Listening to Girls:
Turning Feedback into Engagement

By The Coaching HER® Team

Empowering girls' engagement in sport doesn't start with another drill or a new program. ***It starts with listening.*** The first step in creating lasting engagement is understanding what keeps girls in sport and what pushes them away. Empowerment comes from meeting girls where they are, reducing barriers, and giving them ownership. When girls feel heard and supported, participation can turn into belonging, and belonging is a key factor that keeps them in the game.

The data underscores the urgency:

> **68% of girls** say a fear of feeling judged is a barrier to participation.
>
> (Women in Sport, 2022)

> **64% of girls** give up sport by the end of puberty.
>
> (Women in Sport, 2021)

> **Girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds** are less likely to participate due to cost, responsibilities, and fear of not fitting in.
>
> (Ljungmann et al., 2024)

When girls leave sport, we often look to solutions — more clinics, more communication, more recruitment — but too often we skip the simplest and most powerful question: *What do girls say they need?*

Why Listening Matters

Listening to girls isn't about checking a box, it's about building trust, understanding context, and creating environments that meet girls' needs for care, competence, and choice.

The Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport ecological systems model reminds us that girls' experiences in sport are influenced by four interconnected levels:

- **Individual:** Confidence, enjoyment, and perceived ability.
- **Interpersonal:** Relationships with coaches, parents, and peers.
- **Organizational:** Schedules, uniforms, cost, and accessibility.
- **Societal:** Gender norms and stereotypes that define who "belongs" in sport.

When organizations listen to girls' experiences across these layers, they can uncover patterns from transportation issues to cultural barriers that no attendance report or registration count will ever reveal.

How to Gather Feedback that Matters

For governing bodies and clubs, feedback doesn't have to mean massive research projects or complex surveys. What matters is making feedback intentional, consistent, and safe.

Here are a few proven ways to start:

- **End-of-season surveys:** Ask girls what made them want to stay, what made it hard to keep going, and what one change would make sport more enjoyable.
- **Listening circles:** Host small, informal sessions where girls can talk openly with coaches or administrators.
- **Quick polls or check-ins:** Use digital tools or simple paper cards to ask short questions mid-season, when engagement can still be improved.
- **Youth leadership groups:** Create spaces where girls help shape programming or provide feedback on policies.

The Nike Coaching Girls Guide (2024) emphasizes that feedback must feel safe, free from judgment or consequence, and that girls are more likely to speak up when they know their input leads to change. Similarly, the Women Win Girls in Motion Playbook (2023) recommends "looping back" by sharing outcomes: let girls know what you heard, what you're changing, and why their voice mattered.

Making Sense of the Data

Collecting feedback is only the beginning. Analyzing and responding is where the real transformation happens. Start by **looking for themes** across responses:

- Are girls asking for more flexibility or choice?
- Are barriers tied to cost, confidence, or safety?
- Do certain ages, locations, or communities show higher dropout?

For governing bodies, aggregated results can **reveal systemic trends** like scheduling conflicts that disadvantage girls, uniform rules that exclude cultural or body diversity, or environments where teasing or body talk goes unaddressed. These are often sport-wide cultural patterns, not isolated team issues. The key is to share insights back down the pipeline with local clubs, coaches, and even parents so everyone understands the role they play in creating inclusive, engaging environments.

From Listening to Action

Listening is a skill that takes practice. It's not just about asking questions; it's about creating a culture where girls expect to be heard.

Coaches can start small: ask one athlete, *"What motivates you to keep showing up?"* or *"What would make practices even better?"* Those two minutes of curiosity can transform a season.

Organizations can go bigger: build reflection into existing structures, like annual coach education or club surveys. Use what girls share to inform program design, communication strategies, and leadership pathways.

When we listen, really listen, we discover that girls don't need us to guess what will keep them in the game. They're already telling us.

Take the Next Step

Explore Foundational Module 4: Empowering Girls' Engagement to learn how to turn listening into leadership and create sport environments where every girl feels seen, supported, and motivated to play and stay. Because when girls feel heard, they stay engaged. And when they stay engaged, they thrive in sport and beyond.

References

- Women in Sport. (2022). Reframing sport for teenage girls: Tackling teenage disengagement — Executive summary
- Women in Sport. (2021). Girls who give up sport by the end of puberty: Understanding the dropout rate.
- Ljungmann, C. K., Christensen, J. H., Johnsen, H. R., Klinker, C. D., & Pawlowski, C. (2024). Perceived barriers to sports participation among adolescent girls from low socioeconomic status neighbourhoods.