

Inclusion Starts with Listening: Meeting Girls Where They Are

By: Alicia Pelton, Program Manager of CoachingHER®

Inclusion isn't just about offering opportunities, it's about ensuring those opportunities fit the girls we serve. It's about more than adding another team to the schedule or posting a flyer. True inclusion starts when we stop assuming and start listening.

This month's Coaching HER® theme, Every Girl in Sport, reminds us that effective coaching begins with understanding who we're coaching and recognizing that every girl's identity, background, and lived experience shape her ability to participate, engage, and thrive.



*Girls who feel they belong are
three times more likely to stay
in sport.*

Canadian Women & Sport, 2022

A Softball Story: When Listening Changed Everything

When I (Alicia Pelton, Program Manager CoachingHER®) first became an athletic director, our high school softball program was on life support. We could barely field a team. The few who did play were burned out, demoralized, and losing every game. Year after year, new coaches came and went, all focused on "turning the program around" by pushing harder and chasing wins. But they never stopped to ask the most important question: What's really keeping girls from showing up? When I arrived, I started asking. I listened to the girls, really listened, and what I learned changed everything. Some told me their parents worked evenings, and they were responsible for watching younger siblings. Others had weekend jobs that made Saturday morning games impossible. A few quietly admitted they had no way to get to or from the field, which was off-site. And some came from cultures where expectations for daughters looked very different from those for sons.

It wasn't that these girls didn't want to play softball, it was that we hadn't built a program that worked for their lives.

Coaching With Inclusion in Mind

I recruited a young female coach who was eager to learn and willing to listen. Together, we made small but intentional changes. We moved most games off Saturdays, arranged busing to the field and rides home after practice, and made sure every player could be home by six. We began asking girls directly about what they needed to participate, not what we thought they needed.

By spring, something incredible happened. We didn't just fill one team; we filled two!

Girls who once said they couldn't play were now wearing uniforms, laughing, and building something together.

Three years later, the numbers held steady — and they were finally winning games.



Girls who feel heard by coaches are 2.5× more likely to stay in sport.
Aspen Institute Project Play, 2020

That success wasn't about talent or luck. It was about listening. It was about inclusion.

Inclusion Is a Coaching Skill

This story isn't unique. Across every sport, girls face barriers that often go unseen.

Research shows that girls from lower-income households, girls of color, and girls with disabilities are less likely to participate in sport (Canadian Women & Sport, 2024). Those gaps aren't about ability, they're about access, environment, and connection.

As coaches, we have the power to close those gaps by recognizing the real-world challenges our athletes face and adjusting our environments to meet them.

That's what inclusion looks like in practice, not as a policy, but as a relationship.



Coaches trained in girl-centered practices strengthen girls' confidence, well-being, and sense of belonging, all critical for keeping them in sport.

-Tucker Center, 2020

Putting Inclusion into Action

Here are a few ways to start:



Ask, Don't Assume. Take time to understand each athlete's story — her barriers, goals, and motivations.



Adjust What You Can. Small shifts in schedule, transportation, or expectations can remove big barriers.



Create Shared Ownership. Involve athletes in decisions about practice, uniforms, or team culture. When girls have a voice, they have a stake.



Model the Mindset. When coaches demonstrate care and flexibility, girls learn that their experiences matter — and that's what keeps them in the game.

Learn More: Coaching HER® Foundational Module 5: Recognizing Girls' Identities

This module explores how race, gender expression, culture, and other factors shape girls' experiences in sport and how coaches can create environments where every girl feels seen and valued.

When we take time to learn who our athletes are beyond the scoreboard, we're not just coaching teams, we're shaping futures.

References

- Aspen Institute Project Play (2020). Stay of Play Report 2020.
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