

The gender play gap

Getting more girls involved in sport and making activities more accessible for all are key goals for Olympic gold medal-winning hockey players Helen and Kate Richardson-Walsh. Words: Faye Bartle



▲ Access Sport BMX event in 2018

More men play more sport than women at almost every age, according to Sport England¹, and there remains untapped potential to engage young girls. It's something that new parents and Olympic gold medal-winners Helen and Kate Richardson-Walsh, both now retired from international hockey, are particularly passionate about. As ambassadors for charity Access Sport, the couple are huge advocates for getting young people more involved, especially those with disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds.

"There are lots of factors that can help or hamper female participation in sport," explains Kate. "Helen and I both grew up with active parents and sporty siblings. Our families had enough time, money and resources to get us involved, which is a privilege we are fortunate to have had."

"Having an active female role model plays a vital role in whether a girl will decide to take up a sport. But with the majority of caring responsibilities falling on women's shoulders, mums can be time-poor, so that role modelling isn't always possible."

Investing in initiatives designed to make activities accessible to all, and ensuring women in sport are more visible, can have a big impact. "Simply put, if girls aren't seeing other females playing sport, they may not think it's for them," says Helen. "It's getting better in that we're starting to see more women playing sport on TV. The Olympics is showing a wider variety, such as rock climbing, skateboarding and BMX biking, which is fantastic. Plus, schools are offering more options, which inspires young people to try different things. Still, positive encouragement is needed."

The earlier girls get involved, the better. "If you get to secondary school and that relationship isn't already formed, it's going to be a struggle," says Kate. "As a first step, get out to the local park, have a run around and a laugh — it'll do wonders for your wellbeing. Next, have a conversation about the types of activities your daughter would like to try. There's a wide variety available — it's just sometimes difficult to know where to find them. If you're unsure where to start, just reach out."

Access Sport, for instance, has hubs around the country offering everything from Flyerz, the first fully inclusive hockey programme in England, to Trax youth cycling clubs. During the pandemic, the charity rolled out a number of online activity sessions to help keep people engaged. If your daughter is reluctant to get involved in sport, highlighting the plus points can be a brilliant motivator.

"The physical benefits of sport are very well known," says Helen. "If you exercise, you're going to be healthier, which is a very good thing. But when you play, you're also learning how to work in a team, making new friends and figuring out how to communicate. All these things will help girls in their adult lives when it comes to relationships and the working world."

"Don't be disheartened if your first session doesn't go well," adds Kate. "There's a sport or a physical activity out there for everyone. It'll give you energy, light you up and help to ease some of the stresses you have in your life. What's more, the confidence you gain from being connected to like-minded people is something you can harness at any age." accesssport.org.uk

¹ Go Where Women Are, Sport England (2015)