



# COVID ALERT

## PANDEMIC IMPACT ON GIRLS IN SPORT

JULY 2021



CANADIAN  
WOMEN & SPORT



**E-Alliance**  
*Centre de recherche  
pour l'équité des  
genres+ en sport* | *Research hub for  
gender+ equity  
in sport*



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# A NEED FOR URGENT ATTENTION & ACTION

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COVID-19 has profoundly impacted society and will for years to come. While it has altered everybody's lives in some capacity, research is showing that women and girls were disproportionately impacted through job losses, burden of family caregiving, and violence at home<sup>1</sup>.

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Within sport, COVID-19 has resulted in huge revenue losses and deep cuts to programming<sup>2</sup>. Every individual involved in sport, from leaders to athletes to coaches, and at all levels of sport, felt these changes. The impacts of these changes, however, will likely not be experienced equally by all.

This report is an opportunity to focus on the impact of COVID-19 for girls in sport.

Before COVID-19, sport participation statistics showed that fewer girls participated in sport compared to boys. Girls experienced unique barriers to sport<sup>3</sup>. Once COVID-19 hit, it negatively impacted participation in sport for over 90% of girls through closed facilities, sidelined in-person coaching, and stunted social connections. The pandemic fortified the top barriers and eroded the benefits to participation in sport as reported by girls prior to the pandemic.



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## THE REALITY NOW IS THAT 1 IN 4 GIRLS ARE NOT COMMITTED TO RETURNING TO SPORT.

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If we don't act fast to counter this trend, we might realize a new normal of over 350,000 girls sitting on the sidelines in the post-COVID-19 world. Imagine if every girl aged 6 to 18 walked off the field, court or practice facility in Victoria, Calgary, Regina, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Québec City and Halifax combined. It is more than just about being physically active. If these girls don't return, over 350,000 girls will miss out on the potential mental and physical health benefits, social connection opportunities and leadership development that sport can provide in their future careers and communities.

The success of sport in Canada will depend on girls' engagement and contributions; so now is the time to rethink how we can rebuild sport with and for girls. As sport poised to return, there is an opportunity to change the minds of girls to commit to return. We must pay attention to what girls want. We must design sport with their needs at the centre. The time for action is now.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This project has been made possible in part by the Government of Canada. In addition to helping to fund this report, the Government of Canada announced in Budget 2018 a target to achieve gender equity in sport at every level by 2035. We appreciate the financial commitment from the Government of Canada to achieve that stated goal.

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We are also especially grateful for the financial support from Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities to produce this report. Jumpstart is committed to ensuring kids in need have equal access to sports and physical activity – an equal chance to be their best. We are proud to continue our partnership with Jumpstart to bring continued attention and actions to drive improvement in gender equality in sport.

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Dr. Ann Pegoraro (University of Guelph) and Dr. Heather Kennedy (University of Guelph) led data design, collection, and analysis, and we are grateful for their interpretation of the information provided to us from women and girls across the country.

# METHODOLOGY

Over 5,000 Canadian families were contacted and invited through panel provider Leger on behalf of Canadian Women & Sport and the E-Alliance to explore the impact of COVID-19 on sport and recreation participation among children and adults. Data collection occurred from the end of March 2021 to early May 2021. This report focuses on the current trends among girls (aged 6-18 years) who participated in organized sport at least weekly prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Sport participation is defined as participation in organized team or individual sport at least once a week; this definition is consistent with previous reports (i.e., The Rally Report, published by Canadian Women & Sport in 2020).

The reporting of girls aged 6-12 is based on parent responses. In the full sample of girls 6-12, 63.9% participated in organized sport at least weekly. Thus, this report draws upon 461 girls aged 6-12 who participated in organized sport at least weekly prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Girls aged 13-18 responded themselves. In the full sample of girls aged 13-18 who self-responded, 58.0% participated in organized sport at least weekly. Thus, this report draws upon 186 girls aged 13-18 who participated in organized sport at least weekly prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Any reference to girls and women in this report should be read as self-identified or parent-identified gender, not assigned biological sex. Due to this report's unilateral focus on girls, perspectives from other gender identities are not represented.

In addition to the data collected from the aforementioned survey, this report also features statistics from The Rally Report (June 2020) released by Canadian Women & Sport in partnership with Jumpstart and the Jumpstart State of Sport Report (March 2021). Public reports and research publications were used to provide additional context and insight to the findings.



# A NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH ON AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO SPORT

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This report focuses on girls who participated in sport at least weekly prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. These girls have already overcome many barriers to be able to participate at this level.

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Consistent with prior research and industry reports, we found that girls who participated in sport at least weekly were more likely to be Caucasian, have a higher average household income, and were more likely to reside in suburbia than girls who participated less than weekly.

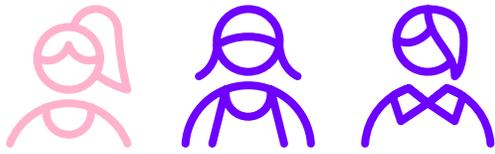
We unfortunately acknowledge that, despite seeking a national sample, we are not reporting separately or explicitly on the experiences of girls who face additional barriers to sport participation due to (in) visible disability, race and ethnicity, socio-economic position, gender and sexual identity and others. At the time of data collection, the vast majority of sport was shutdown, thus we found that the COVID-19 impact on sport transcended many of these barriers.

Further investment is needed in research as sport returns to specifically and exclusively understand the variety of experiences girls have in sport.

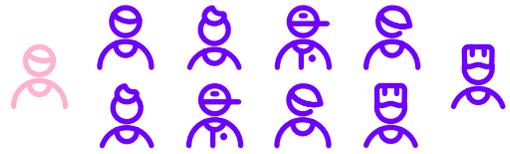
# HOW IT STARTED VS HOW IT'S GOING

## HOW IT STARTED

Despite an increased focus on gender equity and inclusion by sport organizations over the past few years, girls have continued to participate in sport at lower rates than boys. The teenage years are particularly important. The Rally Report, produced in 2020 with support from IMI International and Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities, uncovered that 1 in 3 girls drop out of sport by age 16 compared to only 1 in 10 boys<sup>3</sup>.

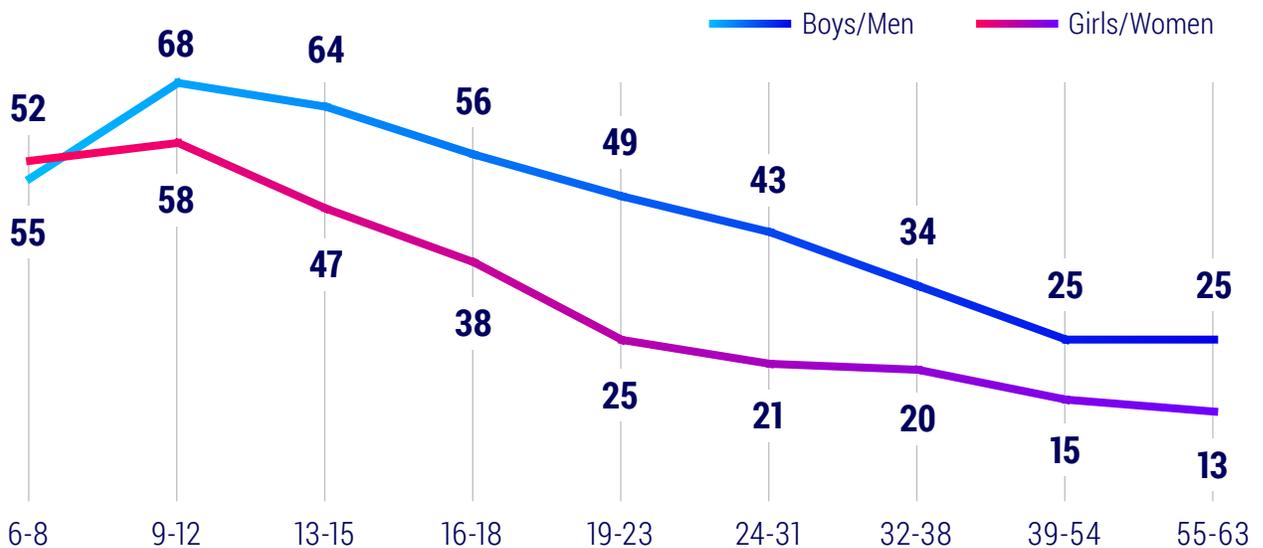


**1 IN 3 GIRLS  
DROP OUT OF  
SPORT BY AGE 16**



**1 IN 10 BOYS  
DROP OUT OF  
SPORT BY AGE 16**

Percentage of Individuals Reporting Weekly Sport Participation, June 2020



**Note:** Sport participation is defined as participation in organized team or individual sport at least once a week; this definition is consistent with previous reports. Going forward, reference to girls is reflective of girls who participated in organized sport at least weekly prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## HOW IT'S GOING

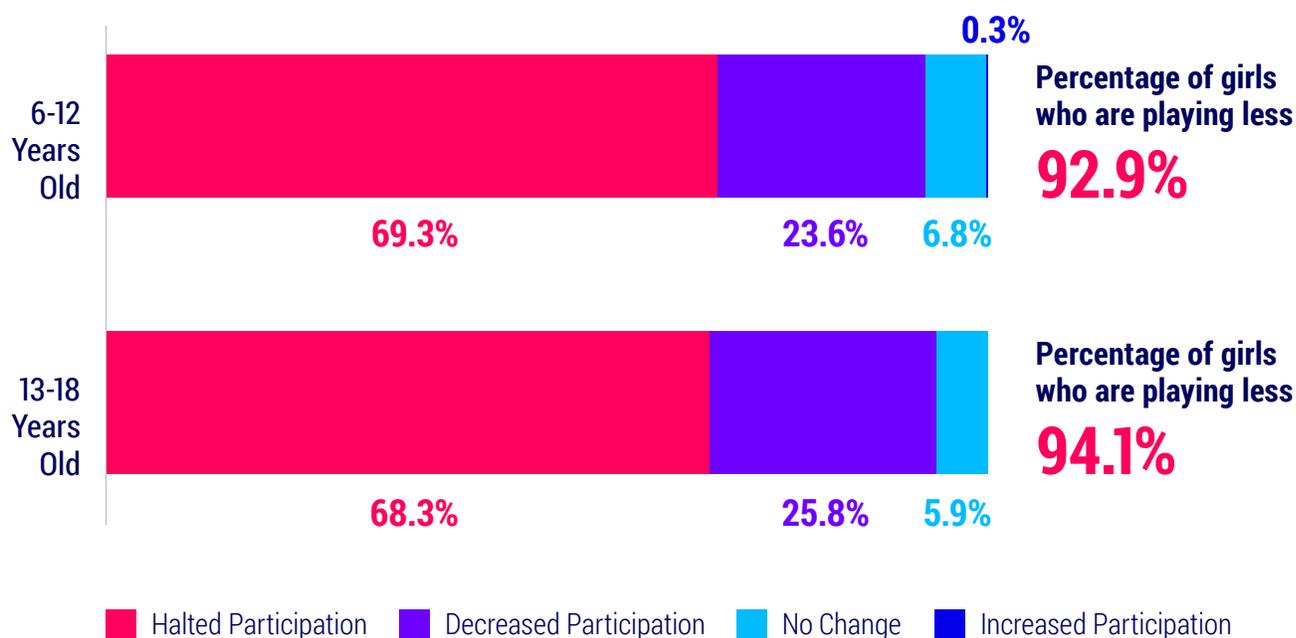
At the time of data collection, most sports were shutdown across Canada because of the COVID-19 pandemic and corresponding regional, provincial, and federal public health guidelines. The vast majority of children and adults indicated that they had experienced a decrease or complete halt to their participation. Therefore, we found no significant gender differences in terms of the impact COVID-19 had on sport participation.

Since girls face greater barriers and receive less support to engage in sport in a typical year<sup>3</sup>, it is particularly important to examine how they have been impacted by the pandemic and their attitudes towards returning to sport when it resumes.



# THE VAST MAJORITY OF CHILDREN & ADULTS INDICATED THAT THEY HAD EXPERIENCED A DECREASE OR COMPLETE HALT TO THEIR PARTICIPATION.

Impact of COVID-19 on sport participation by age among girls who participated in organized sport at least weekly prior to the COVID-19 pandemic



# COVID-19 MAY END SPORT PARTICIPATION FOR SOME GIRLS FOR GOOD



## 1 IN 4 GIRLS

whose participation was negatively impacted by COVID-19 are not committed to resuming their pre-pandemic sport participation levels post COVID-19.



## EACH GIRL MATTERS.

Because girls consistently report that social connection and role modeling are important factors in participation<sup>3</sup>, as more girls drop out, the remaining girls have fewer friends to play with and fewer opportunities for competition. This diminishes the quality of the remaining girls' experiences and increases the likelihood that they will leave too.



*"I am starting to lose interest in sports."*

- Girl 15

If these girls don't come back, that means

## OVER 350,000 GIRLS WON'T RETURN TO SPORT.

That is the equivalent of every girl aged 6 to 18 in Alberta opting not to play sports.



*"I'm not sure if I'll go back to doing badminton since I haven't played in a very long time."*

- Girl 16

***“This will have lifelong effects.  
On coping skills, on being human.”***

- Parent of Girl Aged 7



### **WHAT'S AT STAKE: FOR THE GIRLS**

If girls don't return to sport, they will miss out on the benefits of sport including<sup>4, 5, 6</sup>:

- » Enhanced physical health and well-being
- » Higher levels of confidence
- » Decreased anxiety
- » Leadership competence
- » Education and career opportunities
- » Social connections



### **WHAT'S AT STAKE: FOR ALL COMMUNITIES**

If girls don't return to sport after COVID-19, they are unlikely to return as they age into adulthood<sup>7</sup>.

The long-term impact to this potential decline in participation has major implications for communities, including<sup>8, 3, 9, 10</sup>:

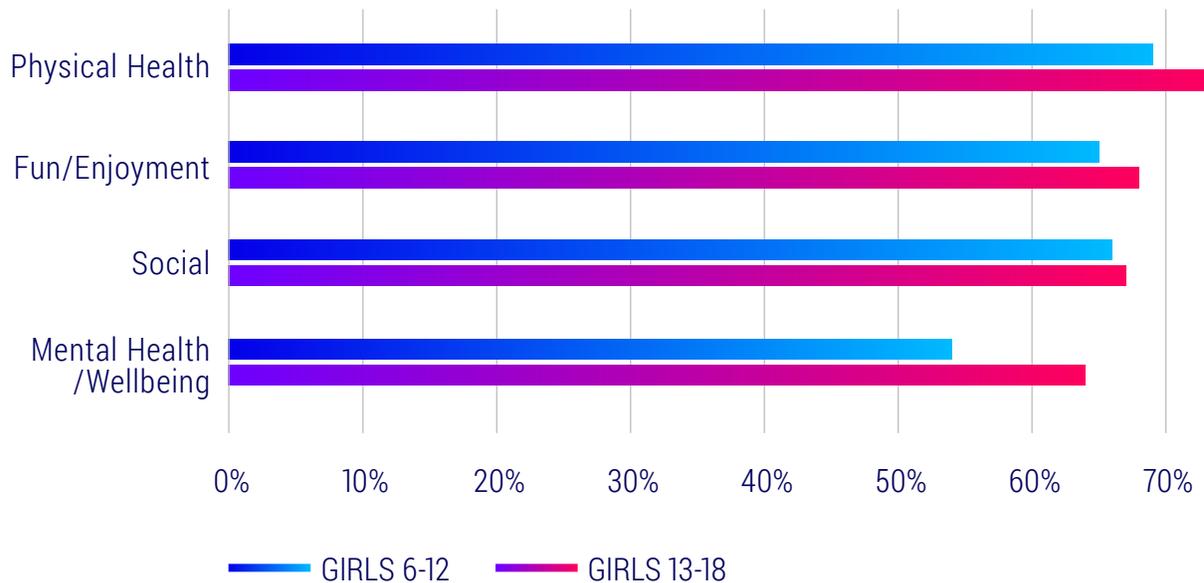
- » Increased mental and physical healthcare costs for society
- » Decreased future sport participation of kids whose woman parents and guardians did not play sport
- » Perpetuated low numbers of women in coaching and officiating
- » Loss of the talents and contributions of women in decision-making, resulting in reduced creativity and reduced ability to meet the needs of diverse groups



**TO FIND SOLUTIONS, WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND HOW THE COVID-19 STOPPAGE IS IMPACTING GIRLS AND HOW THIS RELATES TO THEIR PRE-EXISTING BARRIERS TO SPORT. THIS WILL POINT US TO TARGETED SOLUTIONS.**

# HOW HAS THE STOPPAGE IMPACTED GIRLS?

Prior to COVID-19, girls told us these were the top benefits of sport participation<sup>3</sup>



When asked about the personal impact caused by the change in sport participation during the COVID-19 pandemic, the top negative impacts overwhelmingly reported by girls corresponded to the top benefits girls reported last year. Girls are missing the key benefits of sport!

## Top Themes for Teens 13-18

1. Mental and physical health
2. Missing friends
3. Stuck at home

## Top Themes for Girls 6-12 (as reported by parents)

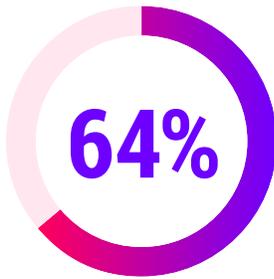
1. Missing friends
2. Mental and physical health
3. Impact of loss of school and activity at school

***"I do not want to participate right now."***

- Teen aged 17



## MENTAL HEALTH



of parents say their kids are finding it hard to reduce stress and control anxiety during COVID-19.<sup>2</sup>

*“Most girls on my basketball team are really depressed. Some failed school courses. Lots have eating disorders.”*

- Teen aged 17



## **SPORT IS A POWERFUL VEHICLE FOR MENTAL HEALTH.**

It can help reduce anxiety and depression, and improve self-esteem, and cognitive function.



Without organized sport,

## **GIRLS ARE MISSING THE BENEFITS SPORT OFFERS FOR MENTAL HEALTH.**

If girls don't return to sport, they may lose a resiliency mechanism to cope with a society rapidly changing around them. This may impact their anxiety levels, their ability to make social connections, and their self-esteem.

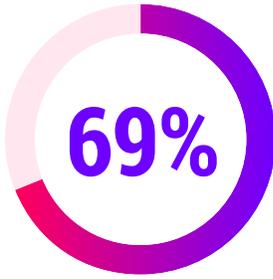
*“Her mental health has been affected dramatically, her mood has changed and her level of recreational activities has dropped.”*

- Parent, girl aged 12

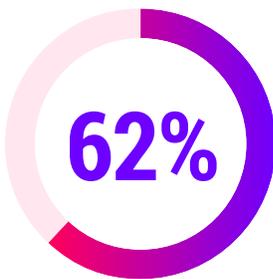




## PHYSICAL HEALTH



of parents say their kids are showing signs of being less physically fit.<sup>2</sup>



of sport organizations have not facilitated alternative activities for girls who engaged in their programs at least weekly prior to COVID-19.

*"[My Daughter] gained some weight as well as lost endurance and skill."*

- Parent, girl aged 10



### SPORT HAS OBVIOUS BENEFITS FOR THE PHYSICAL BODY.

like improving heart function and cardio and reducing risk factors for diseases.<sup>11</sup>



While there are other avenues to support physical health, sport is often a low-cost entry point with additional

### BENEFITS SUCH AS LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT & TEAMWORK.



## **IF GIRLS DON'T RETURN TO SPORT SOON, IT COULD IMPACT THEIR PHYSICAL HEALTH WITH CASCADING IMPACTS IN OTHER WAYS.**

Physical health has connections to emotional health, with girls stating, prior to the pandemic in The Rally Report in 2020, that confidence and body image are two top barriers to participating in sport. Without accessing the physical health benefits of sport, they may see falling self-perception of skills and body image, compounding existing barriers.



***“[My Daughter] gained some weight  
as well as lost endurance and skill.”***

- Parent, girl aged 10



## FRIENDSHIPS/SOCIAL CONNECTION



# GIRLS REPORT THAT SOCIAL CONNECTION IS A TOP BENEFIT OF SPORT.

It often leads to increased effort and performance in sport.<sup>12</sup>

*“My daughter thrives on social interaction. When she does a physical activity, it is important that she is with her friends physically.”*

- Parent, girl aged 11



**PARENTS STATED THAT THE TOP NEGATIVE IMPACT OF SPORT SHUTDOWN ON THEIR DAUGHTERS IS THAT THEIR DAUGHTERS MISS THEIR FRIENDS.**

It was also the number two theme with respect to teens self-reported impacts.



If girls don't return to sport, fewer friends in sport could become a future barrier to participating.

**AS FEWER FRIENDS PARTICIPATE, IT MAY CAUSE MORE GIRLS TO LEAVE, CREATING A SNOWBALL EFFECT.**

*“I miss my sports and friends”*

- Teen aged 17

# HOW HAS COVID-19 IMPACTED EXISTING BARRIERS TO SPORT?

Prior to COVID-19, girls reported heightened and unique barriers to sport. According to The Rally Report, the top five barriers to girls' sport participation are:

1. ACCESS TO FACILITIES & PROGRAMS
2. QUALITY OF PROGRAMS
3. ALTERNATIVES TO SPORT
4. COST TO PARTICIPATE
5. CONFIDENCE<sup>3</sup>

Let's look at the impact COVID-19 is having on each barrier and discuss actions we can take to make sure we don't make them worse as we return to sport following the pandemic.

## 1 BARRIERS: ACCESS



of children and teens who used sport or recreation facilities at schools or clubs had their access altered by COVID-19.

If current conditions do not change, almost **1 IN 5 ORGANIZATIONS (18%) BELIEVE THEY WILL NEED TO PERMANENTLY CLOSE WITHIN 6 MONTHS.**<sup>2</sup>

Access is already a major issue and it's getting worse due to pandemic restrictions caused by COVID-19.

COVID-19  
Impact by  
Where Sport  
is Accessed



## Implication

Given the role of school sport as a “gateway” to sport and as a more equitable sport space, this loss could be a trend to watch in coming years.

**WITH COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS POTENTIALLY NOT BEING FINANCIALLY ABLE TO RETURN AFTER COVID-19, ACCESS TO SPORT COULD BE FURTHER CHALLENGED IF THEY DO NOT REOPEN.**

Prior to COVID-19 some facilities had issues with equitable distribution of resources. A return to sport with fewer facilities and/or fewer sport programs may mean girls will disproportionately lose out given historical inequities.

***“Basketball team practices, and games cancelled. Gyms still closed. Can’t apply for basketball scholarships. Lost chances for post-secondary scholarships and opportunities.”***

- Teen aged 17

### **Actions to support girls’ return to sport:**

1. Prioritize resuming school sport safely, not just community sport.
2. Use a gender lens in making investment and policy decisions as it pertains to facility resources and programming to avoid repeating historical imbalances.



Organizations have faced many challenges providing quality sport programming during COVID-19. Unfortunately, among those girls who accessed sport programming during the pandemic, **1 IN 3 TOLD US THE QUALITY HAS DETERIORATED.**



### Implication

With a narrow focus of opportunities available for participation coming out of COVID-19 due to potential pandemic controlling restrictions, challenging access to space, and fewer athletes returning,

**THE QUALITY FOR GIRLS COULD GET WORSE IF COACHES AND CLUBS DON'T PAY ATTENTION TO GIRLS' SPECIFIC NEEDS.**

### Actions to support girls' return to sport:

1. Involve girls and women in the design, delivery, and evaluation of sport programs and opportunities to connect to their motivations and improve the effectiveness of the approaches.
2. Create an environment that supports healthy social connections among participants and leaders to foster belonging. Set clear expectations for how group members will treat one another and hold one another accountable.
3. Seek training to assist in anticipating girls' needs and interests.



***“Both hockey and soccer have been cancelled since last year. They’ve provided zoom sessions but they are boring and pointless with regards to exercise. I don’t need to be on yet another screen/device in order to get exercise.”***

- Teen aged 17

### 3 BARRIERS: ALTERNATIVES

Leisure screen time and social media use were reported as much higher than before the COVID-19 pandemic among Canadian youth.<sup>13</sup>



Some sport organizations are offering online alternatives within sport, such as online classes. **HOWEVER, WITH LIMITED PROGRAMMING OFFERED FROM SPORT ORGANIZATIONS, GIRLS ARE NOT MAINTAINING CONNECTIONS TO THEIR SPORT LEADERS & PEERS.**

*“I missed participating in sports and spent more time on my computer.”*

- Teen aged 16

#### Implication

### **GIRLS ARE FINDING OTHER PLACES TO RECEIVE THE SOCIAL BENEFITS OF SPORT**

in a COVID-19 world, potentially reducing their motivation to return to sport.

#### Actions to support girls' return to sport:

1. Prioritize social connection in the design of sport so that sport is a strong alternative to screen time for access to friends.
2. Leverage new habits built with increased screen time by exploring gamification of training and social connection.
3. Encourage and support girls to participate in a variety of sports, offering them choice and autonomy in what to play. This will support the development of fundamental movement skills and resiliency in participation over time.

*“Coaches have done their best, but there is no substitute to playing!”*

- Teen aged 16

## 4 BARRIERS: COST



Past research shows that **HOUSEHOLD INCOME PLAYS A ROLE IN SPORT PARTICIPATION.**<sup>3</sup>



COVID-19 has tightened household budgets, with **1 IN 5 HOUSEHOLDS WHO RESPONDED TO THE SURVEY EXPERIENCING A NEGATIVE FINANCIAL IMPACT DUE TO COVID-19.**

Negative financial positions of many sport organizations may mean they are unable to offer as many accommodations for those with financial constraints.

### Implication

**THE ABILITY TO PAY FOR SPORT HAS DECREASED.**

**THE ABILITY TO ACCESS FREE SPORT HAS DECREASED.**

### Actions to support girls' return to sport:

1. Invest or re-invest in programs that provide access based on financial need.
2. Direct funds to grassroots sports, not just high performance.
3. Review what is necessary for programming (i.e., equipment, uniform, team gear) to avoid passing on costs that are not necessary for participation.

***“She misses her basketball practice and because of how my employment has been affected she will not be able to start again because of financial trouble.”***

- Parent, girl 11



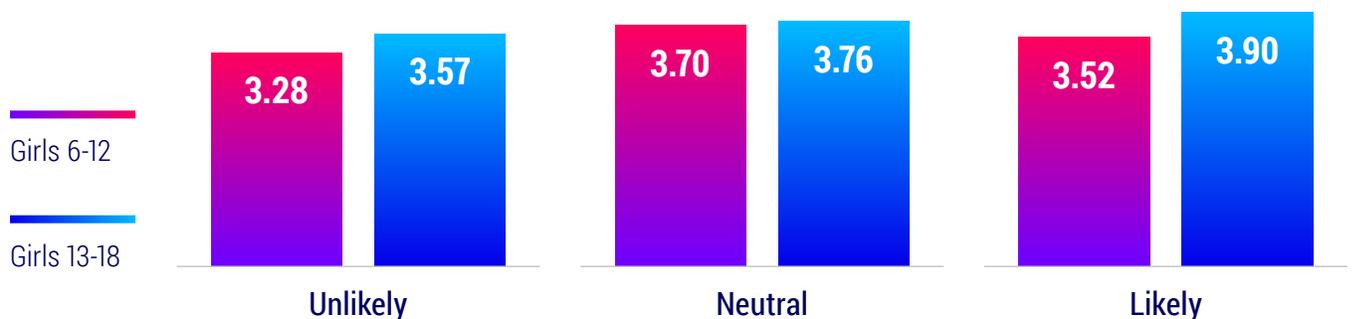
## 5 BARRIERS: CONFIDENCE/SKILL

Athletic identity captures the degree to which the girl identifies with the athlete role. In this study, it was measured by asking respondents their level of agreement with a series of statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to statements such as "I consider myself an athlete."<sup>14</sup>



**GIRLS WHO REPORTED HAVING A HIGHER LEVEL OF ATHLETIC IDENTIFICATION ARE MORE LIKELY THAN GIRLS WHO REPORTED A LOWER LEVEL OF ATHLETIC IDENTIFICATION TO COMMIT TO RETURNING TO SPORT.**

Average athletic identification of girls whose sport participation was negatively impacted and likelihood to resume pre-pandemic participation levels



## Implication

A year on the sideline means that **GIRLS MAY HESITATE TO RETURN TO SPORT IF THEY FEEL THEY'VE FORGOTTEN SKILLS AND LOST FITNESS.**

Since confidence and skill are important prerequisites to sport participation over time, a loss of these may result in girls choosing to opt-out instead of trying to overcome their perceived loss.



Girls may also feel more **SELF-CONSCIOUS ABOUT THE WAY THEY LOOK DUE TO CHANGES TO THEIR PHYSICAL HEALTH AND FITNESS**

another top barrier reported by girls pre-COVID-19.<sup>3</sup>

## Actions to support girls' return to sport:

1. Intentionally support social connection to rebuild trust and reduce girls' sense of vulnerability in performing in front of others.
2. Emphasize effort, not perfection.
3. Provide specific positive reinforcement, with constructive feedback offered privately to support girls' skill development and confidence building. Avoid comparisons with other participants.
4. Develop zero-tolerance policies on weight and body commentary to create body-positive spaces for all participants. Focus commentary on what the participants can do, not what they look like.
5. Give girls more freedom in choosing what to wear to practice, including team uniforms in a wide range of sizes.
6. Don't make assumptions on skills. Many girls report experiencing a loss in skills and fitness. Make ongoing skill development central to all programs, prioritize fundamental movement skills and then sport-specific skills to develop and maintain girls' sense of competence and confidence. Consider how to build skills confidence with a "pre-return" plan.

*"I feel I don't like my body the way it looks now."*

- Teen aged 16



# PARENTS PLAY A ROLE

IT'S NOT JUST THE KIDS WHO ARE NOT COMMITTED TO RETURN.



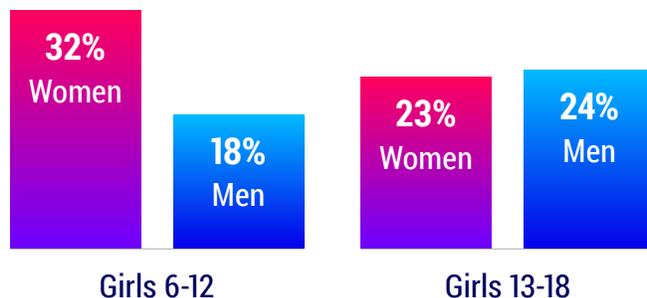
## 1 IN 4 PARENTS

who participated in organized sport at least weekly and whose sport participation levels were negatively impacted by COVID-19 are

**NOT COMMITTED TO RETURNING TO THEIR PRE-COVID-19 LEVELS OF SPORT PARTICIPATION.**

The table below provides a breakdown of the percentage of parents who are not committed to resuming their pre-pandemic levels of participation by parents' genders and children's ages. The responses are of parents who participated in organized sport at least weekly prior to the pandemic and whose participation was negatively impacted by the pandemic.

Percentage of parents who are not committed to resuming pre-COVID-19 levels of participating among girls aged



Previous research shows the impact of a parent or guardians' activity on children's sport participation.

**KIDS ARE 1.5X MORE LIKELY TO PLAY IF THEIR WOMAN PARENT OR GUARDIAN PLAYS AND 1.8X MORE LIKELY IF THEIR MAN PARENT OR GUARDIAN PLAYS.<sup>15</sup>**

Actions to support return:

1. Encourage adults get active and return to sport.
2. Develop programs that provide outlets for adults to participate while their child is also participating.
3. Invest in family-based programs and activities.



# CONCLUSION

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**1 in 4 girls are not committed to return to sport post COVID-19.**

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But there is hope. While the girls we talked to are not committed to returning to sport, sport has yet to fully re-open as Canada still copes with controlling the pandemic. We must act now to ensure that “not committed to return” does not translate to “did not return” to sport. We have time to consult with the girls who have had their physical and mental health impacted by COVID-19 and to build a new sport system that addresses the barriers girls tell us they have with access, quality, cost, and confidence in sport participation.

While we find ourselves at a challenging and pivotal moment, it is also a moment of tremendous opportunity for sport. Now is the time to be courageous and boldly question the status quo. By keeping inclusion of girls and women as a priority, sport will be poised to come back stronger for all.

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### **About Canadian Women & Sport**

Canadian Women & Sport is dedicated to creating an equitable and inclusive Canadian sport and physical activity system that empowers girls and women—as active participants and leaders—within and through sport. With a focus on systemic change, we partner with sport organizations, governments, and leaders to challenge the status quo and build better sport through gender equity.

**For more information, visit [www.womenandsport.ca](http://www.womenandsport.ca).**

### **About E-Alliance**

E-Alliance is a knowledge sharing hub made up of scholars and partner organizations from across Canada who are dedicated to gender+ equity in sport. E-Alliance is led by three co-directors, Dr. Gretchen Kerr (University of Toronto), Dr. Guylaine Demers (Université Laval) and Dr. Ann Pegoraro (University of Guelph).

**For more information, visit [www.ealliance.ca](http://www.ealliance.ca).**

### **About Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities**

Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities is a national charity committed to ensuring kids in need have equal access to sport and recreation. With an extensive, national network of more than 1,000 grantees and 289 local chapters, Jumpstart helps eligible families cover the costs of registration, transportation, and equipment, and provides funding to selected organizations for recreational infrastructure and programming. Supported by the Canadian Tire Family of Companies, Jumpstart has provided more than two million opportunities for Canadian kids to get in the game since 2005.

**For more information, visit [jumpstart.canadiantire.ca](http://jumpstart.canadiantire.ca).**

**Follow Jumpstart on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to learn about how the Charity is giving kids across Canada a sporting chance.**

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