new athlete engaged, which means having trained coaches and a program structure that helps them feel confident and comfortable from the moment they arrive.<sup>16</sup>



### Training Your Coaches

To effectively train your coaches and officials, start with your Provincial Sport Organization, the [Coaches Association of Saskatchewan](#), and the [Coaching Association of Canada](#).

## Your Role as a Community Sport Leader

Creating an inclusive space is a collaborative process.

- **Connect and Listen:** Talk with the athlete and her family to understand her unique goals and needs.
- **Be Willing to Adapt:** Be open to modifying drills, equipment, or rules.
- **Build Your Network:** Get to know the para sport organizations in your community.
- **Refer When Needed:** If your program isn't the best fit, help her find one where she will thrive. A successful referral is a win for everyone.

## Building Physical Literacy for a Lifetime of Activity

Physical literacy means having the skills, confidence, and desire to be active for life.<sup>12</sup> Right now, fewer girls have these skills compared to boys.<sup>14</sup>



### Building Skills

To effectively support others in developing physical literacy, engage with the [NCCP Fundamental Movement Skills](#) eLearning from the Coaching Association of Canada.

## How to Build It

- **Focus on Fun and Fundamentals:** Teach fundamental movement skills through fun games and activities rather than just repetitive drills.
- **Make it OK to Make Mistakes:** Praise effort, participation, and personal improvement over perfect execution.
- **Start Skill Development Early:** Teach skills before puberty, growing bodies can make skill acquisition harder.
- **Adjust:** Recognize that participants will have different skill levels. Design programs that can be adapted for various abilities.<sup>16</sup>

## Creating Safe and Comfortable Physical Spaces

The building itself sends a message about who belongs.

### Change Spaces

Girls need clean, private change rooms. These must be physically accessible for athletes with disabilities. For 2SLGBTQIA+, transgender and non-binary participants, private or gender-neutral stalls are essential for safety.<sup>4</sup>

### Uniforms

- **Offer Choices:** Offer different fits, including plus sizes that match the style and quality of straight-sized uniforms. Select female uniforms rather than boys or unisex designs.
- **Accommodate Cultural and Religious Needs:** Allow religious wear like hijabs.
- **Sports Bras:** A proper sports bra is a crucial piece of equipment. Consider including them as part of the uniform package.
- **Transgender/Non-Binary Options:** Work with transgender and non-binary participants to ensure there are uniform options that feel comfortable and affirming to their gender identity, avoiding choices that may cause gender dysphoria.




## Ask the Experts—The Girls Themselves

The best way to pick uniforms? Ask the girls!<sup>4</sup> The single most effective way to get uniforms right is to involve participants in the selection or design process. Their input is invaluable.<sup>4</sup>

## Building Inclusive Environments

Inclusion means everyone—regardless of their background, identity, or ability—feels safe, valued, respected, and that they truly belong. It requires a fundamental cultural shift within our organizations. Instead of expecting new participants to adapt to a pre-existing culture, our goal must be to co-create a new, welcoming culture that is flexible enough to meet the needs of everyone.<sup>15</sup>

### Universal Principles of Inclusion

|   |  |   |  |
|---|--|---|--|
|  <p><b>Have Diverse Leadership</b><br/>A truly welcoming club has leaders who represent the different people in the community.</p> |  <p><b>Welcome Beginners</b><br/>Create a team culture where it is safe to be new. Celebrate effort instead of just results and teach experienced players to be supportive mentors.</p> |  <p><b>Show Inclusion Quietly</b><br/>Use photos of different families, races, abilities and body types in your social media and ads. This signals that everyone is welcome without saying a word.</p> |  <p><b>Respect Culture and Religion</b><br/>Be mindful of who is on your team. For example, during fasting holidays like Ramadan, plan easier drills, use smaller spaces and take lots of breaks.<sup>7</sup></p> |
|---|--|---|--|

## Supporting Indigenous Athletes and Communities

**Building trust with Indigenous communities takes learning, listening, and working together.**

- **Look at the Whole Person:** Many Indigenous cultures see wellness as a balance of physical, mental, cultural, and spiritual health. This is often shown by the Medicine Wheel. As a coach, your goal is to help the whole person grow within their family and community.<sup>9</sup>
- **Work Together:** To be effective, your program needs to fit the culture. Work directly with Indigenous leaders, Elders, and community members to plan your program. Include traditions, like inviting Elders to ceremonies or hosting community feasts.<sup>8</sup>
- **Stop Racism:** Coaches must speak up against racism. If you stay silent, you are signaling it is acceptable. Addressing racism is part of reconciliation and requires open and honest conversation.<sup>9</sup>



### Learning from the Community

To enhance your professional development, utilize the [Aboriginal Coaching Modules](#) from the Aboriginal Sport Circle. This training tool is designed for all coaches who work with Indigenous athletes.

## Designing for All Abilities: Universal Design

Inclusion for girls with disabilities involves a commitment to adapting to fit the needs of the athlete. This means changing drills, equipment or rules when needed. It also means making sure the facility is easy to access, all the way from the parking lot to the playing field.

**Universal Design** means creating programs and spaces that work for all women and girls right from the start. It isn't about fixing things later; it is about building them correctly so everyone can participate fully and confidently.

Here is what Universal Design looks like in action:

- **Inclusive Program Design:** Programs should be flexible from day one. Offer multiple ways to participate, compete and lead.
  - Examples: Use tiered levels of competition, modify the rules to fit the players, and offer different roles like athlete, leader, coach, official or volunteer.
- **Flexible Pathways:** Recognize that everyone starts at a different place. Provide multiple ways to enter the sport and move up.
  - Examples: Offer "Give-it-a-go" days for beginners or combined practice sessions where different levels train together.
- **Flexible Equipment:** Equipment should allow everyone to play safely and meaningfully, regardless of how they move, see or think.
  - Examples: Use high-contrast balls (easier to see), balls with bells (easier to hear) and have adaptive gear available (or clearly say where to get it).
- **Clear Communication:** Make sure all information is easy to access and understand.
  - Examples: Use registration forms that work with screen readers. Give instructions in multiple ways: visually (pictures), verbally (spoken), tactilely (touch), and in plain language.
- **Universal Coaching:** Good coaching supports different learning styles.
  - Examples: Demonstrate skills in multiple ways (show it, say it, let them feel it). Give feedback that is specific to the person. Keep the practice structure predictable so athletes know what to expect.
- **Safety and Belonging:** Create a space where girls feel safe mentally and emotionally.
  - Examples: Train coaches in disability literacy and inclusive coaching. Have a zero-tolerance rule for ableism (discrimination against people with disabilities) and exclusionary behaviours.
- **Accessible Costs:** Financial barriers often impact women with disabilities more than others.
  - Examples: Offer "sliding scale" fees (pay what you can), provide loaner equipment so families don't have to buy it and share information about grants.
- **Understanding Overlapping Barriers (Intersectionality):** Recognize that women and girls often face more than one barrier at a time, such as disability, race, being a newcomer, living in a rural area, or having less money.
  - Examples: Avoid "one-size-fits-all" approaches. Offer support for transportation or virtual training options for those who cannot travel.
- **Design Together (Co-Design):** Include people with disabilities in the planning process from the very beginning.
  - Examples: Hold focus groups, collaborate with disability organizations and pay advisors with lived experience for their time and expertise.

## Welcoming Other Diverse Communities

Create your program with participants in mind, not just for them. Ask them what barriers they face. Talk to agencies that work with these participant groups. This builds trust and helps you solve real problems you might miss, like how hard it is to get to practice on a bus in winter.

- **Newcomers to Canada:** Be ready to welcome new families. Provide clear, simple information about costs and how to sign up, while being mindful of language differences. Work with settlement agencies. They can help share resources, like translating forms or helping families find equipment. Remember that families might not know how sports work in Canada. Take time to explain things like how long the season lasts, what volunteers do and how athletes move up to the next level.
- **2SLGBTQIA+ Participants:** Create a safe and respectful space. Use inclusive language, provide private changing areas and have strict rules against harassment. Show your support visibly, like displaying a Pride flag or a “safe space” sticker.
- **Transgender and Non-Binary Participants:** The main rule is to let athletes participate based on their gender identity. Use the correct names and pronouns, respect their privacy, and create a clear policy for inclusion. Check your forms to make sure they include everyone and provide safe places to change.
- **Welcoming Visitors:** Think beyond the people on your registration list. Consider the teams who come to compete against you. If a team from a different background visits—for example, participants from a neighboring Indigenous community—will they feel safe and welcome in your space? Make sure your respect and hospitality extend to everyone who walks through your doors, not just your own team.



### Community Connections

Connect or collaborate with organizations like [Inclusion Saskatchewan](#), [Global Gathering Place](#), Open Door Society, Multicultural Council of Saskatchewan and cultural associations in your community.

### Welcoming Newcomers

To better support new residents, participate in the [Welcome to Canada](#) workshop from Sport for Life. It outlines common barriers and provides examples of solutions and opportunities to get everyone involved.

### Creating Safe Spaces

To ensure your coaching is inclusive, look to [Leading the Way: Working with LGBTQ Athletes and Coaches](#) from Canadian Women & Sport. This comprehensive resource provides the guidance needed to make sport a more welcoming place.

## Inviting Girls to Participate

“Recruiting” is really just creating a welcoming invitation.<sup>15</sup>

- **Focus on Fun and Friendships:** Your promotional materials should show the main reasons girls play. Use photos and videos of smiling faces, high-fives and teammates supporting each other.
- **Promote the Benefits:** Show how your program helps girls build confidence, handle stress and feel strong and healthy.
- **Host “Bring a Friend” Days:** Girls are much more likely to try a new sport if a friend comes with them.
- **Run Free “Try-It” Events:** Offer a free, one-day event for beginners. Keep it fun and play games.
- **Create ‘Late-Entry’ Options:** Make a special group for pre-teens and teens who are new to the sport. This gives them a safe place to learn basic skills with girls their own age.
- **Use Social Media:** Build a community online. Share inspiring photos and videos of your athletes in action to celebrate them.
- **Partner with Schools and Groups:** Connect with local schools, community centers, and youth groups. Be sure to reach out to groups that help newcomers and cultural centers to share information about your program.

## Part 4: The Leadership: Ensuring Success

### Training And Supporting Coaches

The coach is the most important person in a girl’s sport life. The coach is the most influential person in an athlete’s day-to-day sport experience. Coaches need training in:

- **Girls-Centered Coaching:** Learning what motivates girls. The [“Keeping Girls in Sport”](#) e-learning module from Canadian Women & Sport is an essential resource.
- **Injury Prevention:** Keeping girls healthy, like girls-specific injury prevention, including appropriate warm-ups, conditioning, and recovery strategies.<sup>6</sup>
- **Disability Inclusion:** There are a number of resources to give coaches the knowledge and confidence to work effectively with every athlete.<sup>16</sup>
- **Inclusive Coaching Practices:** How to create safe spaces for 2SLGBTQIA+, transgender and non-binary athletes. Diverse-gender inclusion policies are a good tool to create inclusion.

### Evaluating Your Program

Evaluation is important to determine if your program is working.<sup>20</sup> Focus on two things:

1. Retention: Do girls intend to come back next season?
2. Satisfaction: What did girls think about their experience?

### How to Gather Feedback

Create simple, regular opportunities for feedback.

- **End-of-Season Surveys:** Use short, simple, and anonymous surveys to ask girls and their parents/guardians about their satisfaction and intent to return.
- **Informal Check-ins:** Casually check in with participants throughout the season.
- **Group Conversations:** Host a year-end pizza party and facilitate a relaxed group conversation about what the girls enjoyed and what they’d like to see change next year.

## Invest in Your Knowledge: Key Resources

To effectively evaluate and improve your programs, use the right tools. Canadian Women & Sport offers expert-led resources to help sport leaders apply a gender lens to their work. Consider these as your next step:

- [The Gender Equity LENS e-Learning Module](#): This online module teaches you how to apply a gender equity lens to your own organization.
- [Retaining Girls in Sport & Physical Activity Workshop](#): This hands-on workshop provides in-depth training on girl-centered program design.

## Organizational Actions

Creating sustainable, high-quality programs for girls requires more than just great coaching—it requires commitment from the entire organization.

- **Train Volunteers and Staff:** Everyone who makes decisions must be equipped with gender equity skills.<sup>5</sup>
- **Leadership From the Board:** Leaders need to make equity a priority.<sup>5</sup>
- **Program Champions:** Every successful program has a champion—a dedicated individual who is responsible for making it run.<sup>11</sup>
- **Keep Costs Low:** This makes the program accessible to more families.<sup>11</sup>
- **Advocate for Support:** Ask the government and funders for long-term support.<sup>5</sup>



### Leading the Way

To learn more about building a strong organization, see Section 4: From the Sidelines to the Boardroom: Empowering Women in Sport Leadership and Section 5: The Organizational Playbook: Strategies for Growth and Sustainability.

## Empower Women Leaders

Make a commitment to recruiting, training, supporting, and promoting women into roles at every level—as coaches, officials, mentors and administrators.

## Pay it Forward

Don't keep your success a secret. Support other leaders and clubs by sharing your resources and ideas. Invite new people to learn from you or help a neighboring community start their own program. By lifting each other up, we create more opportunities for everyone. Remember: when we all rise, we rise together.

## Conclusion: The Power to Change the Game

Creating a place where girls thrive is ongoing work. To do it: we must listen to girls, prioritize their need for connection and design programs on purpose.

This guide has given you tools and strategies. Whether you change your uniforms, host a “Bring a Friend” day, or just change how you talk to your team, every small step helps keep girls in the game. The power to change the game is in your hands.

## Feature 1

### Girlstylerz: From a Saskatchewan Hill to a National Movement

In the world of freestyle skiing, where adrenaline and acrobatics often take center stage, a powerful revolution has sparked on the slopes of Saskatchewan. After joining a national Women in Freestyle committee in 2020, Lauren Ryan learned about the Girlstylerz program catching air in British Columbia. Inspired by what she heard, she and her colleague Andrea Ornawka decided to try the program out in the prairies, starting a journey that would eventually help shape female engagement across Canada.

It began with a simple idea: the Girlstylerz Airbag Camp. These camps gave girls a safe place to practice their tricks and jumps. Unlike regular training, which can sometimes feel competitive or dominated by boys, these camps were all about support and fun. The girls loved it. They told their coaches that the fun and safety of the camps were the main reasons they kept coming back to ski every year.

The plan worked incredibly well. By the 2022-23 season, Saskatchewan was the only province in Canada where more than half of the members were girls (76%). This wasn't just because of the camps, but also because women were leading the way. Female head coaches ran two of the three biggest clubs in the province. The program has expanded to host events in Asessippi, launched partnerships with neighbouring provincial sport organizations, and has planted seeds and interest throughout the province.

When Ryan later moved to British Columbia to lead the Girlstylerz program there, she took the lessons learned in Saskatchewan with her. She knew the program needed a clear plan to keep growing. She created something called "Girlstylerz in a Box." This guide showed that the program wasn't just about socializing; it was about real skill building. It focused on four main things: Building Confidence, Belonging, Mentorship, and Learning Skills.

Freestyle Canada saw how well this worked. Now, the national organization is using the "Girlstylerz in a Box" model. They are working with Ryan to create tools and guides for coaches all over the country.

What started locally has become a national standard. Girlstylerz proves that when girls have a place where they feel they belong, they don't just stay in the sport—they become the leaders of it.



Photos Credit Andrea Ornawka

## Feature 2

### From the Playground to the Podium: The Rise of Girls' Football in Saskatchewan

When Brenna Metz started playing flag football in Grade 4, she loved the sport, but the environment felt awkward. She was playing in a league dominated by boys. By Grade 5, Brenna gathered a group of her basketball friends to form an all-girls team. They practiced once a week and played for fun.

Brenna played in the Regina Youth Flag Football League (RYFFL), launched by Mike Thomas after Football Sask identified a growing demand for flag-specific programming. In the years that followed, all-girls teams multiplied, proving that they didn't just want to participate—they wanted a space of their own.

The sport has since exploded. The girls' high school league in Regina alone has grown to nearly 600 players. It has two different streams: a competitive division for those who want to win and a recreational division for those who just want to participate in the sport. The organizers are committed to making sure that there's space for all girls who want to play.

There is now a serious pathway to represent Saskatchewan at national championships. To support this high-performance ambition, an elite league was established for Grades 9 through 12. With the girls in mind, organizers moved away from oversized men's jerseys and introduced uniforms designed for female athletes in fun pastel colors like yellow and blue. Brenna remains involved today, helping to run the University of Regina's club team.

Supporting this growth from the top is Aimee Kowalski, the Women and Development Coordinator at Football Sask. Aimee is a veteran of the sport, having played tackle football for 13 years with the Regina Riot. She uses her experience to remove barriers for the next generation. Aimee points to the Saskatchewan Roughrider Foundation as a massive support. Because supporting women is one of the Foundation's three key pillars, they have been essential partners in growing the sport.

Aimee notes that while flag football is growing fast because it is low cost, Football Sask is also working hard to grow the tackle game. The message is clear: if you want to play, there is a place for you. Football Sask has the resources to help new clubs get started—they just need a local "champion" with the enthusiasm to get the ball moving.



Photos Credit Michael Scrapper  
Shoots with Scrapes

## Dig Deeper: Resources

The following resources can help you continue learning.

### Research & Insights on Girls' Sport Experience

[Rally Report 2024: A Call to Reimagine Sport so All Girls Can Play](#) – Canadian Women & Sport – The latest insights on how girls experience sport.

[The Rally Report 2022: A Call for Better, Safer Sport for Girls](#) – Canadian Women & Sport – A look at the state of sport for girls in 2022.

[The Rally Report 2020: Encouraging Action to Improve Sport for Women and Girls](#) – Canadian Women & Sport – Explores sport participation trends for girls ages 6–18.

[Rally Report Insights – Rallying for Girls' Mental Health](#) – Canadian Women & Sport – How sport positively impacts mental health.

[She Plays: Designing Sport Experiences for Girls through a Participant-Centred Approach](#) – viaSport – Understanding girls aged 11 to 14 and what encourages them to keep playing.

[Jumpstart State of Play Youth Report 2024](#) – Jumpstart – Represents youth voices and challenges regarding access to sport.

[Accessibility, Inclusion, and Quality Participation: A Look at the Literature](#) – Canadian Disability Participation Project – Summarizes the literature supporting the definitions of accessibility, inclusion, and quality participation.

### Building Connection, Belonging, and Retention

[Retaining Girls in Sport & Physical Activity Workshop](#) – Canadian Women & Sport – Helps leaders create solutions for keeping girls in sport.

[Keeping Girls in Sport eLearning](#) – Respect Group Inc – Provides understanding of why girls play to help them stay in sport.

[She Belongs: Building Social Connection for Lasting Participation in Sport](#) – Canadian Women & Sport – Recommendations to create social connection for girls.

[How We Play](#) – Jumpstart - Video series for girls entering adolescence, featuring diverse athletes.

[Introduction to Belonging in Sport and Physical Activity](#) – Sport for Life – Equips stakeholders to cultivate belonging.

[Social and Emotional Learning for Sport and Recreation](#) – Sport for Life – About social and emotional learning (SEL) in youth sport.

[Gender Equity Toolkit](#) – Canadian Parks and Recreation Association - Addresses facility use and design for gender equity.

[Actively Engaging Women and Girls: Addressing the Psycho-Social Factors](#) - Canadian Sport for Life - Recommendations to address factors influencing female athlete development.

## **Inclusive Program Design & General Strategy**

[Same Game Challenge](#) – Canadian Women & Sport - Helps leaders make sport more welcoming for everyone.

[Gender Equity Lens eLearning](#) – Canadian Women & Sport - A course on using the Gender Equity Lens framework for decision making.

[Gender Equity Lens Debrief Session](#) – Canadian Women & Sport - A workshop to reflect on the Gender Equity Lens concepts.

[Play for All: Building Inclusive Mixed-Gender Sports](#) – Sport for Life – Recommendations for inclusive mixed-gender sports.

[Project SCORE](#) – Resources to develop confidence, competence, connection, and character in youth.

## **Foundational Physical Literacy Resources**

[NCCP Fundamental Movement Skills](#) – Coaching Association of Canada – eLearning for coaches to support physical literacy.

[PLAY Tools](#) – Sport for Life & Physical Literacy for Life - Tools to assess and improve physical literacy levels.

[An Introduction to Physical Literacy Workshop](#) – Sport for Life – A broad introduction to physical literacy.

[Getting Started with Physical Literacy](#) – Sport for Life - Introduces how we learn to move and key elements of a supportive environment.

[Introduction to Long-Term Development in Sport and Physical Activity](#) – Sport for Life - Helps create developmentally appropriate sport experiences.

[Developing Physical Literacy in Recreation Programs](#) – Sport for Life – A workshop on physical literacy in recreation.

[HIGH FIVE SPORT](#) – High Five® - Training on child development and motivation in sports.

## **Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Anti-Racism**

[A Quick Guide for Accessibility, Inclusion, and Quality Participation](#) – Canadian Disability Participation Project – Describes accessibility, inclusion, and quality participation.

[What is Intersectionality?](#) – Canadian Women & Sport – Describes intersectionality and how to apply it to gender equity.

[Organization Reflection: Intersectionality](#) – Canadian Women & Sport – Exercise to check if diverse experiences are represented in decision-making.

[What is Unconscious Bias?](#) – Canadian Women & Sport – Describes unconscious bias and how to counteract it.

[Intercultural Skills in Sport Toolbox](#) – Coaching Association of Canada - Resources for engaging with participants from varying cultural backgrounds.

[Inclusive Language Guide](#) – Jumpstart – A guide to creating belonging using inclusive language.

[Anti-Racism in Coaching](#) – Coaching Association of Canada - eLearning to help coaches support racialized participants.

[Play Fair. An Anti-Racism in Sports Toolkit](#) – Inclusion in Canadian Sports Network - Designed to address and combat racism in sports.

[Anti-Racism Training – Recreation](#) – Sport Nova Scotia – eLearning on racism within the recreation sector.

[Anti-Racism in Sport for Youth](#) – Sport Nova Scotia – An anti-racism eLearning for youth.

[Anti-Racism in Sports for Parents](#) – Sport Nova Scotia – Outlines the role of racism in sports and how to be an ally.

[Black Leaders in Sports Day](#) – Inclusion in Canadian Sports Network – Dedicated to the development of equitable leadership pathways.

[Inclusion in Canadian Sports Network](#) – A not-for-profit supporting racial equity in Canadian sports.

[Cultural Calendar & Observations](#) - Jumpstart – A guide for important cultural days for planning the season.

## **Inclusion for Disability and 2SLGBTQIA+**

[Sport Modifications Guide](#) – Saskatchewan Blind Sports Association – A guide for modifying sports for people who are blind or partially sighted.

[Axis to Access](#) – Saskatchewan Arts Alliance – A living document on accessibility in the province of Saskatchewan.

[Transathlete.com](#) - Information about trans inclusion in athletics.

[Leading the Way: Working with LGBTQ Athletes and Coaches](#) – Canadian Women & Sport - Resource for making sport welcoming for LGBTQ individuals.

[2SLGBTQI Sports Inclusion: Playbook to Breaking Down Barriers](#) – Egale Canada - Tips on fostering a more inclusive sport environment.

[Policy Guidance: 2SLGBTQI+ Inclusion](#) – viaSport British Columbia - Supports organizations in developing inclusive policies.

[NCCP Coaching Athletes with a Disability](#) – Coaching Association of Canada – eLearning for coaches new to coaching athletes with a disability.

[Coaching Kids of All Abilities](#) – Jumpstart - Helps leaders create inclusive environments for kids of all abilities.

[No Accidental Champions: Long-Term Development for All 3.1](#) – Sport for Life – Opportunities and challenges for persons with disabilities in sport.

[Special Olympics Quality Sport Checklist](#) – Special Olympics Canada – Defines elements of quality sport experiences.

[Long-Term Athlete Development: Supporting Quality Sport Experiences 2.0](#) – Special Olympics Canada – Model for athletes with intellectual disabilities.

[Inclusive Physical Literacy](#) – Sport for Life - eLearning on physical literacy for participants with disabilities.

[Coaching Athletes Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing](#) – Sport Manitoba - Information for coaching D/HH athletes.

[Evidence-Informed Recommendations: Tips and Tricks for Developing and Disseminating Physical Activity Information for Families of Children with Disabilities](#) – Sport Canada, Active Living Alliance & Canadian Disability Participation Project - Tips for sharing info with families of children with disabilities.

[Inclusive Playgrounds Playbook](#) – Jumpstart – Blueprint for developing inclusive play spaces.

[Physical Accessibility Evaluation](#) – Jumpstart – Evaluates accessibility of facilities.

[Building Welcoming Sport Environments](#) - viaSport British Columbia - Recommendations on 2SLGBTQ+ issues.

[2SLGBTQ+ Inclusion Policy Resources – Sport and Rec](#) - Sport Manitoba - Guidance for safe, equitable spaces.

[Training Athletes with a Physical Disability](#) - Canadian Sport for Life - Supports athletes with a disability through Long-Term Development.

## **Inclusion for Indigenous and Newcomer Communities**

[Aboriginal Sport Circle](#) - Canada's national voice for Aboriginal sport.

[Indigenous Sport for Life: Long-Term Participant Development Pathway 1.2](#) – Aboriginal Sport Circle & Sport for Life - Framework responding to Indigenous peoples' needs.

[Indigenous Long-Term Participant Development Pathway – Sport Organization Guide](#) – Sport for Life - Sport for Life - Guide for collaboration with the Indigenous sport system.

[Indigenous Long-term Participant Development Pathway Workshop](#) – Aboriginal Sport Centre - Workshop on supporting Indigenous participants.

[Aboriginal Coaching Modules](#) – Aboriginal Sport Circle - Training tool for coaches of Indigenous athletes.

[Stepping Stones to Indigenous Sport and Physical Activity Participation](#) – Aboriginal Sport Circle – eLearning for culturally grounded programming.

[Aboriginal Apprentice Coaching Program](#) – Aboriginal Sport Centre – Professional development for Aboriginal apprentice coaches.

[First Nation Elder Protocol](#) – Coaching Association of Canada – Understanding processes of inviting and thanking Elders.

[How to Take Part in a First Nations Round Dance](#) – Coaching Association of Canada – How-to for a traditional celebration.

[Indigenous Communities: Active for Life](#) – Sport for Life & Aboriginal Sport Circle - Equips local champions to create sustainable sport programs.

[Indigenous Communities: Active for Life Workshop](#) – Aboriginal Sport Centre - Support for developing sustainable quality sport programs.

[Welcome to Canada: Engaging New to Canada Participants in Sport and Physical Activity](#) – Sport for Life - Workshop on barriers and solutions for newcomers.

[Cultural Awareness in Youth Sport](#) – Sport for Life - eLearning on modeling cultural awareness.

[Hijabi Ballers Toolkit](#) – viaSport British Columbia - Tools for inclusive practices for female Muslim participants.

[Faith on Ice: How Canadian Coaches Can Support Muslim Athletes During Ramadan](#) – Winnipeg Newcomer Sport Academy - Guidance for supporting Muslim athletes.

[Sport for Life for Every New-to-Canada Participant 2.2](#) - Sport for Life - Outlines barriers and solutions for newcomers.

## **Body Image and Mental Health**

[Mental Health in Sport](#) – Coaching Association of Canada – eLearning for coaches on mental health support.

[BodySense](#) – Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport – eLearning on navigating body image.

[Body Confident Sport](#) – Body Confident Sport - Program to tackle negative body image.

[Take Action on Body Confidence: Help Girls Feel Strong and Capable in Sport](#) - Canadian Women & Sport - Guide to supporting girls' body confidence.

[Take Action on the Menstrual Cycle: Help Normalize Girls' Experiences in Sport](#) - Canada Women & Sport - Guide to normalizing the menstrual cycle in sport.

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