



How to... **'identify the right type of coach or leader for female sport and physical activity sessions'**

Why it's important

Having a good coach or leader is one of the most crucial elements to a successful project and is recognised as key to the popularity and participation levels of sessions amongst young women. One of the reasons for the drop-out stated by young females is that they don't like the person delivering the session.

Research with young females has shown that the attributes of the coach/leader is much more important than their gender. It is important therefore that projects carefully consider the type of person that is to deliver their women and girls activities in relation to both engagement and retention.



Factors to consider

Coach, leader or instructor

It's important to think about the type of practitioner that will deliver the activity – is a coach, leader or instructor more appropriate? For young women with little or no prior experience in sport, it is likely that a highly technical coach is not required and could be off-putting. For sports and activities with technical skills however, a coach may be more appropriate. Irrespective of this, the attributes of the person leading the session are the most important factor.

Female leaders can often be more responsive and have a better understanding of the needs of young women. They may relate to them better and make them feel comfortable. However, often women relate to male leaders just as well, or even better than to female leaders. Again, the personal attributes of the individual are the most important aspect to consider.

Attributes of a good coach/leader/instructor

It's important to remember that women who are new to physical activity are sometimes nervous about how they'll be coached, and can be embarrassed about their perceived lower level of ability. Delivering instructions in a warm, friendly way is really important. The role as the coach or leader is to encourage, support and engage the

participant. It's all about inclusivity, respect and making everyone feel comfortable regardless of ability. There's no formula for perfect coaching but there are several characteristics/attributes that successful coaches have when delivering activity to women and girls:

- Inspiring and encouraging
- Capacity to be a role model
- Knowledgeable and easy to understand
- Down to earth and 'real'
- Open and helpful
- Motivational and supportive
- Relaxed, friendly and approachable
- Ability to listen and be responsive
- Experienced, suitably qualified
- Skilled at the activity they are delivering
- Non-judgemental
- Mindful
- Committed
- Sociable.

The coach or leader will set the tone of the sessions. It is important that they are in tune with the social dynamics of the group they are working with and, more so for females than males, being attuned to the feelings of the young women is very important.



A lack of confidence is one of the key barriers for female participation and therefore the coach must be acutely aware of this and deliver activities in a style that can build levels of confidence and self-esteem. They should provide positive reinforcement and encouragement to the participants throughout the session. Issues relating to body image and self-consciousness are other factors that coaches need to be aware of.

“She’s clear, makes sure that you ‘get’ it.”

Student, Zumba

“She’s nice, not critical, teaches you how to do it, breaks it down and repeats, she makes mistakes too which makes us feel better!”

Focus group, Zumba

Building relationships with young women

When engaging young women from underserved communities in sport and activity, their relationship with the coach or leader is often one of the main reasons why they do or don’t decide to attend and whether they keep attending. It is important that the coach/leader is able to empathise with the young women and take time to understand their circumstances.

The most successful Us Girls projects have been where the participants see the coach/leader as a friend and not just somebody that delivers an activity session. It is important therefore that the coach or leader tries to build a relationship with the participants and makes a special effort to talk to those who have attended for the first time.

Young women are often interested in the background of their coach/leader and by sharing some personal experiences it’s often a good way to get them to see the coach as a role model and somebody that they can aspire to.

Young women will generally trust and relate to somebody they know as being members of their community more than somebody ‘helicoptering in’

and leaving again (who may not have a complete grasp of local challenges). Therefore, where possible, try and use a coach/leader from within the local community. It is important to have the same coach or leader and not different ones every week so that participants can build a relationship with them. It is important to choose a coach or leader who is dedicated to the sessions.

“I’d say our main thing is the skill of the staff we’ve got on board...it’s their ability to engage with young people and their skills in developing quality relationships.”

Project Manager

“I think the coaches have been one of the main reasons participants keep coming to sessions.”

Project Manager

“It was the WHO that made the difference, not the WHAT!”

Fit for Girls, Scotland



Case studies

Middlesbrough FC

The coach that was recruited to deliver multi-sport sessions as part of the Middlesbrough Us Girls project was appointed because of his experience in working with young women from underserved areas and his personal attributes that suited this type of work. The male coach had worked with women's groups before including with 'at risk' individuals such as ex-offenders and drug users. He also had the range of skills required to deliver multi-sport-type sessions. He was recruited in favour of an existing female sports coach who had great technical skills but fewer of the attributes identified above. It was felt that the male coach was more suited to this type of session and would deliver a more relaxed and informal session and be more understanding and responsive to the young women.

Southwark Us Girls

The female only boxing sessions are a big hit in Southwark. They are very popular with young women from the local area and much of this is attributed to the coach. She is a very successful female boxer herself, a qualified and experienced coach who also works for 'Fight for Change' and acts as a mentor. The females can relate to her and see her as somebody they can aspire to.

Top tips

- When identifying who is best placed to deliver your women and girls sessions, consider the attributes of the individual and their experience in working with this target group – this is often more important than their sporting technical knowledge and ability.
- Whilst there are some benefits to having a female coach, male coaches can also be as effective if they have the right attributes.
- Coaches/leaders are valued as role models and are appreciated for their skill, relaxed approach, helpfulness, ability to facilitate fun and learning, and ability to listen and be responsive to participants' needs.
- One of the key barriers to female participation is a lack of confidence – ensure that your coach/leader is mindful of this, can put participants at ease and provide positive reinforcement and encouragement throughout the session. Consider including activities that help to build confidence.
- Try and use a coach or leader from within the local community that is known and well respected in the area.

Further information

Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation: www.wsff.org.uk

sports coach UK: www.sportscoachuk.org

www.usgirls.org.uk

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