



## Self-Esteem, Sport and Physical Activity

Self esteem is defined by the degree worth and competence that we attribute to ourselves.

Through sport, we may enhance our self esteem by having a positive image of our bodies and the physical skills and abilities that we develop. We feel positive self worth through the recognition that we receive from family and friends and the social relationships that develop as a result of our involvement in sport and physical activity.

Yet, we may be vulnerable to low self esteem in sport and physical activity if we perceive our body to be inadequate, unfit or inappropriate for our selected activity. We may feel that our self-worth is judged on our losses and wins versus our abilities and intentions. The intensive participation in sport may lead to social isolation and lack of family support. All of these negative emotions need to be refocused in order to build positive self-esteem.

Coaches, physical education teachers and active living leaders can positively influence self-esteem and provide girls and women with ongoing incentive to participate and personally succeed in physical activity endeavours.

### How Can Individuals Enhance Self-Esteem?

#### Coaches, Leaders and Teachers

#### WEB SITE RESOURCES

Canadian Athletes Esteem Team  
[www.esteemteam.com](http://www.esteemteam.com)  
Parks and Recreation Programs  
[www.highfive.org](http://www.highfive.org)

#### Relationships and Communication:

- Practice mutual respect and learn all participants' names
- Provide sincere, positive encouragement and recognize effort
- Listen to your athletes and participants. Acknowledge the feelings behind what a young woman is saying.
- Show unconditional regard: when a young woman misbehaves, dislike the behaviour, not the person
- Avoid sex-stereotyped activities and comments, such as 'don't act like a girl' or "you're just a tomboy"
- Avoid comments about body size and shape, reinforce comments about ability and skill.
- Praise girls for their skills and successes, instead of praising them for their appearance. Tell them 'you did a great job today' not 'you look great today'.
- Ask young athletes "how the game went" versus "did you win?" You may find that they speak of their personal best moments as the highlight and not the final score.
- Encourage young men to talk about feelings and to solve problems in non-violent ways
- Encourage young women to declare boundaries and to say no in an assertive not aggressive manner.
- Interact in intentionally inclusive ways: reject all discrimination or stereotyping based on gender, race, age, ethnicity, body size, ability or sexual orientation.

'Self-esteem isn't  
everything; it's just  
there's nothing  
without it..."  
  
-- Gloria Steinem  
  
*Revolution from Within:  
A Book of Self-Esteem*

### Tasks and Strategies:

- Present yourself as a positive role model and share your experiences.
- Introduce your athletes and participants to dynamic women leaders who convey strength and independence. All too often women are seen as chauffeurs or watergirls; they need to be seen as officials, coaches, and leaders.
- Encourage athletes and participants to set individual goals with realistic time frames so that success can be monitored and achieved.
- Use training logs so that goals and targets are in small steps and not only focused on competition.
- Provide positive assertiveness training examples or courses allowing the participant to "say what they want, when they want in the way they want"
- Profile all participants by highlighting their uniqueness, their determination and their successes in local articles, social nights, resume writing, group discussion, team athlete cards, "our famous" wall.
- Include family and friends by having them write a letter to an athlete about what they mean to them before going away on a tournament or event. Then have the athlete open the letters from home while on the road. Often writing a letter allows us to express our feelings.
- Have athletes or students make a scrapbook of their enjoyment of sport or physical activity capturing the essence of why they participate.
- Decrease competitive situations during learning
- Involve participants in making decisions and affecting outcome.
- Be clear where there are rules and where there are decisions to be made.
- Ensure that every participant experiences some form of success and that this is acknowledged at the time or within the season.
- Meet with parents to discuss values and attitudes toward physical activity and how you can work together to foster physical success and self-esteem
- Give young women and young men equal attention and equal air time.
- Forbid racist and sexist remarks, harassment, bullying and verbal and physical abuse. If a situation occurs, act immediately to correct it.
- If you suspect that a young woman has (or is developing) an eating disorder, help her get counselling immediately
- Provide young women with physical challenges. Ensure safety without overprotecting girls and young women (e.g. ensure safe routes to and from program sites, travel in groups, try co-ed teams and teaching, and provide safe, high-quality equipment).
- Give young women responsibilities and leadership opportunities
- Get involved. Find ways to influence your organization's support of young women.

### Programming

- Ensure early successes based on realistic, gradual progression
- Make activities relevant to young women: focus on co-operation, relationships, fun and skill development
- Allow participants to try different roles within the game or activity as opposed to always being only on one position on a team.



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## Self-Esteem

Self-esteem – a young woman's perception of self-worth – develops gradually as she matures and interacts with others. The younger years in a child's life are critical for producing positive self-esteem and may be influenced by personality, parenting techniques and role modelling. Adolescence is another critical period for development and preservation of positive self esteem especially for young women. If parents, teachers, coaches and others communicate approval, liking and respect, a child develops positive feelings of self-confidence and self-worth. Conversely, if significant others belittle a child and communicate that she is not worthwhile in her own right, he will tend to view herself as unworthy.

While self-esteem is most strongly developed at a young age, individuals and society continue to affect and influence self-esteem throughout our lives. It is never too late to alter one's perspective and encourage positive self-worth.

Low levels of self-esteem in young women may be the result of discrimination, sexism, inequities in all aspects of life, harassment, abuse, dysfunctional family life, a lack of female role models, poor parenting or the portrayal of women in the media.

Adolescent women with low self-esteem are more likely to suffer mental health problems (such as depression and eating disorders); to engage in high-risk behaviours; to have problems in school and in their relationships; to have negative body images and obsessions with weight, body size and shape; and to drop out of physical activity.

While every young woman is unique, recent Canadian studies paint a negative composite picture of self-esteem and young women in Canada today.

- Although a majority of young women say they feel good about themselves, young men consistently score higher on all measures of self-esteem.
- Young women lose self-esteem during the high school years; the gap between young men and young women increases throughout adolescence.
- Young women's self-esteem is more dependent on relationships (especially on families) than young men's.
- Young women are more likely to do nothing when bullied and to avoid confrontation at all costs.

In 1988, a National Task Force on Young Females and Physical Activity defined the problem of self-esteem and physical activity this way:

Females, beginning at an early age, under-value and underestimate their capacity (and potential) for competency in physical activity. This view is shared by others in society, including male peers. As a result, a girl's competency in physical activity constantly falls further behind her male peers. She may select only activities that are traditionally female, or worse, be turned off physical activity altogether.

There is good evidence to suggest that sport, active living and physical education can have a positive effect on self-esteem in adolescent women. Indeed, we have a moral responsibility to offer programs with ethical leadership that foster feelings of self-worth.



## How Can Organizations and Institutions Enhance Self-Esteem?

If sport, school and active living systems are serious about bolstering young women's self-esteem, they must confront gender inequities that are imbedded in the policies and practices of the system. Use this checklist to make your institution's physical activity more inclusive, accessible and empowering for young women.

### Promotion and Communication

- Portray sport, active living and physical education as co-operative, inclusive activities that encourage young women to develop a positive, active self-image.
- Use multi-cultural visuals of both sexes in all promotional material and cover both men's and women's events. Show a variety of shapes and sizes and depict young women succeeding in non-traditional activities.
- Use non-sexist language in all communications. (See *Words to Watch: A Few Suggestions for Treating Men and Women Athletes Equally in Sport Reporting and Commentary*)
- Examine the policies and practices of your organization. Does your organization promote gender equity and positive self-esteem. Does it forbid harassment, abuse and negative practices, such as public weigh-ins? Does it provide in-service training on the needs of young women? Does it promote healthy body images and realistic goals for athletes?
- Enact policies that prohibit harassment based on gender, age, ability, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity or marital status.
- Form an equity committee to spearhead policy and program changes.
- Enable women with children to stay involved. Offer flexible work hours to staff, and manageable tasks and reimbursement for childcare to volunteers.
- Provide affirmative action programs and professional development opportunities that encourage women to take on leadership and coaching roles.

### Programming

- Promote a healthy body image and healthy behaviours in all aspects of the program
- Examine injury statistics, trends and the long-term safety implications of advancing technology.
- Provide training sessions on gender-specific needs and influencing self-esteem to coaches and leaders.
- Provide accessible skill development opportunities, sports clubs and learning sessions for young women who are disadvantaged or physically challenged.

### Policy

#### AUTHORS

This article is based on a paper originally commissioned by CAAWS and written by Peggy Edwards. It was reviewed, revised and updated in 2003 by Dr. Julia Alleyne.

Copies of the original paper are available from the CAAWS office.

