

Five Fundamentals Every Coach Should Know to Keep Girls in Sport

By The Coaching HER® Team

Why Coaches Matter More Than Ever

Coaches are one of the **most powerful influencers in a girl's decision to stay in sport — or to leave it**. Research from the Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport, led by Dr. Nicole M. LaVoi, Director of the Tucker Center, shows that coaching style, culture, and connection can either build a girl's lifelong love for sport or end it prematurely. And the stakes are high: by age 14, girls drop out of sport at twice the rate of boys ([Women in Sport, 2023](#)). Many of the reasons are preventable — lack of belonging, poor communication, limited leadership opportunities, and environments that undervalue girls' participation.

The good news? Coaches can develop the tools to change the story. Here are five fundamentals, backed by research and lived experience, that keep girls in the game.

1. Create a Culture of Belonging

Girls thrive when they feel they are part of something bigger than themselves. The Tucker Team's research shows that belonging is a prerequisite for retention. Girls are more likely to stay in sport when they feel valued, connected, and supported — regardless of skill level. In one Tucker Center study, "a climate of care" was repeatedly cited as a top factor in positive sport experiences for girls.

From HER Voice:

"When my coach took the time to know me and not just my position, I wanted to come to every practice."

— Athlete, Foundational Module feedback

Action Steps for Coaches:

1. Learn and use every athlete's name quickly.
2. Pair new players with a buddy for their first few practices.
3. Celebrate small wins publicly, from effort in drills to supporting a teammate.

Data Spotlight:

- Girls who feel they belong are 3x more likely to stay in sport ([Canadian Women & Sport, 2022](#)).
- 43% of girls say not feeling welcome is a reason they consider quitting ([Women in Sport, 2023](#)).
- 70% of girls say friendships and team connection are the reason they stay in sport. ([Women's Sports Foundation, 2020](#))

Why It Matters



Belonging fuels confidence, motivation, joy in sport, and it starts with the everyday actions coaches take to show every girl she matters.

2. Focus on Skill Mastery - Not Just Winning

Girls value competition but also the process of learning and improving. When coaches prioritize learning and progress instead of just outcomes, they create an environment where girls feel competent and capable, two key drivers of intrinsic motivation. Overemphasis on the scoreboard can discourage those still developing.

From *HER* Family:

“My daughter used to dread games because she thought she wasn’t good enough. Her coach shifted the focus to her personal improvement — and she’s loving it again.” – Parent, Foundational Module feedback

Action Steps for Coaches:

1. Use “personal best” challenges instead of only comparing athletes to each other.
2. Rotate positions so all players develop a variety of skills.
3. Give skill-focused, encouraging feedback that highlights what went well and identifies one area to improve.

Data Spotlight:

- Girls aged 6–12 (34%) and 13–17 (38%) played at higher regular rates in 2023 than any year since at least 2012 ([Aspen Institute Project Play, 2024](#)).
- Girls value progress and development as key drivers of motivation ([Tucker Center Research Report, 2018](#)).
- Coaches who focus on skill mastery over winning see higher enjoyment and retention ([Tucker Center Research Report, 2018](#))

Why It Matters

→ When girls feel their growth is valued, they stay engaged, motivated, and willing to push their limits no matter the score.

3. Integrate Body-Confident Coaching Practices

Research has uncovered that low body confidence is the #1 reason girls quit sports ([Dove & Nike, 2024](#)). The Tucker Center’s collaboration Body Confident Coaching, shows that focusing on what an athlete’s body can do rather than how it looks leads to better self-esteem and performance.

From *HER* Coach:

“Shifting the conversation from how athletes look to what they can do has completely changed my team’s energy.”
– Coach, Body Confident Coaching feedback

Action Steps for Coaches:

1. Ban negative comments about weight, size, or shape from everyone, including yourself.
2. Ensure uniforms and gear fit all body types comfortably.
3. Create a Body Talk Free Zone

Data Spotlight:

- 61% of girls say body image concerns keep them from sport ([Women in Sport, 2022](#)).
- Nearly 1 in 3 girls say body-related comments undermine confidence, with greater impact for girls with disabilities, racialized girls, and those wearing visible religious attire. ([Canadian Women & Sport, 2024](#))
- Coach-led programs that challenge appearance pressures can reduce body dissatisfaction and improve enjoyment in sport ([Matheson et al., 2023](#))

Why It Matters



When girls feel comfortable and confident in their bodies, they play with freedom, enjoy sport more and stay in sport longer.

4. Encourage Leadership Opportunities

Leadership roles in sport translate into confidence, career success, and community involvement later in life. The Tucker Center's Research Report (2018) highlights that giving girls agency, such as leading warm-ups, mentoring peers, or contributing to practice plans which builds confidence that translates into education and workplace success. Plus, it sends a clear message: girl's voices matter

From HER Coach:

"Once my players started leading warm-ups, they took ownership of the whole practice and each other." –
Coach, Foundational Module feedback

Action Steps for Coaches:

1. Assign rotating "practice captains" to lead warm-ups.
2. Invite athletes to design a drill once a season.
3. Pair older players with younger teams for mentoring.

Data Spotlight:

- 94% of women executives played sports, many in leadership roles ([EY & espnW, 2014](#)).
- Girls with role models "like them" are 68% more likely to stay in sport ([Women in Sport, 2023](#)).
- Peer leadership opportunities are linked to higher retention for girls in sport. ([Tucker Center Research Report, 2018](#)).

Why It Matters



When girls lead, they learn to trust themselves and others learn to trust them.

5. Tailor Training to the Developmental Stage

A 12-year-old and an 8-year-old may wear the same uniform, but their physical, emotional, and social needs differ dramatically. Mismatch between training demands and a girl's physical or cognitive readiness can lead to burnout, injury, and dropout. Developmentally appropriate coaching respects the athlete's growth stage while still challenging her to improve.

From HER Family:

“

When my coach adjusted the drills so my daughter didn't feel behind, she came home smiling instead of frustrated. That was the turning point.”

– Parent, Foundational Module feedback

Action Steps for Coaches:

1. Use small-group drills for new skills to reduce embarrassment.
2. Offer choice in activities to increase autonomy.
3. Schedule regular one-on-one check-ins to understand needs.

Data Spotlight:

- By primary school, 69% of girls rate their self-belief as “good or very good” vs. 79% of boys — but the gap widens with age ([Women in Sport, 2023](#)).
- Individualized coaching during early adolescence makes girls 30% more likely to continue playing into high school ([Canadian Women & Sport, 2022](#)).
- Girls who feel competent are more likely to stay in sport. ([Tucker Center Research Report, 2018](#))

Why It Matters



Matching coaching to a girl's stage of development ensures challenge without overwhelming them, thereby keeping sport both fun and sustainable.

Coaches as Game-Changers

When girls drop out of sport, we lose future leaders, innovators, and changemakers. The fundamentals above are not just retention strategies, they are investments in the next generation's confidence, health, and leadership.

Every practice is a chance to show a girl she belongs, she can grow, and she has a future in sport. And when coaches commit to this work, they don't just keep girls in the game they help shape the leaders of tomorrow.

References

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