Richard Bailey, Ian Welling and Harriet Dismore: Girls and Physical Activities: a summary review

Physical activity has the potential to provide considerable benefits to young people, not only in terms of the obvious health aspects, but also in terms of self-esteem, body empowerment and enjoyment.

However, there is still a tendency for many young people, especially girls, to be excluded. There has been a lot of research into girls’ participation in sports, although much of this work has tended to explore the negative aspects of exclusion from what is considered to be ‘male’ sports. Although important and relevant, this position has often resulted in a plethora of descriptive accounts of women’s exclusion which could be seen as maintaining gender divisions without taking into consideration other social factors. For example, the body, geography, economics and race. Consequently, many investigations into gender in physical education, athletics and physical activity have been focused on what are defined as benefiting from sport and all girls excluded, which is obviously not the case.

The recent report, conducted for the World Health Organization, it was found that there is an international consensus that participation in sport and physical activity can have a great deal to individuals, communities and nations.

However, the evidence also suggested that from an early age, differences in gender-based attitudes towards sports and physical activity can have a significant influence on children’s participation. This may, in turn, affect later involvement in physically activity and influence health and benefits that may result from it.

This research into girls’ participation in physical activities is done by focusing upon the questions which emerged during this exploration.

In what ways do girls benefit from participation in physical activities? Numerous benefits are claimed on behalf of children’s participation in physical activities. In this discussion, we will consider these benefits under the following headings:

- Physical Health
- Reproductive Health
- Mental Health
- Intellectual Development

Physical Health

The physical health benefits of regular physical activity are well-established. Regular participation in such activities is associated with a longer and better quality of life, reduced risks of a variety of diseases and many psychological and emotional benefits (Sallis and Owen, 1999). There is also a large body of literature showing that inactivity is at the root of the most significant causes of death, disability and reduced quality of life in the developed world (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1996).

Physical activity may influence the physical health of girls in two ways. First, it can possibly affect the causes of disease during childhood and youth, including diabetes and high blood pressure (Malina, et al., 1999). Second, physical activity could reduce the risk of chronic diseases in later life (Sabo, et al., 2004). A number of conditions appear in adulthood, such as osteoporosis, cancer, diabetes and coronary heart disease, have their origins in childhood and could be aided by regular physical activity in the early years (Freedman, et al., 2007).

Obesity deserves special attention in this context. There seems to be a general trend toward increased childhood obesity in many countries, and girls in urbanised areas appear to be especially vulnerable (World Health Organisation, 1997). Physical activity can be an important feature of a weight control program for girls, increasing caloric expenditure and promoting fat reduction (Gutin, Barbeau and Yin, 2004).

Reproductive Health

Adolescent pregnancy and sexual ill-health are major social problems around the world. Although there is a shortage of research in this area, early studies conducted in the US have found that adolescent girls who are physically active are more likely to become sexually active later in life, have fewer partners and, when sexually active, make greater use of contraception than non-participating girls (Sabo, et al., 1999). Projects are currently underway in the developing world that use sports participation as a strategy for empowering girls to avoid high-risk sexual behaviour (Bejer, et al., 2002).

Mental Health

There has been evidence of disturbingly high rates of mental ill-health among children and young people in recent years. These conditions range from low self-esteem, anxiety and depression to eating disorders, substance abuse and suicide (Sallis and Owen, 1999), and adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable (Noel-Muennkamp and Cirgus, 1994). Regular physical activity can have a positive effect on girls’ psychological well-being. Specifically, activity can contribute to the reduction of problematic levels of anxiety and depression. A position statement of the International Society of Sport Psychology drew out numerous mental health benefits of physical activity from the research literature, including reduced state anxiety, neuroticism and anxiety, and to moderate depression, and various kinds of cognitive benefits.

Intellectual Development

A range of evidence suggests that for many girls, physical activities are positive features of their academic aspirations and educational achievements. While there have been few studies in this area, girls have found improvements in many children in academic performance when time for physical activity is increased in their school day (Sallis, et al., 1999).

There is also evidence of a positive relationship between girls’ participation in sports and positive attitudes to school. For example, girls who participate in sports are more likely to achieve academic success than those who do not play sports; female high school athletes expressed a greater interest in graduating from both high school and
collaborations reduced to a series of negative and stereotypical interactions, activities, and ideas.

Therefore, it is imperative that schools and communities work together to promote gender equality and provide opportunities for all students to participate in a wide range of activities, regardless of their gender identity. This will help to challenge and dismantle the harmful effects of gender stereotypes and contribute to creating a more inclusive and equitable society for all.