

# Getting Girls Involved in Athletics & Sports



# Athletics Ireland

## Conversation Series

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## Welcome Note

Welcome to our third workshop in the Athletics Ireland conversation series. According to Sport Ireland, just 7% of girls aged 14-15 years meet the recommended levels of physical activity. Girls are dropping out of sports at twice the rate of boys. However, research shows that girls who continue with exercise throughout their teens do better not only academically, but socially and emotionally with the benefits echoing long after their school days. We are on a mission to get girls to stay active and to help them reach their athletic and personal potential.



**Orna Murray,**  
*Your Health Psychology*  
**Researcher & Facilitator**

I have a Master's in Health Psychology from NUIG and an Honors Degree in Applied Psychology from UCC. I have both professional and personal experience working with elite athletes, having had the opportunity to work as part of an elite sports science team, while also representing Ireland internationally for both distance running and squash. Passionate about sports and women's health I am working towards ensuring the next generation has the tools and the support they need to reach their athletic and personal potential.

We want to offer support so that they understand their bodies and are able to work with them rather than against them. We hope to create a movement where girls from all backgrounds want to get active and stay active for life.



**Grace Lynch,**  
*Athlete Development Manager, Athletics Ireland*  
**Co-Facilitator**

As a member of the Irish athletics community from the age six, athletics has been an integral part of my life. Athletics has helped me to grow as a person, discover my passion and connect to others with similar interests and drive in life. Athletics can pose many challenges and while these challenges provide growth and progression through learning, it has highlighted to me the importance of having support in specific areas which can provide help in navigating some of the obstacles we encounter. Orna and I shared a vision and so the Athletics Ireland conversation series was born. It is our belief that these workshops focus on four very important areas which resonate with so many others. Through Orna's expertise and the input from our community, we hope to provide an experience that not only sheds light on these topics but helps to begin a community of practice within the Irish athletics scene. It is our hope that this community will continue to grow and help to support the current and future generations of Irish athletics members.

## Benefits of Athletics and Sports

The benefits of being involved in a sport like athletics go way beyond track and field. **Social benefits** such as, building confidence and making friends, as well as the **physical benefits** of feeling stronger, fitter and more at home in their bodies are just a few benefits of physical activity. Girls who are involved in sports and physical activity are also more likely to get better results in school and to do higher level maths. A lot of the benefits come from the process of navigating the challenges and hidden hurdles associated with athletics and sports – that’s where you the coach come in. As a support and role model to the next generation, helping them build resilience, learn from failure and have fun along the way.

### Hidden Hurdles

It’s important to remember that very often it is the first time the athletes are facing the challenges associated with sports, participation and performance.

Many young people can feel like they are the only ones going through a particular experience. Or equally may not be able to identify why they might be struggling. That’s why we often use the term hidden hurdles or barriers. As a coach, your role is to offer them perspective and insight – helping them understand and make sense of the challenges and experiences so they can grow and learn from them.

If athletes internalise challenges or disappointments this may over time impact their enjoyment of the sport. However, if we can provide a safe environment where athletes are encouraged to share their experiences they will have the opportunity to see that their experiences and struggles are often reflected in others and contextualise their challenge.

#### 1. Participation V’s Performance

Sport is often strongly associated with competition and winning but I want to reiterate the ethos that **EVERY MOVEMENT**

**MATTERS!** Research has shown us that many girls drop out of sport because they felt their sport or activity became too competitive. If your daughter/player/athlete loves to participate and have fun without getting competitive that is amazing! Some girls may want to be the next Katie Taylor or Ciara Mageean, but for others, that’s simply not the case. Other girls might be there to socialise, make new friends, exercise, have fun and be part of the club. It’s easy to presume we know what motivates girls to get involved in a sport. We need to start valuing sport and physical activity for the social network it creates, the opportunity it offers to grow and develop, the moments of pride and of course the benefits of moving your body!

### Activity

**Opening up the conversation around what they want from their involvement will help you both understand what success looks like for them.**

**At the start of the next season, new year or new term, talk to all your athletes together and ask them what they want from their sport and what they would love to achieve.**

## 2. Not Being 'Good' or 'Sporty'

One of the main barriers to physical activity is the concept of not feeling 'good enough' or self-identifying as someone who isn't 'sporty'. There is nothing harder than coming last, or dropping out of training, especially if others around them seem to find it easy and comfortable. It's natural that teenagers will compare themselves to the people around them, natural but definitely not helpful!



### Comparison is the thief of joy

— Teddy Roosevelt

*Help your athletes set their own goalposts. Encourage them to focus on where they started and where they want to go, and track that progress.*

### Measuring 'Success'

- Looking at an athlete's development over time, compared to when they first came.
- Are the athletes happy, can you see smiles, is the body language positive?
- Do they keep coming back to training?

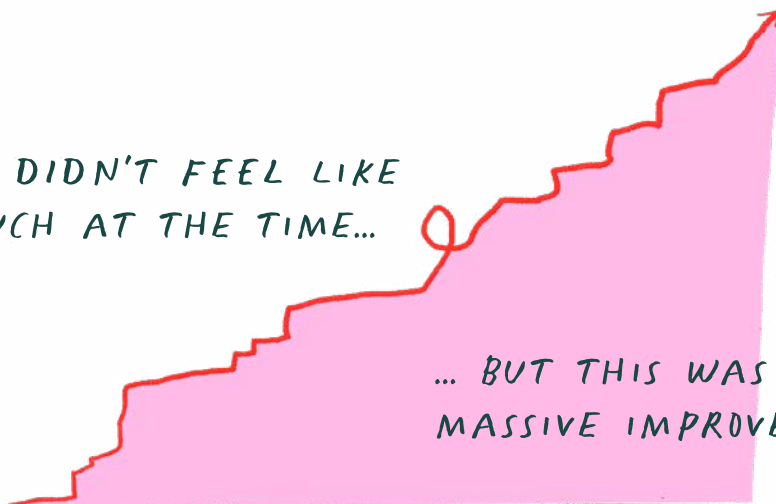
## 3. Starting Something New

Sometimes the entry level to a new sport and training is so high that it can be intimidating or too physically challenging to get going. Other times we set expectations so high that it can lead to young people getting discouraged when they don't reach them right away. Encourage new athletes to talk to other people in the club about their experience, soon they will find that everyone started in that place. Setting them up with a buddy in the club, someone who has been involved and is happy to show them the ropes is also a great place to start.

It can be a good idea to set some time aside to openly talk to new athletes and share with them that you don't expect them to be at the same level as the girls that have been there a long time. That progress takes time and effort - help them set their own goals to take some of that internalised pressure off.

IT DIDN'T FEEL LIKE  
MUCH AT THE TIME...

... BUT THIS WAS  
MASSIVE IMPROVEMENT



## Shine Theory

Was developed by two friends Aminatou Sow and Ann Friedman. Shine Theory is an opportunity for girls to lift each other up rather than tear each other down just because they're perceived as the 'competition'.

***"I don't shine if you don't shine"*** – Aminatou Sow & Ann Friedman

Shine Theory is a practice of cultivating a spirit of genuine happiness and excitement when your friends and peers are doing well, and being there for them when they aren't doing so well. In your club or training group it could look like acknowledging the hard work that has gone into a good result or progress, and reminding everyone that they are all capable of doing the same with time, work ethic and through supporting each other.

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## Psychological Safety

***"A shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking."*** – Amy Edmondson

Young people are often very worried about making mistakes, getting things wrong and 'looking stupid' in front of their peers. It's important to develop a culture of safety within our clubs and communities so athletes know that it's okay to mess up and make mistakes, it's okay to do your best and end up dropping the baton (even Olympians drop the baton). This creates an atmosphere of trust and open communication, which can lead to great performances, happier athletes and increased motivation to train.

We need to ensure the track is a place everyone feels safe and where 'mistakes' are framed as learning opportunities. As a coach don't underestimate how powerful an impact you can have on your players if you talk about a time you may not have made the best decision and what you learned from it.

### Activity

**Talk about failure and mistakes. Tell your athletes that you expect them to make mistakes. If the opportunity ever arises when you've made a mistake yourself (it happens to the best of us) use that as an opportunity to demonstrate how to talk about mistakes and how to reframe it as a learning opportunity**

## Reframing Failure

Most of us when considering trying something new or challenging, we weigh up the risk of failure. If the fear of failure is too great many often choose not to try at all. But failing is an unavoidable and important part of sport and life. When we are working with young people, it's helpful to structure it as a learning opportunity rather than an end point. Learning from experiences both good and bad is where the magic happens.



FIRST  
ATTEMPT  
IN  
LEARNING

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## Resilience

Just another buzzword? Actually, it's the opposite. Resilience and bouncing back is a key part of any athlete's journey in sport. Each individual athlete in your club will have different levels of resilience - this is why some girls seem to manage their menstrual cycle or any other adversity without my effort and others can find it more challenging.

***"Between stimulus and response there is a space.  
In that space is our power to choose our response"*** — Viktor E. Frankl

To help athletes choose their response and develop their own resilience it's helpful to foster a growth mindset amongst your players 'minor setback, major comeback.' Communicating openly as athletes navigate the inevitable challenges that come with being involved in sports is a great place to start. It is this mindset that coaches should be looking to encourage within their players to create psychologically safe environments.

## Activity & Reflection points

- What is your own experience of participation V's performance?
- How do you measure your athlete's success?
- Discuss practical ways of fostering psychological safety amongst your athletes.
- What are practical ways coaches can support teenage girls in sports?

### Notes:



**Notes:**



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