

Back to Basics: Leading with Belonging and Opportunity

By The Coaching HER® Team

September is the reset button in sport — a chance for leaders to re-ground in the fundamentals that matter most. Strong seasons don't start with rankings or results; they start with creating spaces where every girl feels she belongs. Girls who feel they belong are three times more likely to stay in sport (Canadian Women & Sport, 2021), and yet by age 14, they drop out at twice the rate of boys (Women's Sports Foundation, 2018; Canadian Women & Sport, 2021).

As a sport leader, you set the tone. Girls thrive in environments where they are seen, heard, and supported. Inclusive, body-positive team cultures show **25% higher retention** (Canadian Women & Sport, 2024). Representation also matters: when girls see women in leadership, retention improves by 33% (Women in Sport, 2021). And when girls feel heard by their coaches, they are **2.5x more likely to stay in sport** (Aspen Institute Project Play, 2024).

What Leaders Can Do This Season:

- **Align Policies With Equity:** Review uniforms, scheduling, and facilities. Uniform policies that don't account for comfort or religious dress disproportionately push girls out (Canadian Women & Sport, 2022).
- **Invest in Coach Education:** Less than half of coaches have ever received training on gender equity, body image, or mental health (Canadian Women & Sport, 2022). Leaders can change that by requiring girl-centered training, which is proven to strengthen girls' confidence, safety, and belonging (Tucker Center Research Report, 2018).
- **Make Listening a Habit:** Encourage coaches to ask girls what they need to feel safe and supported. Research shows 80% of girls cite a positive coach relationship as the top reason they keep playing (Aspen Institute Project Play, 2024).
- **Boost Visibility:** Representation matters. 80% of girls say they would stay in sport longer if they had role models (Canadian Women & Sport, 2022). Highlight women coaches and leaders in your communications, events, and recognition programs.
- **Celebrate Belonging, Not Just Winning:** 70% of youth quit sport by age 13, most often due to lack of fun or exclusion (Project Play, 2024). Make recognition for inclusive, joyful environments as visible as championship banners.

This season, going "back to basics" means remembering that your first job is keeping girls in the game. When we commit to equity, belonging, and development-first environments, we don't just build stronger girls — we build stronger futures.

References

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