# Evidence Brief

## Five Mentorship-Based Approaches to Retain Racialized Girls in Sports Programming

### How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "girls", "sports", "racialized", "mentorship", "retention", "participation", and "all-girls".

### Definition of Key Terms

**Racialized girls** are girls of colour, 17 years of age and younger. Racialized girls encounter barriers to sport and physical activity. The U.S. Center for Law and Social Policy states that children of colour are disproportionately affected by poverty due to pervasive systemic racism (Johnson-Staub, 2017); Black children, in particular, may be affected through "racially segregated, densely settled, and geographically restricted neighborhood environments, with little or no safe, usable outdoor play space" (Halpern, 2006). A lack of access to safe playing spaces and inability to afford sports equipment, programs, and transportation have been cited by Canadian parents as factors in pulling children out of sports (Zarrett et al., 2020). Racialized girls also experience racism and sexism in sports, with children reporting being alienated, subjected to racial slurs, and stereotyped (Brooks, 2019; MLSE Foundation, 2021).

**Mentorship** is a mutually beneficial relationship in which a mentor provides guidance and information to a mentee in order to aid their professional and personal growth, used here in the context of sports and physical education programming (Stirling et al., 2017).

### Summary of Evidence: Five Mentorship-Based Approaches

#### 1. Recruit diverse female mentors.

To support retaining racialized girls in sports programming, leadership in such programs should be diversified and comprise women of colour. Research shows that having women mentors – in addition to offering an all-girls' environment – **fosters a strong sense of belonging**, which in turn improves the effectiveness of a program (Dowd et al., 2015). Having women in leadership positions in sports programs indicates to girls that sport can be **safe and inclusive** (Banwell et al., 2021). Seeing women in positive leadership roles also indicates success and fulfillment from sports, which sends a positive message to young girls. Furthermore, the availability of mentors of colour not only increases the credibility of the program as one for racialized girls, but also the comfort levels of both parents/caregivers and participants. Parental/caregiver comfort leads to higher levels of

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support and enthusiasm for, and ultimately participation in, programs. Girls who are current athletes have higher levels of parental support than boys, indicating that parental/caregiver support plays a significant factor in retaining girls in sports (Zarrett et al., 2020).

Having coaches who look like participants is highly important to Black youth who participate in sports programs; Black youth are 370% more likely to value this factor than their white counterparts (MLSE Foundation, 2021). More than 1 in 3 Black youth, 1 in 4 Indigenous youth, and 1 in 5 BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour) youth face direct racism in sports, and creating an environment in which racialized girls feel their culture is respected remains a deciding factor for girls' participation in sports (MLSE Foundation, 2021). Diverse representation is needed in sports programming, as many sports teams in Canada are not representative of local communities.

As representation in sports increases, it is also important to intentionally create space for positive role models who racialized girls can directly interact with in their communities. Seeing women role models that girls racially identify with further **provides a sense of belongingness and respect**, **bolstering their sense of value and confidence** in the group setting, and resulting in higher rates of retention in sports programming (Zarrett et al., 2020).

**2. Ensure an empathic and considerate approach to mentorship and coaching.**
Although representation is important in mentorship, it is equally important to ensure that mentors and coaches are **providing adequate support** and **creating an environment in which girls feel welcome, regardless of skill level.** In 2020, Canadian Women & Sport reported that 1 in 3 girls drop out of sports, with one of the factors being their perceived lack of skill. 'Not playing well' and 'messing up during a game/competition' were also reported by the U.S. Women's Sports Foundation to be the two highest factors for girls dropping out of sports programs (Zarrett et al., 2020). A lack of confidence and fear of disappointing others is a deciding factor in girls' sports participation, and it is critical for mentors to **support participants in developing a strong sense of self.** Coaches, mentors, and role models must find a balance between encouraging girls to strive for improvement and providing ongoing support, even in perceived failure. An environment in which girls are met with encouragement will **increase self-confidence** and retention.

Racialized girls in particular may benefit from additional encouragement and support; in the United States, Black and Hispanic girls are the two groups with the *lowest* participation rates amongst all girls who currently participate in sports, and the *highest* rates of having never participated in sports (Zarrett et al., 2020). In order to overcome the barriers racialized girls already face, mentors should strive to **encourage girls through positive reinforcement and empathy.** All coaches, mentors, and role models should be trained in anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion to ensure that program leaders are equipped to treat *all* participants with the necessary understanding and respect.

In addition to guiding girls to improved physical health, coaches, mentors, and roles models in sports programs can also support the development and maintenance of a healthy mindset. Approximately one in five children and youth in Ontario are experiencing a mental health issue, and 70% of mental health challenges in adulthood are known to develop during childhood and adolescence (Centre for Addiction & Mental Health, 2020). Sport has been linked to improved mental health, with adolescent girls reporting feeling reduced symptoms of depression (Dishman et al., 2006). Girls may look to their coaches, mentors, and role models for different types of support; regardless of their previous training or expertise, these adult allies should have an understanding of mental health challenges, disorders, and their symptoms, and be prepared to support youth as necessary and appropriate, including by being able to refer youth to relevant community resources.

### 3. Consider peer-led mentoring models.

Peer-led mentorship places similarly-aged participants in mentorship roles. There are significant benefits to this approach, as adolescents are **more receptive** to physical activity interventions directed by slightly older peers and role models than by teachers or researchers. Adolescents are also susceptible to influence from their peers, as children with more active friends are likely to be more active themselves (Owen et al., 2018). Peers in mentorship roles also fulfils a social aspect of programming; studies show that physical activity interventions targeting adolescents should include the recruitment of friends in order to **increase participants' enjoyment** of the program (Garcia et al., 2016). Former participants of sports programming may also return in leadership roles, serving as examples of success and becoming role models.

Black girls in particular may find it difficult to open up to mentors who they perceive to be authority figures, as they have likely experienced discrimination or punishment due to negative perceptions by teachers or others in similar roles (Brinkman et al., 2018). This can lead to a lack of trust, and peer-led mentoring models can circumvent the issue with **mentors who are seen to be more like friends** than teachers.

### 4. Create inclusive, group-based mentorship programs.

A principal motivating factor for girls who continue in sports is the **team bonds** that they create with peers, mentors, and coaches. Seventy-eight per cent of girls reported feeling excited by 'being someone [their] teammates could rely on'; 'teammates accepting who I am' was also reported to be an important aspect of building rapport in sports by over 40% of Black youth, South Asian youth, Southeast Asian youth, youth living with disabilities, lower-income youth, and girls (Zarrett et al., 2020; MLSE Foundation, 2021).

Research suggests that programs targeting girls' activity level and healthy behaviours may have increased efficacy when **promoting group belonging** (Dowd et al., 2015). In addition to having strong relationships with mentors, girls and adolescents should foster **positive connection to their**

**community, their schools, and their peers.** In doing so, girls may also experience improved academic performance and motivation (Dowd et al., 2015).

Sports programming aiming to **foster strong relationships** should strive to create opportunities for participants to encourage and support each other. Forty-eight per cent of girls aged 14-17 who dropped out of sports programming reported being teased for the way they play, leading to lower self-confidence and a greater fear of disappointing their teammates (Zarrett et al., 2020). Combatting this issue with **support and acceptance** while **discouraging derision** among participants will lead to **a more inclusive playing environment**, which will in turn lead to higher rates of participation and retention among girls and young women.

## 5. Develop age-targeted programs for racialized girls.

Creating tailored programs can increase the retention of girls in sports programming, as age groups benefit from learning different skills (Eime et al., 2020). The average age of girls dropping out of sport is 11 – 0.2 years younger than boys who drop out of sport (Zarrett et al., 2020). Girls also drop out at significantly higher rates, with 1 in 3 girls dropping out compared to 1 in 10 boys (Canadian Women & Sport, 2020). The greatest decline in participation happens between the ages of 9-12 and 13-15 (Zarrett et al, 2020), indicating that action should be taken *before* girls reach the age of 13; in fact, the optimal starting age for sports programming retention is between 6 and 9 (Eime et al., 2020).

Mentorship in sports programming should start early to encourage lifelong participation. Developmental models for sports participation and retention place girls ages 6-12 in a sampling phase, wherein girls are encouraged to try a variety of sports and enjoy deliberate play activities (Coté & Hay, 2002). In this phase, girls benefit from less structured sports play, and instead are taught motor and sports skills. As girls age, programs benefit from changing curriculum to more structured play and increased competency, and from play to practice (Eime et al., 2020). With increasing age, girls also may benefit from healthy competition (Zarrett et al., 2020).

Racialized girls also benefit from targeted, developmentally-appropriate programs that are inclusive of diverse identities and experiences. For example, adolescent Muslim girls have reported feeling alienated in sports programming and may actually be excluded from sports, such as swimming, due to a failure to provide appropriate accommodations that meet their needs (Hamzeh & Oliver, 2012). Program design should consider both the age and intersecting identities of participants to **increase comfort and engagement**, and **eliminate some of the barriers that racialized girls may face** in sports programming.

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