

From Sidelines to Lifelines — How Parents Keep Girls in Sport for Life

By The Coaching HER® Team

Why Parents Are the Game-Changers

By age 14, girls drop out of sport at **twice the rate of boys** ([Women's Sports Foundation, 2018](#)). Often, it's not about losing interest, it's about losing access, confidence, or a sense of belonging.

The benefits of staying in sport are clear: girls who remain active enjoy **better mental health, stronger friendships, higher academic achievement**, and even **career advantages** later in life ([Tucker Center Research Report, 2018](#)). Yet these outcomes don't happen by accident. They happen because parents create the conditions for girls to stay in the game.

Research from the Tucker Center and others shows parents are the **most influential factor** in whether girls persist in sport more than coaches, facilities, or talent level. Here's how to make that influence count.

1. Lead By Doing

Girls are more likely to be active when their parents, especially mothers, are active themselves ([Tucker Center Research Report, 2018](#)). Your example sends a powerful, lasting message.

Coaching HER® Tip: *Share activities together from bike rides to fun runs to show that movement is a normal, enjoyable part of life.*

2. Cheer for the Process, Not Just for the Score

When the focus is only on winning, girls can feel pressured and lose the joy of play. Praising effort, grit, and teamwork fosters resilience and a growth mindset. Girls who feel competent in their sport are more likely to keep playing — showing that valuing effort over outcomes is directly tied to retention ([Tucker Center Research Report, 2018](#)).

Coaching HER® Tip: *Swap “Did you win?” for “What was your favorite moment?” or “What did you learn today?”*

3. Remove the Roadblocks

Sometimes the barriers are obvious like cost, transportation, or gear. Other times, they're subtle, a lack of nearby programs, female coaches, or flexible schedules.

Coaching HER® Tip: *Explore community leagues, scholarship programs, or gear-sharing options. Organize carpools early in the season to prevent missed practices turning into missed seasons.*

4. Protect Her Confidence

Body image is one of the leading reasons girls leave sport during adolescence ([Dove & Nike, 2024](#)). Even well-meaning appearance-based comments can chip away at her desire to play. And remember—she's listening when you talk about your own body, too. It's hard not to, but trying to limit negative self-talk shows her that bodies are meant to be appreciated for what they do, not how they look.

Coaching HER® Tip: *Focus on what her body can do, not how it looks. Replace “You look fit” with “Your passes were right on target” or “Your endurance really showed today.”*

5. Encourage Sport Sampling

Early specialization might seem like the fast track to success, but it can lead to burnout, injury, and dropout. Multi-sport participation builds physical literacy, diverse skills, and broader social networks ([Tucker Center Research Report, 2018](#))).

Coaching HER® Tip: *Support short-term experiences in new activities. Even a weekend clinic in a different sport can spark interest and confidence.*

The Long Game

Keeping girls in sport is about far more than this season's wins. It's about building the habits, skills, and confidence that last a lifetime.

- **94% of women in the C-suite played sport** ([EY & espnW, 2014](#))
- **85% of women who played competitive sport say it gave them critical career skills** ([Deloitte, 2023](#)).

Be her reason to stay in sport. The rides, the pep talks, the sideline cheers, they're not just keeping her in the game, they're shaping the rest of her life.

References

- Tucker Center for Research on Girls & Women in Sport (2018). [Tucker Center Research Report: Developing Physically Active Girls: An Evidence-based Multidisciplinary Approach.](#)
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