

What do chickens and eggs have to do with sports?
By Gina Mollicone Long, Goddess Concepts Ltd.

Chicken: Do women lack an interest in sports and physical activity because there is a lack of access to programs?

Egg: Is there a lack of access to programs for women because they lack enough interest in the first place?

This is a common topic for debate among sports administrators, coaches and athletes. If you promote the benefits of physical activity in order to build interest but you lack the facilities and programs to capitalize on this interest then you are working in vain. On the other hand, if you build programs and facilities to include more female participation but you lack the interest then you end up with empty gyms and classes. This is a chicken and egg dilemma that needs an answer.

A recent study showed that by the time they are six, girls have lower fitness levels and less skill competence than boys of the same age because girls are not encouraged to participate in physical activity to the same degree that boys are. Furthermore, by this age, both boys and girls believe that boys are “better” at sports. As these kids continue to age, the gap in their skill levels starts to widen. As a result, adult women don’t usually have the skills or the confidence to be physically active so they abstain altogether. But that doesn’t mean that they don’t want to participate and it doesn’t mean that they want it to be the same way for their daughters.

There are many barriers to participation for women and most of them boil down to access to facilities and programs that meet their needs:

- i) Incompatible skill levels – many women are embarrassed by their skill level or their perceived skill level.

- ii) Household Obligations – women are usually the primary caregiver in the family and usually sacrifice their own time in order to tend to their families.
- iii) Timing of Programs – due to the dominance of men in most physical activities, the programs that are designed for women are usually offered during “off-times”.
- iv) Safety – some women don’t feel safe using co-ed facilities.
- v) Cost of programs – Given that Canadian women, on average, earn 64% of what men make they often cannot afford to join the activities.
- vi) The Lack of Policies that Encourage Gender Equity – many facilities do not plan their programming with specific equity policies.

It has been shown that “having fun” was particularly important to girls when they were asked about physical activity. The main obstacles to having fun were their concerns for safety and negative interactions with boys. The negative interactions with boys were usually a function of skill level. Most girls stop participating, and hence lose interest in sport, because they are just not “having fun” anymore. It seems that the key to sustained participation is to ensure that all of the participants are having fun!

There are programs cropping up across the country now that emphasize fun, enjoyment and participation and they are attracting scores of women. The Sport and Social Clubs of Canada (SSCC) started off with one club in Vancouver in 1994 and by 1996 they had expanded to include a club in Calgary and 3 clubs in Toronto (East, Central and West). Their mission has always been to “create great memories”. All of their programs are co-ed and emphasize the “having fun” aspect of participating.

Some of the things that these clubs offer make them especially attractive to women. For instance, this summer in Vancouver, they decided to run a pilot program

called “Train and Play” with the objective of teaching beginners the skills required to play beach volleyball. “We expected about 30 or 40 participants and were absolutely blown away with the response. We ended up with 152 participants, 140 of which were women”, exclaimed Neil McKinnon, president of the SSCC. Another interesting point was that of the 152 participants about 100 of them were first-time volleyball players. After nine weeks, they were ready for action. The opportunity to actually learn a sport as an adult in a setting that is not intimidating is very rare. The Vancouver Sport and Social Club (VSSC) capitalized on that reality.

Another feature of the SSCC is that they allow people to join leagues, teams and tournament as individuals or with a few friends. According to Neil McKinnon, “We found that one of the barriers to participation was that people couldn’t get enough of their friends to form a team so we decided to do it for them. It has been very successful.” The SSCC has created an excellent activity model, one that is based on participation and enjoyment. Without even trying they have created an environment that is equitable, fair and very, very fun!

There are many organizations out there that focus on trying to convince other programmers and facilities to adopt equitable programming policies. These organizations provide support for groups that are trying to change their programs to include more of the population, namely women. They act as resources in program design, staff training and public education. There is a national umbrella organization called the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS) that leads the way.

The province of British Columbia believes so strongly in creating equitable access for girls and women in physical activity that it has created a provincially supported organization called Promotion Plus. The mandate of Promotion Plus is to increase choices and opportunities for girls and women in physical activity and sport in BC. Promotion Plus ran a pilot of a program that was designed by CAAWS called “ON THE MOVE”. The purpose of the “On the Move” program was to increase participation of non-active teenage girls in a fun, social, safe and supportive environment. Tammy Lawrence, the Executive Director for Promotion Plus says that the programs have been very successful in igniting interest in physical activity among these girls.

Bruce Kidd, a Dean at the University of Toronto, described equity in a great way when he said: “Equality focuses on creating the same starting line for everyone. Equity has the goal of providing everyone with the same finish line.” The key to sustaining interest in physical activity among girls and women is to ensure that programs continue to be developed for them and that the focus is on fun. From the movie *Field of Dreams* : “If you build it, they will come”.

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