



How to... 'retain female participants and encourage lifelong participation'



Why it's important

Currently young women living in low income households in England are less than half as likely to participate in sport on a regular basis, hold club membership, volunteer, be coached or compete as those living in more affluent households. Therefore, it is vitally important to try and not only increase levels of participation in sport and physical activity but to also ensure that:

- Existing participants are retained – by making sessions so good that participants want to keep coming back time and time again (and bring their friends);
- Participants are equipped with the skills, confidence and knowledge to enable them to 'make their own way' in sport – either by joining a local gym, club/team or continuing activities independently, leading to lifelong participation.

This guide provides a short summary of some of the key factors we have found to be important in terms of retaining participants within project specific activities and beyond.

Participant Retention

- factors to consider

Essentially, participant retention is the product of sessions delivered at the right time, right place, right price, and, critically, in the right style. However, some of the key factors to consider include:

The sessions

- The sessions need to build a sense of ownership and belonging amongst group members – with opportunities for participants to feed back and have a say in how the sessions are shaped.
- Sessional branding and 'give-aways' can be used to build group identity.
- It is important to ensure that sessions are not purely focused on the sport/activity – females want to have fun with their friends so the inclusion of 'social time' is very important.
- Programme schedules should look to include specific 'high points' – such as an event, trip, festival or competition to aim towards.
- The use of incentives can provide a valuable retention tool. For example providing freebies at engagement days/festivals/taster sessions, rewards for regular attendance, prizes for competitions or promotional discounts such as buy three sessions get the fourth free/bring a friend for free has proved popular with young females.
- Provide opportunities for young females to develop their leadership skills/volunteering opportunities.
- Provide opportunities, for those who wish to do so, to take part in fun challenges or competitions at the right standard.

The coach/instructor

Within any sport and physical activity setting the role of the coach/leader is an extremely important factor, but in underserved areas, this is especially true. Young people living within underserved areas often face challenging, complex community and home circumstances. As a result they may have fragile self-esteem and confidence regardless of the image they

project. Recognising this, it is imperative that doorstep sport coaches are consistent, reliable and deliver sessions which are participant centred. Sports coaches/instructors working with females in underserved areas need to:

- Act as a positive rolemodel – ensuring they are passionate about the value of the activity yet empathise with the feelings and moods of the participants in a realistic way, taking pride in ensuring a great session is delivered.
- Have a good rapport and be able to interact well with participants, as well as having good delivery skills to ensure that sessions are fun and interesting.
- Provide the support and confidence to enable participants to make the next step.
- Be non-judgemental, positive and mentoring.
- Provide positive feedback about performance and check they are coming to the next session etc.
- Establish and agree clear ground rules and boundaries.
- Recognise the differing needs of participants and set personal goals.

Successful coaches are often local and know the social issues within the area, know key families and individuals, and can gain the respect of the participants. They care about the area and want to give something back to make it a better place.

Coaches/leaders need to recognise and respond to the needs of different groups of participants. For example for newcomers, coaches and leaders need to remember:

- The importance of welcoming and integrating the newcomers.
- To consider using a volunteer or established group member to 'buddy' the newcomer and ensure they are invited to the next session.
- Explain the ground rules and boundaries.
- Consider adapting the activity or rules (where appropriate) to ensure new members are included.



Whilst for more established group members, actions which have been found to minimise drop-out include:

- The inclusion of opportunities for participants to take part in a competition or special events at regular intervals.
- Setting personal goals and fun challenges.
- Providing opportunities for them to input into the sessions.
- Recognition – such as player/participant of the week or month.
- Providing information/opportunities for them to take part in a wider variety of activities and progression/exit routes – such as opportunities to participate in project based teams, referral on to local clubs/leagues where appropriate and also into volunteering, leadership, umpiring and coaching roles within the project.

Lifelong participation - factors to consider

As well as retaining participants for as long as possible, within specific projects and groups, it is essential to also provide them with the skills and knowledge to 'make their own way' in sport and physical activity – whether this be in terms of having the confidence to join a local team or club, or knowing where to go to play badminton with a friend, join a gym or exercise class or go for a run or cycle independently. Therefore, it is essential that coaches working with their groups also:

- Plan to increase participants' confidence to learn new skills.
- Visit sport and leisure venues – teach young people how to use them.
- Develop youth leadership through volunteering and devolved decision making.
- Show where sport and physical activity can be read about and watched.
- Connect to local clubs and events.
- Explain the value of life-long activity.
- Show how to do solo/informal activity.



Case studies

Retention

Us Girls projects have used a range of incentives to promote retention within their projects, including Us Girls branded gear (eg T-shirts, bags, watches), shopping vouchers, trips and other branded items. The Us Girls branded items are reported to have been well received by young women in the projects – providing a sense of belonging to a national programme. One Us Girls Project manager commented that:

“The [Us Girls] T-shirts have worked quite well. So we’ve used them as incentives, so if you did eight sessions or you wrote in a story for us, just did a little case study about your experiences, we rewarded them with a T-shirt or a hoodie.”

The Wigan Us Girls project has provided all their participants with a loyalty card which gets stamped each time they attend and so for example after attending six sessions they receive a kit bag and drinks bottle, after 12 sessions they receive an Us Girls T-shirt, after 30 sessions they receive gift vouchers and after 50 sessions one month's free gym membership.

Lifelong participation

To try and encourage and develop a sense of independence amongst their participants, the Us Girls Treyla project in Penzance includes physical visits to sports venues/leisure centres to teach their young participants how to use them.

The group leaders realised that their participants would need practical support to transition into independent activity in community and club settings. Therefore, the project worker booked for them to play badminton at the local leisure centre, which was a big step – as they were playing sport in a public place, using reception and changing rooms. To help transition participants into clubs, the project staff organised for Penzance Running Club to provide one-off events with them. Staff have also provided practical support, in terms of physically walking with them to a nearby sports club, giving them kit, walking with them each time until they get into a routine.



Chesterfield College Us Girls
Activity Programme

Top tips

- Ensure that sessions are fun, enjoyable and sociable – so participants want to keep coming back time and time again (and bring their friends).
- Sessions need to build a sense of ownership and belonging amongst group members – with opportunities for participants to feed back and have a say in how the sessions are shaped.
- Consider the use of incentives – which may take the form of tangible goodies, promotional discounts or trips/events to reward regular attendance or specific achievements.
- The role of the coach/leader is absolutely integral; they need to be able to build a rapport with participants, as well as having good delivery skills. They are often seen as a strong positive role model by participants.
- Projects need to provide participants with opportunities to develop their skills, confidence and knowledge so that they are able to 'make their own way in sport'.

Further information

www.usgirls.org.uk

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