



How to... 'ensure sport and physical activity sessions for young women are delivered in the right style'



Why it's important

Many young women living in underserved areas may have had little or no experience of being involved in sport and physical activity outside of the school environment. Therefore it is important that activity is delivered in an appropriate style so that the women and girls want to take part and keep coming back.

Negative experiences of PE and school sport are often a reason that young women don't participate. It is therefore important to think about the reasons many young females didn't like PE (PE kit, didn't like or get a choice of activities, often cold weather if outside, difference in ability with a class group) and ensure sessions address these barriers.

Sport England market segmentation suggests that the decision-making style for this target market is 'experiential'. This means the young women are likely to be open to new ideas and offers as long as they are presented in an original and entertaining way. Therefore creative approaches to introducing sport and physical activity may be required.



Us Girls Project, Hammersmith & Fulham

Factors to consider

Previous experience/involvement in sport and physical activity

It is important to consider the level of sports experience and sport-related confidence and skill amongst the participants. Young women who have had positive experiences of sport, who feel confident about their abilities, and have positive images of sporting femininity will feel more able to be involved in a range of activities. Young women who have had negative sport experience and have less confidence in their abilities will have a narrower range of activities that they will perceive as desirable. For the market segment Leanne, often the latter is most apparent and therefore activities that focus on building confidence, skills and ability first and foremost are likely to be the most appropriate.

“With our Zumba, I think it’s because it’s so popular at the moment. It’s a real craze and everyone just wants to do it.”

Type of activities

With female participants the activity on offer will dictate the popularity of a session. Great promotion will not work if the right activity is not being delivered; participants won’t turn up or stick around. The key is to make sure the sport or activity is fun, easy and popular – think about the latest craze. Ask the women and girls what activities they want to do. Research has shown that women from this demographic tend to choose individual sports or exercise over team sports.



Whilst there is no single guaranteed successful activity for the diverse group of young women that make up this target population, consideration of the factors below can increase the chances of success:

- Different activities are popular with different age groups – eg Zumba for over 20s, Street Dance for 16–19 year olds.
- Dance or fitness activities appeal to young women who do not identify as sporty or would like to change from activities more associated with PE and childhood.
- Multi-sport sessions are a way of encouraging young women to try a range of activities that they may either not be familiar with or have not enjoyed previously.

“Multi-sport is absolutely right with our target group, perfect for reluctant young women without a sporting background. If they go straight into a sports session, it will put them off. Sometimes you don’t know what you like.”

Us Girls project

- Delivery of sporting activities in conjunction with other (non-sporting) activities. One Us Girls project integrates sport into other activities that the young women are more used to/comfortable with.
- Make it a little bit different – whatever you decide, make sure there is innovation in the choice of activity. Introduce new activities and variations of current activities. Anything that makes a session a little bit different to the last one will keep women and girls coming back.

“We’re just trying to make it a little bit different with table tennis. The workers have done all sorts of things. One time they pulled both table tennis tables together so you had a much bigger table to play on...just silly...but things that are mixing it up a bit so it’s not just like table tennis as they know it.”

Us Girls Project Manager



- Having something to work towards – this often acts as a motivator for young women – eg taking part in a running group to prepare for a fund-raising event such as Race for Life or midnight walks.

Individual activities are most popular amongst current Us Girls projects with the main motivations predominantly based around fitness, weight loss, fun/enjoyment and feeling better – these include dance, fitness, swimming, running/jogging and trampolining. Nevertheless, football, netball, badminton and rounders are also popular, especially with those who have had previous experience of playing team sports. Modern fitness activities such as Hoop and Tone and Zumba have proved very popular in engaging women and girls in this demographic. Activities that enable families to take part together have also proved popular.

Pre-planning consultation with the target group is key to deciding on the most appropriate type of activity to deliver. Relationships with other partners and coach availability and expertise/attributes may also play a part. You may also want to learn from and build on the success of previous projects. In choosing the most appropriate type of activity to deliver also consider the social element, confidence of young women, associations with adult femininity, potential for enjoyment, image of activity and extent of competitiveness.

Style of delivery

The type of activity is only one of the factors that must be considered when planning sessions. Leadership, delivery style, opportunities for fun and development are also part of the attraction.

Successful sessions are typically informal, welcoming and accommodating. The most successful sessions are generally fun, relaxed and not too serious. Young women often have input into the organisation of the session including the type of activity, choice of music and style of delivery. The sessions are often packed full of activity with limited instruction. Competition is often minimised at first. It is particularly important to make the first couple of sessions welcoming and warm.



“There are no rules, if you do it wrong it’s OK, no one shouts at you, no one is watching you. You get sweaty, you get your stress out, no one stares. It doesn’t matter if you go wrong.”

— **Us Girls Participant, Zumba**

When providing activities for young women from underserved areas, the style in which these are delivered is very important. Sessions should:

- **Be female only!** – In the majority of cases young women don’t want to exercise in front of males. This is especially true for those who have limited experience, skill and confidence. Sessions therefore, on the whole, should be female only, with no spectators. The gender of the coach/leader, however, is less important as it is more about the attributes of the individual (with the exception of some cultural groups that require a female only environment). Whilst women tend to not want to be active in front of men, they are often keen to mix with men for events, festivals and during social time.
- **Be inclusive** – Everybody should feel included. The coach/leader should be as approachable and accessible as possible ensuring that there is time to speak to everyone individually and making sure that nobody feels left out. The coach/leader should help the group to operate together rather than as a selection of cliques and incorporate activities that encourage interaction between participants and encourage friendships. Everyone should be made to feel welcome and a valued member of the group.
- **Be informal, flexible and adaptable** – Sessions should be informal and flexible so that they can be adapted to meet the needs of the group. Sessions should be shaped and developed as they progress and be offered on a pay and play basis. Having flexible sessions where women can arrive after ‘the start’, being able to drop in and out of activity and to be able to fit in easily is also encouraged. Rigid formats and rules should take a back seat whilst participants are eased gently into an environment which is fun, encouraging and warm. This also applies to kit – let the women dictate what they wear.
- **Be encouraging and non-threatening** – One of the main barriers to participation amongst this target group is a lack of confidence. Sessions therefore should be delivered in a way that is supportive, safe, engaging and encouraging to the participants. It is important that the coach/leader is open-minded, non-judgmental and friendly and creates a positive

and comfortable atmosphere. It is important to strike a good balance between praising those who are doing well and encouraging those who aren’t.

- **Be fun and sociable** – Fun and enjoyment are two of the main reasons why women from this demographic want to be active. The emphasis of sessions therefore should be on having fun. Maximising social interaction and introducing a sociable aspect to the session is also a good way of attracting and retaining participants. For example, allocate time at the end of the session for everybody to go for a coffee.

“I think it’d be good if you made things fun ’cos then if it’s fun and you’re having a good time it takes your mind off it and you don’t realise that you’re doing exercise.”

One badminton coach told us “Although I had the option of using all of the badminton courts in the sports hall, I decided to keep all the participants together on one court, to keep the group together so it was more sociable.”

- **Be collaborative** – Ask the women what they want, try to identify a common reason as to why they want to participate and what they want to get out of the session, plan the session accordingly as a group. This approach can also give the group a sense of camaraderie, belonging and ownership.

“It seems with women; especially girls aged 16-25, it is important to ‘grab the group’. The girls need to know that when they enter into a new environment they are not going to be made fun of or ridiculed. This results in girls participating in activities in the safety of ‘packs’ or simply avoiding the situation all together.”

— **Salford Us Girls**



“I do a spinning class in the dark with disco lights and music. No one can see you and it’s great fun.”

- **Include music** – Music is shown to enhance motivation to exercise and has a considerable bearing on how long participants might endure a repetitive activity and their feelings during the task. The tempo of the music must reflect the type of session and the genre of music should be appropriate to the age/profile of the participants. Let the women decide what music is played but also consider the following:
 - Fast tempo music (140bpm) should be the primary choice for high intensity exercise (75% max HRR).
 - For exercise bouts characterised by repetitive rhythmical movements such as walking, running or cycling up to 70% max HR, medium tempo music (120–140bpm) provides the best motivation outcomes.
 - Even at low exercise intensity, slow music appears to be inappropriate.
 - Music chosen should be characterised by a strong rhythmical component – eg that makes you nod your head or tap your foot.
 - The music programme should demonstrate great variety by varying the age and genre. However, the volume, tempo, and rhythmical components of the music should not be varied to the same extent.
 - Louder volume is likely to enhance motivation to exercise.
- **Involve hidden coaching** – Young women want to learn but may not wish to have too much instruction. Try and foster skill development without over-teaching – lead by example with occasional reinforcement of girls’ successes and repetition of difficult moves or tasks. Give the women ‘hints and tips’ in relation to their technique and how they could improve but stay away from the traditional skills and drills approach. Keep things simple.

Competition

For young women who are new to an activity, minimising the element of competition is crucial as many may find competition uncomfortable and embarrassing if they do not do well. However, even young women with little confidence can enjoy competition in a supportive context after they have had an opportunity to develop some skills and knowledge of the activity. Individuals who have been involved in skill development probably do want to challenge themselves and competition is one way to do it. In considering whether or not to include an element of competition within your sessions, you must consider the previous experience and levels of confidence amongst those individuals taking part.

One young woman attends both Zumba and basketball sessions. She stated that “I really like being [able to] achieve in basketball, and...I am progressing every week, whereas Zumba I’m kind of turning up and just getting fit which is quite nice....[in basketball] we play in a league as well, which is great.”

Group size

Many of the programmes that attract regular numbers of participants are relatively small in group size. Many young women report that they enjoy the smaller group size and it helps them to make friends.

“[In Zumba] the classes are small enough that you’re like...people notice if I don’t turn up and I feel sort of, you know, motivated to keep coming. The first week there were more girls and it was too crowded. I like that I know everyone.”

Zumba, Us Girls participant



Case studies

Positive Futures North Liverpool

Positive Futures North Liverpool started by offering taster sessions for a variety of activities to their existing groups. These were one-off sessions to get people interested and included circuit training, Zumba, dodgeball, aerobics and bouldering. At the end of the taster sessions they did a survey to find out what activities the women wanted to do. Circuit training, multi-sports, personal training and bouldering have all continued since. They've now also started a running club and a hoop and tone class. They found that people wanted to try running, but weren't confident enough to join a club, so they're all starting together, and are all running at the same pace. The hoop and tone has been a great success and people are really loving it. The focus in all of these sessions is on fun.

“People might want to be healthy and lose weight, but they don't see this as any reason that they shouldn't have a great time too!”

Us Girls Project Coordinator

North East Music Factory

The North East Music Factory deliver all kinds of dance through their Us Girls programme and are open to the young people suggesting new ideas and styles. There are three types of dance which have proved to be most popular with their audience – Street Dance, Street Cheer (a mix of hip-hop and cheerleading) and Zumba. The project started by delivered a number of taster sessions in different dance styles and then let the women and girls choose which activity they preferred. Street Cheer is most popular with 16–18 year olds and Zumba for older females. There is a fun competitive element which is helping retain young females in Street Cheer as the participants look forward to performing in showcases.

Trelya, Penzance

In order to make sport more attractive they offer it within a range of activities. Initially young women might come in to do something like cooking or arts. Then they'll also run a multi-sport session every so often. When they find something that the girls like they turn that into a regular session, circuits has proved quite popular. In order to keep the girls interested they've connected with a charity walk. Doing that has kept them on board and kept them motivated. The young women liked it because they had something to train for and work towards.

Us Girls Middlesbrough FC

The Us Girls Middlesbrough project set up a multi-sport session aimed at non-sporty women. At the first session the coach asked the young women to complete a questionnaire about which sports they wanted to play – this feedback was used to decide which sports are included in the session. The young women all have low levels of coordination, skill and fitness and it was decided that it was important for the session to be 'women only'. Football has been 'hidden' within the session – for example using footballs as part of the warm-ups and integrated into activities such as circuits. This means that the young women can do these skills at their own pace and get used to playing with footballs – the level of skill and coordination doesn't matter as they're not doing it in front of anyone else. The session works well as the young women are the same ability, same age and do not have much experience of sport, it's informal and they get to choose what they do. The session also provides access to dance mats. This activity gets the young women talking to each other more. They have fun on the dance mats and it gets them laughing together.





Us Girls Clubs for Young People Liverpool

Top tips

- Low intensity sessions focusing on fun, fitness and building confidence are most successful with non-sporty women. 'Sport' focused sessions are more appropriate with young women who have previous experience of participating and already have a level of skill and confidence.
- Activity programmes must reflect demand – ask the women what they want! Consider a wide range of activities and think about using taster and multi-sport sessions to expose women to new activity and try to keep up with the latest trends.
- In the main, female only sessions are essential.
- Put on sessions which focus around having fun, getting fit, feeling better and losing weight rather than on competition.
- Sessions must be informal, welcoming social, non-pressured and fun with 'hidden coaching' – rather than an emphasis on traditional skills/drills.
- Sessions must be inclusive and non-threatening so that participants feel at ease. They should be delivered in a way that is supportive, safe, engaging and encouraging.
- Include music as an integral part of the session – this provides a real motivating factor and will create a fun atmosphere.
- Include opportunities for social time for participants to talk to each other and build friendships. This will create a positive environment.
- Make sure the sessions do not feel like PE or school sport.



Us Girls Rocks, North West

Further information

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