

Impact Case Study

How sport can foster girl's wellbeing



Introduction

Mental health challenges among adolescent girls have reached crisis levels in Australia. This research project investigates how participation in local sport contributes to positive mental wellbeing outcomes for adolescent girls aged 11-17 – with a focus on the sporting environment's impact.



Working alongside the North Geelong Warriors Football Club (NGWFC), the project examines the role of coaches, club culture and values in building a supportive sense of community that positively contribute to adolescent girls' mental wellbeing.

The multi-disciplinary mixed methods project, led by Associate Professor Bronwyn Coate (RMIT University, School of Economics, Finance and Marketing), was funded by VicHealth as part of their Growing Healthy Communities scheme.

Background

The Mental Health Crisis

Statistics around mental health challenges among adolescent girls in Australia are alarming.

Self-harm hospitalisations for girls aged 15-19 increased by almost 87% between 2008 and 2022.

There has been a staggering increase in young people reporting eating disorders. With 27% of Australians aged 10-19 experienced an eating disorder in 2023 (around 1.1 million in total), aged 10-19, nearly doubling from approximately 15% in 2012 according to the Butterfly Foundation.

These concerning trends highlight the urgent need for protective factors that support adolescent girls' mental wellbeing.



Team Sport as a Protective Factor

Previous research has identified significant physical and psychological benefits associated with sports participation. While team sports offer potential protective benefits, there is limited knowledge of how sporting clubs themselves influence mental wellbeing outcomes.

Furthermore, little is known about how the type of team sport participation impacts outcomes. For example, does playing a traditionally male-oriented team sport impact mental wellbeing outcomes for adolescent girls differently?

The Challenge

Girls' participation in sport declines as they advance in adolescence, and interestingly this occurs at a considerably higher level than for boys.

Research suggests an attrition rate of approximately 60% for girls aged 15 and older in Australia, compared to 42% for boys. Despite growth in participation among younger girls, football (soccer) clubs face high dropout rates for adolescent girls.

Many adolescent girls exit the sport at the exact age when they may benefit mentally from team sport. The challenge for clubs is then to not only attract new players but retain existing ones.

Clubs need to be responsive to player's needs and committed to provide a safe, inclusive and supportive environment for girls and women. This fosters a sense of belonging within teams, positively supporting mental wellbeing and benefiting players and clubs alike.



The Research

The study employed a mixed-methods design broken into two phases.



Phase One

- Parents and guardians completed a survey capturing family demographic information, perceptions of club culture and perceived impacts of football (soccer) participation on their daughter's wellbeing
- Adolescent girls who play football were surveyed to ensure participant voice and agency. The survey included indicators of mental wellbeing, including anxiety, peer relationships, life satisfaction, and meaning and purpose (measured using validated paediatric PROMIS scales)
- Additional measures assessed include body acceptance and sense of team belonging.

Phase Two

- Phase two involved individual player interviews and a focus group with club officials and coaches.
- Player interviews explored lived experiences, club organisational culture and the broader sporting environment.
- All qualitative data were recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically.
- As part of the mixed methods design, themes emerging from Phase One were examined in greater depth.

Findings

Participants with a stronger sense of team belonging saw more positive mental wellbeing outcomes, including:



- reduced anxiety and loneliness
- better body image
- higher life satisfaction
- greater meaning and purpose.

Longer club tenure strengthened belonging and improved wellbeing, demonstrating that sustained participation allows deeper social connections to develop.

Four key environmental factors were found to foster belonging, including:

1. supportive coach-athlete relationships
2. an effort-focused motivational climate, with improvement emphasised over winning
3. a culturally and psychologically safe club culture and environment
4. positive parental or guardian engagement.

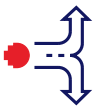
These findings suggest that when a sporting club creates a supportive environment in which coaches and players feel mutually valued and respected as well as being culturally and psychologically safe, players experience a strong sense of belonging which supports their wellbeing.

Further Impact

The findings provide a framework transferable to other football clubs and team sports.

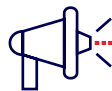
By demonstrating how community sporting clubs can promote health and mental wellbeing, and foster supportive and inclusive environments, this research can inform policy from key health promotion agencies like VicHealth.

The project has established foundations for scaling the model beyond NGWFC to benefit adolescent girls' mental wellbeing across a diverse array of community sport settings.



Media

The Geelong Advertiser interviewed participants about the project and the impact of the sport on their wellbeing.



Partnerships

The project was delivered in partnership with:



- Growing Healthy Communities Scheme

