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Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

Building Leadership Skills in Middle School Girls through Interscholastic Athletics. ERIC Digest.....	2
WHY FOCUS ON GIRLS?.....	2
WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?.....	3
START EARLY: ATHLETICS AND LEADERSHIP ABILITIES IN MIDDLE.....	3
IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL PERSONNEL.....	5
CONCLUSION.....	5
REFERENCES.....	5



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Building Leadership Skills in Middle School Girls through Interscholastic Athletics. ERIC

Digest.

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The transition to intermediate or middle school, beginning as early as grade four, is often challenging due to an increase in academic load, additional choices in academic curricula, an expectation of increased autonomy, and instruction by subject area teachers. Because students change classes and teachers several times a day, maintaining personal relationships is often difficult (LeCroy & Daley, 2001). Middle school-aged students must, at the same time, contend with intense and rapid changes in physical, emotional, and cognitive development, social approval, a large student body, and a student government as well as choices in sports programs and extracurricular activities.

Harter (1986) found that change in self-esteem is most likely to occur during times of transition, such as changing schools. Changes in one's environment are usually the catalyst for changes in one's self-assessment, resulting in an increase or a decrease in self-esteem. The re-evaluation occurs due to changes in self-perceptions of competence or incompetence based upon the degree of mastery of new developmental tasks, a comparison of oneself to a different group of students, and/or the creation of new social networks.

WHY FOCUS ON GIRLS?

Eccles et al (1993) found that girls had lower self-esteem than boys in middle school and the gender gap grew when girls transitioned from middle school to high school. Harter (1999) posits explanations for the decline in self-esteem: (1) girls are more negatively affected by experiences with failure than are boys. The sensitivity may limit their willingness to take risks for rewards or advanced opportunities; (2) many girls experience a conflict between feminine goals and competitive achievements, resulting in increased anxiety in competitive situations; (3) girls are confronted with societal and school structures that favor boys and with pressure to conform to gender roles that limit their exploration; (4) girls are less satisfied with body image compared to boys, and this is compounded by pubertal changes; and (5) girls are more likely to worry about their problems than boys and this tendency to worry puts girls at risk for depression.

TITLE IX EDUCATIONAL AMENDMENTS OF 1972

Many middle schools offer interscholastic sports programs for boys and girls. Students obtain a position on a team by competing in a "try-out," a new experience for most adolescents. Once selected, membership requires a commitment to compete in several games per week and practice for many hours daily.

Sports teams for girls flourished as a result on the Title IX Educational Amendments of 1972. Often referred to as Title IX, this federal law requires that almost all educational institutions provide educational opportunities to male and female students equitably, including their athletic programs and offerings (www.womenssportsfoundation.org). Title IX seeks to level the playing field for both genders by mandating equal opportunities for participation.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

Dobosz and Beaty (1999) assert that leadership is the capability to guide others in the achievement of a common goal. Leadership characteristics consist of many personal qualities, including self-esteem, determination, organizational aptitude, focus, tolerance, decisiveness, self-discipline, charisma, time management, self-confidence, social competence, communicating a "vision," and sensitivity to the needs of others, among other qualities (Dobosz & Beaty, 1999). This digest will address empowerment, self-esteem, and time management.

START EARLY: ATHLETICS AND LEADERSHIP ABILITIES IN MIDDLE

SCHOOL GIRLS Middle school is the typical time for introduction to competitive sports for most adolescents. Thus, research collected at the "start gate" of middle school, if you will, will establish a benchmark of the impact of athletics on the development of leadership skills in girls. Yet, although Title IX has existed for over 30 years, limited research exists in examining this impact (Dobosz & Beaty, 1999). Leadership skills that are instilled during early adolescence in girls evolve throughout adolescence and into adulthood (Dorrance, 1996; Simon & Martens, 1979; Shields & Bredemeir, 1995). In fact, 80% of the female executives in Fortune 500 companies self-identified as having been athletes and/or "tomboys" in adolescence (Feminist Research Center, 2001).

Membership on an athletic team is one avenue to acquire, assess, refine, and demonstrate leadership skills developmentally appropriate for middle school students. Participation in sports extends the nurturance of leadership by teaching girls to cooperate with their teammates and opponents as well as abide by the rules (Horn, 1985). Girls learn about taking turns, sharing play time, and valuing rules. A sense of fair play is instilled. They learn that without rules and regulations, the game would become unfair. If the players believe that everyone contributes to the team's success and feel as though they are being treated fairly, then each player's athletic ability and psychological stamina are maximized (Gregg, 1999).

Athletic team membership enables girls to control and shape their lives, to feel empowered, in ways that other middle school girls feel that they cannot (Dorrance, 1996). Through participation in sports, girls tend to have higher levels of self-confidence, increased self-esteem, and lower levels of anxiety compared to

non-athletic girls (Simon & Martens, 1979). Furthermore, the athlete's competitive spirit steers many team members to vie for student leadership positions such as team captain or to seek election to the student government (Dobosz & Beaty, 1999). Hart (2002) found that, in a sample of 108 girls in one middle school, girls on the soccer team held more leadership positions in school organizations and attained more leadership positions within the student council compared to non-athletic girls. Hart concluded that for the middle school-aged female athletes, confidence and empowerment are acquired through competitive sports and school leadership.

Learning effective time management is a major step towards leadership development for the middle school female athlete. She must learn early that time is finite, that she must set priorities, and that she must sacrifice experiences enjoyed by her peers. She must manage an athletic schedule, fulfill academic and extracurricular demands, participate in family activities and responsibilities, and attend to personal needs during the after-school hours. The mastery of time management, setting priorities, and multitasking are early stepping-stones to leadership.

The effects of self-esteem in student athletes and non-athletes have been investigated in relation to age, gender, and type of sport, among other factors. Findings are relatively consistent in demonstrating that self-esteem for athletes is higher than for non-athletes (Simon & Martens, 1979). For instance, Hoganbruen (1999) developed a 4-week sports camp for young adolescent girls to determine the effect on self-esteem. Significant and positive changes in global self-esteem were found. Moreover, improved self-esteem contributed to the perception of personal competence.

An increase in self-esteem nurtured through athletic competition assists middle school girls to cope with the negative influences and social turmoil experienced in their daily lives. For adolescent girls, in particular, participation in sports has demonstrated an increase in self-esteem except for sports with rigid body type requirements (e.g., gymnastics). A girl who feels good about herself physically tends to present herself as a socially strong person. For example, the Women's Sports Foundation (www.womenssportsfoundation.org) has proposed that girls who have high self-esteem are less likely to become pregnant as teenagers and are more likely to leave an abusive relationship than girls with low self-esteem. High self-esteem is no guarantee that middle school girls will make the right decisions, but it provides a strong foundation, along with peer support of team members, for resisting many negative pressures.

Impressionable, athletic, middle school girls need positive and empowering role models to emulate while developing personal and interpersonal skills. Fortunately, coaches, officials, and parent volunteers are additional role models of leadership that student athletes are exposed to, compared to the general student body. In addition to the leaders in their daily lives, contemporary women athletes are the women that girls consider empowering leaders too. Athletes such as Mia Hamm, Marion Jones, Rebecca Lobo, and Venus and Serena Williams surmounted obstacles and emerged as role

models of leadership and athletic success.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL PERSONNEL

Dobosz and Beaty (1999) conclude that athletic participation and early leadership experiences may improve a girl's leadership skills. The initiative to lead is instilled through athletic achievement, competition, and self-confidence (Shields & Bredemeir, 1995). Development of leadership ability through athletic competition was not the original intention of school districts offering interscholastic sports. However, the emerging connection between athletic participation and leadership skills may assist school personnel to intentionally incorporate leadership training for girls with athletic ability. Coaches and parent volunteers should work to develop leadership skills in adolescent girls with the support of school personnel. Research supports that an early investment in leadership training can yield lifelong benefits for the athlete and society (Dorrance, 1996; Simon & Martens, 1979; Shields & Bredemeir, 1995).

In the spirit of No Child Left Behind, girls, regardless of athletic ability, may benefit from intentional leadership development. Although opportunities exist for the athlete to develop leadership skills, school personnel must not overlook the non-athletic girl. Traditionally, girls have had few formal opportunities to develop leadership skills. Girls should be encouraged to attend leadership seminars as well as participate in recreational sports and extracurricular activities in school and in the community. School personnel must prepare all girls to lead.

CONCLUSION

For the middle school-aged female athlete, self-esteem, empowerment, and self-confidence are often bolstered through participation in interscholastic competitive sports. These traits are also traits of leadership. Many contributing factors and people mold the student athlete into a leader but the process must be intentional and must start in middle school to support girls in achieving their full leadership potential. Thus, school personnel are advised to maintain athletic programs for girls and coaches are advised to instill intentional leadership skills in female athletes. Threats of budget cuts that would endanger interscholastic athletics must be re-examined. The reduction or elimination of athletic programs may stifle athletic ability and leadership development for today and tomorrow.

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