Where are the Moms? Strategies to Recruit Female Youth Sport Coaches

By Krista C. Diedrich
The benefits of youth sport participation are numerous and well documented (Women’s Sports Foundation, 2020). Each year, millions of children participate in youth sport in the United States (Aspen Institute State of Play, 2018). A variety of sport opportunities are offered by youth leagues, organizations, clubs, park districts, and schools. According to the Aspen Institute’s State of Play (2018), approximately 70% of children ages 6 to 12 years participate in a team or individual sport at least one day during the year. The majority of these organizations rely heavily on parent volunteers to coach the youth teams, and it is estimated that there are more than 6.5 million youth sport coaches in the United States (Aspen Institute State of Play, 2016).

Coaches can play a significant role in getting youth, especially girls, involved in sports and continuing participation in sports (Cooky, 2009). However, according to Messner and Bozada-Deas (2009), the majority of youth sport coaches are men, and women make up only an estimated 27% of youth coaches. This percentage is even lower when it comes to coaching boys’ youth sports and decreases as boys and girls get older. Conversely, women hold the majority of manager roles (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009). Rather than actually coaching, women’s roles include duties such as “team mom,” coordinating team schedules, organizing snacks, and other organizational activities. The small percentage of female youth sport coaches is surprising and problematic considering the number of women who have participated in sports since the inception of Title IX. The coaching gender imbalance could send the wrong message to children and youth about power, gender, and leadership and reinforce the notion that sport is a male-dominated, male-run, and male-centered activity (LaVoi & Leberman, 2015). For children who are impressionable, seeing mostly men in positions of power in sports does little to challenge and change the status quo (LaVoi & Leberman, 2015). The purpose of this article is to describe the benefits of having female coaches and potential strategies to encourage more women to coach youth sports.

Title IX

In 1972, Title IX was a federally mandated law designed to provide everyone with equal access to any program that receives federal financial assistance, including sports. Since then, all public schools are required to provide girls the same sporting opportunities that were provided for boys (Women’s Sports Foundation, 2011, 2020). Since the inception of Title IX, there has been a 545% increase in the percentage of girls playing college sports and a 990% increase in the percentage of girls playing high school sports (Brooke-Marciniak & de Varona, 2016). However, growth in the number of female coaches has not increased at the same rate. In fact, the percentage of female coaches at the high school and college levels is actually lower now than immediately after Title IX was enacted (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012).

Presently, female coaches are overrepresented (>85%) in sports viewed as more feminine (e.g., gymnastics, dance, cheer) and all-girl teams (66%), but are highly underrepresented (<35%) in sports viewed as more masculine (e.g., baseball/softball, basketball, soccer, martial arts) in which girls are likely to face greater gender barriers for continued participation (Zarrett et al., 2019). In addition, the lack of women coaches also means girls have very few active female role models, therefore making it less likely that girls will view coaching as a viable career pathway or even as a volunteer opportunity in the future (LaVoi & Leberman, 2015).

Benefits and Positive Experiences

Female coaches are important role models for girls in sports. Researchers suggest that girls more readily identify with and see a female coach as a mentor and they can enhance their feelings of inclusion in a sporting environment (Ekholm et al., 2019). Further, female coaches can help counter negative cultural stereotypes about girls playing and coaching sports. When girls see women in leadership roles, this can help boost girls’ confidence, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and girls can also see what may be possible for them. Sport participation also offers opportunities for girls to increase their physical skills and strength. The Women’s Sports Foundation (2016) reports numerous benefits to sport participation for girls and women. These benefits include higher self-esteem and lower levels of depression, a greater sense of control of their physical safety and psychological well-being and learning achievement-oriented behavior that will help in the workplace.
The positive experiences gained through active participation in sports are not limited to the girls who engage in sports. Female coaches involved in coaching youth sport also express benefits. Mothers who coach stated that the additional role of coach enriched their lives and reported that spending more time together with their children, facilitating positive development of life skills, and providing a positive role model in leadership roles were all benefits to youth sport coaching (Leberman & LaVoi, 2011).

Challenges

There are challenges in recruiting and retaining female coaches across many sports organizations. A primary challenge is to change the status quo, where approximately 75% of all youth coaches are males who are former athletes. Research suggests that many women do not become involved in coaching due in part to a perceived lack of knowledge, skills, and confidence (LaVoi & Leberman, 2015). Some mothers do not think their skill sets are applicable to coaching nor do they perceive themselves as fit to coach. However, many mothers who were also athletes have extensive sport knowledge, and child-centered knowledge that is an important component of successful coaching. Additional challenges to mothers coaching youth sport include work/family/coach balance issues, societal stereotypes, and individual self-perceptions and fears (LaVoi & Becker, 2007).

Strategies

A report recently commissioned by the Women's Sports Foundation (2019) examined girls' sports development needs, experiences, and coaching practices and strategies that will best support girls' initiation and continued participation in sports. Findings from this report indicate that female coaches were key to girls' participation and retention in sports and noted challenges in recruiting female coaches. Women (many of whom have played sports) with children who played (or still currently play) sports are a readily available and knowledgeable, yet largely untapped, group of potential coaches. Parenting skills, such as planning, management, communication, organization, teaching, scheduling, and interpersonal and relational expertise, are all attributes of successful coaches.

Other researchers (LaVoi et al., 2009; Norman, 2012) have investigated ways to get more women involved in coaching by challenging current coaches to come up with strategies to increase the number of women in coaching at all levels. One influential strategy to encourage more
women and moms to coach is to have other female coaches as role models and mentors. This would help provide the motivation and inspiration for other moms to start coaching. In 2012, Norman interviewed high-level female coaches in the United Kingdom to gain insight into their strategies for recruiting more moms as coaches. In addition to increasing the number of role models, strategies included having greater frequency and quality of coaching opportunities in the form of structured programs designed to support and increase the number of female coaches, the creation of supportive networks, and intentionally seeking out women to coach (especially in sports dominated by men).

A study by LaVoi and Leberman (2015) offered a different set of strategies specific to engaging mothers as sport coaches. These strategies include:

- **Ask and Invite Women**: People are more likely to volunteer if asked. Organizations should be proactive and invite mothers into coaching at the outset. When mothers are involved in coaching young children, they will gain confidence to continue coaching as the children get older.
- **Involve and Invite Girls Into Coaching Early**: Millions of girls are involved in youth sport and thousands of older girls play high school sports. Invite these girls to coach youth sports to build their confidence in coaching from a young age. Large sport organizations could build in a teenage coach mentor program to build interest and confidence early.
- **Include Female Mentorship**: Create a buddy-system and pair up new coaches with a more experienced female mentor or group of mentors.
- **Include a Co-Coaching Option**: This option allows a flexible arrangement that accommodates women who are juggling multiple roles. This option could allow for shared responsibility as to who leads practices to make scheduling easier.
- **Offer All-Female Coaching Clinics**: Most coaching clinics are male dominated, which can be intimidating. So, offer female friendly clinics that are welcoming.
- **Appeal to Altruism**: Coaching is a meaningful way to give back to your child, family, and community. Coaching at the youth level is volunteerism, the same as charitable committee work, community organizing, or serving in the church.
- **Relationships**: Emphasize the possibility for a better relationship with your child: Coaching provides additional time to spend with children in a different context. This allows new ways for relationships to grow and to understand your child in a new way.
• **Make Apparent Mother Skill Translations:** Skills needed to successfully parent are very similar to coaching skills, such as planning, management, communication, organization, teaching, scheduling, and interpersonal and relational expertise.

• **Impart the Impact of Being a Role Model:** Many mothers felt strongly about being a positive role model for their, and other, children. Female role models in the sport environment leave lasting impressions on girls.

A number of strategies suggested by elite female coaches and mother-coaches at the youth sport level were shared to help everyone involved in youth sport to develop best practices and/or policies to recruit more mother-coaches and ultimately lead to greater gender balance across leadership roles in youth sport (LaVoi & Leberman, 2015; Norman, 2012).

**Conclusion**

Millions of boys and girls participate in sports each year. Since the inception of Title IX, girls have endless opportunities to participate in sports. However, these opportunities and advances have not yet fully been realized. Increasing the number of female coaches would be an important step in the advancement in girls’ sports. Female youth sport coaches allow youth to see women in sport leadership roles at younger ages. These coaches not only serve as role models for girls in sports, but also act as mentors and can enhance girls' feelings of inclusion in a sporting environment (Ekholm et al., 2019). Additionally, when girls see women in leadership roles, this can help boost girls’ confidence, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and to see what is possible for them.

Girls are not the only ones who benefit from female coaches. Mothers who coach stated that the additional role of coach enriched their lives through being able to spend more time with their children, promoting important life skills, and providing a positive role model (Leberman & LaVoi, 2011). In order to help future generations of girls view coaching at all levels as a fruitful endeavor, the number of women involved in all youth sport roles, including the coach, must be addressed. Sport leagues, organizations, and youth sport networks need to be intentional about inviting women to coach and be part of more leadership roles. To help in the recruitment process of female coaches, offer female mentors, all-female coaching clinics, co-coaching opportunities, and make females feel they are welcome. This will help boys and girls see that women can thrive in these roles and offer inspiration for future female coaches.

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**References**


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