

Utah Girls, Young Women, and Physical Activity: What Utahns Need to Know

RESEARCH SUMMARY

UTAH WOMEN & LEADERSHIP Project

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The benefits of physical activity are clear, with physical, mental, and emotional benefits. Yet with thousands of Utah girls and women participating at lower levels than boys and men, change is needed. Addressing the barriers to participation will have an impact. The way forward requires parental involvement and role-modeling, asking girls and women what they want to do, providing support for those activities, and making women's athletic pursuits and events equally visible for everyone. Finding ways to increase the physical activity of girls and women will improve their overall health and wellbeing, which, in turn, will impact the health and wellbeing of Utah families, communities, and the state as a whole.

ACTIVITY OPTIONS

A barrier for girls and young women participating in fitness activities is the lack of preferred options. Most physical education classes consist primarily of competitive sports, which young women identified as their least favored activity. Women across generations show preferences for yoga, walking, biking, and dancing. When girls and young women are offered physical activities that interest them, there are increased levels of autonomy, self-determination, and participation. Women who participate in regular, low-impact activities report higher levels of self-esteem and quality of life compared to women who participate in regular, high-intensity activities.

OPPORTUNITIES

Since the passage of Title IX in 1972 mandated that federally funded educational institutions provide women equal opportunity in sports, the number of women participating in sports went from one in 27 girls to two in five girls. While large strides have been made in women's sports, gaps still exist. In Utah, close to 39,000 boys participate in sports compared to just over 28,000 girls, or almost 11,000 more opportunities for boys to participate than girls.

BENEFITS

The benefits of physical activity are well documented and improve all aspects of health and overall wellbeing. Physical activity can contribute to positive self-image and improved confidence and mental health, which is critical for meaningful community participation as well as interpersonal relationships.

Dr. Susan R. Madsen, UWLP Founding Director

GUIDELINES

Children and adolescents should get 60 minutes or more of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity each day, and adults should engage in 150–300 minutes of moderate intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity aerobic activity each week. Most Americans do not meet these recommendations, and women and girls are disproportionately less likely to. In Utah, 28% of boys meet the state's recommended physical activity levels, compared to only 14%, or half as many, girls. In addition, female college students are significantly less likely than their male peers to meet physical activity guidelines. Across the lifespan, women report facing more barriers to physical activity than men.

WHY THIS MATTERS

- 19% of Utah women are insufficiently physically active.
- While women live longer than men, they are frequently in worse health.
- Physical inactivity contributes to the development of chronic diseases.

GENDER ROLES

Gender roles are strongly associated with young women's lower participation in physical activity. From an early age, individuals develop perceptions of their bodies and their purpose based on biological sex. For many girls, participation in physical activity is associated with negative social feedback after physical education classes if they are unable to shower or change clothes. Adolescent girls may also feel pressure to conform to ideals of beauty that emphasize being small, slight, and soft—qualities that may seem incompatible with physical activity.

The reasons girls and women choose to be physically active also influence their long-term participation. Encouraging physical activity for reasons beyond appearance, such as improving physical and mental health, reducing stress, increasing energy, building strength, or simply enjoying movement, leads to greater motivation and sustained engagement. In contrast, when exercise is primarily motivated by weight loss or body toning, many of the psychological benefits are diminished. Women's motivations for exercising are more strongly associated with quality of life than the exercise they perform. Positive body image is also linked to higher levels of physical activity.



SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social support plays an important role in girls' and young women's participation in physical activity, yet is often lacking. As they get older, girls and young women report less enjoyment of and confidence in their abilities, influenced by limited encouragement and societal expectations that discourage competitiveness and strength. The lack of social support also appears in inadequate facilities, a lack of time for showering, and inappropriate gym attire which amplifies their self-consciousness about their appearance.

ADDITIONAL BARRIERS

Poverty, cultural norms, and hair maintenance can be barriers to women's physical activity. Poverty contributes to girls dropping out of sports at twice the rate of their peers. Physical activity is not prioritized in cultures where it is unacceptable for women to sweat or be in the sun. For some Black and African American women, the time and financial costs of maintaining hairstyles can discourage physical activity.

BUILDING ACTIVE LIVES

Encourage physical activity at home. Fewer things have a greater impact on a girl's long-term physical activity levels than her parent's own activity and their enthusiastic encouragement. Logistical support and modeling lead to increases in girls' physical activity.

Personalize physical activity options. Girls and women are more likely to be physically active when they enjoy what they are doing and have opportunities to participate with friends and peers. Ask girls and young women what they enjoy doing and tailor physical activity options accordingly. Ensure that options are favorable to them in physical education classes.

Promote gender inclusivity in all types of sports. Gendered sports limit teens' potential by pressuring young men to participate in competitive sports while discouraging young women from doing so. Encouraging children to explore sports and physical activities that interest them can lead to increased interest and engagement.

Improve the visibility of women's athletics. Both societal interest and girls' and young women's interest in sports increases when women athletes are visible and celebrated. Ensuring that women athletes have access to facilities, media coverage, sponsorship, and funding can increase the credibility of women's sports and grow the fanbase.

PROMOTING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

When more women and girls are physically active, they are healthier, more resilient, and better equipped to thrive. See below for calls to action and resources to encourage lifelong opportunities for women and girls to lead active, healthy lives.

Data Source: UWLP Research Snapshot No. 30 (2021)

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Learn More:** Explore resources in the UWLP Health Across the Lifespan [Resource Kit](#).
- **Review:** Find resources and community leaders on the Health Across the Lifespan Spoke [webpage](#).
- **Get Involved:** Connect to the grassroots initiative, [A Bolder Way Forward](#).
- **Take Action:** Help move the needle and discover additional [Calls to Action](#) for individuals, groups, organizations, and communities.



Be consistent and patient with your own and your family's physical activity. Healthy habits require time, and consistency builds confidence and reduces the risk of burnout.



Walking or other group activities provide support and a shared experience of being physically active. Consider [Walk This Way!](#) or joining a community sports team.



Check with local parks, schools and recreation centers for girl-focused or mixed-gender programs such as [Girls on the Run](#) that align with girls' interests.

Learn more at www.utwomen.org

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