

Girls and Sports

Tips for keeping girls interested in activities through the preteen years

By Teresa Pitman

Robin Hansen started playing soccer at age five and now, at age 11, still loves it. She's also taken up hockey, martial arts and horseback riding. Her nine-year-old sister, Margaret, is also a sports enthusiast.

Robin and Margaret, though, are marching (and skating and galloping) to a different drum from most girls their age. Between ages five and 12, only one-third of Canadian girls are physically active (compared with 50 percent of boys). By the time girls are teens, this figure drops to less than 25 percent.

Yet physical activity is important for girls. Gina Mollicone Long, of proMOTION plus, a non-profit BC organization supporting active participation for girls and women, says: "Girls who are active have increased self-esteem.

They are less likely to get involved with smoking, drugs and alcohol and less likely to become pregnant." These psychological boosts are in addition to the many documented health benefits.

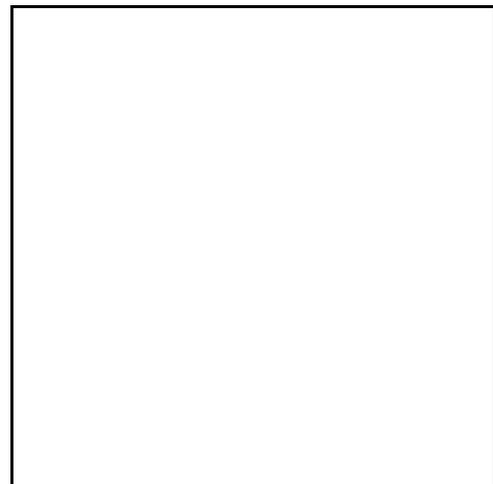
Active girls also set a pattern for future fitness. The Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute reports a number of studies from both Europe and North America showing that children who are active as preteens are more likely to stay that way as teens and adults.

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If it's such a great idea, why are so few preteen girls in sports? Long lists a number of reasons: "Sports programs — such as ice hockey — may be less available for girls and may be offered at less convenient times. Often more money is allocated to boys' programs. Girls also have a distinct lack of role models — yes, they can play peewee hockey, but only boys can see themselves making a career of hockey in the NHL." Maybe this will change now that the Canadian women's hockey team won the gold medal at the Women's World Hockey Championship. Long points out, though, that this is still different from the possibility of a lucrative career with the NHL.

That said, when it comes to sports, a little parental encouragement can go a long way. Some tips from Long and Hansen for getting girls in the game:

Teach the fundamentals. Many boys learn basic skills of throwing, catching and kicking from their fathers, but girls may miss out. Take your daughter to the park and play ball together.

Be a good role model. Joining a soccer team seemed natural to Robin because she'd been watching her mother play it "for as long as she could remember." Hansen still plays soccer and takes martial arts classes. Long notes that when a mother is involved in sports, the daughter's rate of participation jumps by 22 percent.

Give her goals. Let your daughter see top women athletes playing. When sports on TV always feature male players, girls may think women and sports don't mix. Hansen took her daughters to see the National Women's Soccer Championships and they cheered on the Canadian women's hockey team during the Olympics.

Be her biggest fan. Actively support your daughter's involvement — go to her games, drive her to practices, take photos of her playing and put them where everyone can see.

Accept some misses. "We've signed them up for lots of things that just didn't work out," says Hansen. "That's to be expected. It's part of the process of discovering what sports they do enjoy." When an activity doesn't work out, Hansen tries to find out why so she can help them pick something that will fit them better.

Lighten up. Emphasize fun and fitness, rather than competition or weight loss.

watch. That evening, Robin begged to be signed up.

Don't force it. The Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute reports that being forced to exercise during the preteen and teen years led to becoming *less* active as adults. Hansen agrees: "It just makes everyone miserable if you have to drag them along to every practice, every game." She knows soccer is still fun for Robin because she's always ready and eager to go.

Broaden your sports horizon. Some girls enjoy team sports, and some hate them. Yours might like being close to nature as she hikes or rock climbs; another might prefer dance or gymnastics. As Long points out: "It's not so much the specific activity, but rather that they are active."

Increasing the overall participation of girls in sports will take more collaboration, Long believes. She encourages parents to join boards, volunteer to coach and support girls' teams, and insist that schools and public recreational facilities provide equal resources for girls and boys.

"Programmers and educators might benefit from looking at these things in a different way," Long says. "In the past, they've said, 'Girls don't sign up for our programs,' or 'Girls don't sign up for phys. ed.' From this, they've concluded that girls don't like sports. My take on those same observations is that their programs and curriculum are not appealing to girls. Girls do like sports, just not the way you've served sports up to them."

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