

Go, Girls, Go!

Is participation in sports and physical activity important for Philadelphia girls? **You bet it is!** Dr. Betsey Stevenson at Penn's Wharton School has just published a seminal analysis demonstrating that the changes set in motion by Title IX (the landmark 1972 federal legislation that opened up school sports participation to millions of girls) explain about 20% of the increase in women's education and about 40% of the rise in employment for current 25-to-34-year-old women. Additionally, a study published by Dr. Robert Kaestner from University of Illinois, Chicago, reports that the increase in girls' participation caused by Title IX was associated with a 7% lower risk of obesity 20 to 25 years later, when women were in their late 30s and 40s. Dr. Kaestner reports, "While a 7% decline in obesity is modest, no other public health program can claim similar success." Additionally, a December 2009 report compiled by the Women's Sports Foundation indicates that girls' lack of physical activity contributes to deleterious consequences from breast cancer, osteoporosis, smoking, illicit drug use, sexual activity, depression, suicide, and poor educational performance.

This research and data, along with other findings, illustrates that physical activity for girls is not a luxury or an "extra", it is a requirement.

Starfinder has been working with girls since our earliest soccer camps. **But, after looking closely at our data, we have to do more.** Year over year, 60% of Starfinder elementary school participants are girls and 40% are boys. In middle school programs participation changes significantly to 30% girls and 70% boys. In high school programs the participation of girls drops precipitously to less than 15% of all participants. As participation in girls' soccer and all sports is booming in suburban areas of Philadelphia and across the country, girls from Philadelphia communities have missed the revolution sparked by the 1972 passage of Title IX legislation.

Developing habits of physical activity in elementary, middle, and high school girls ensures immediate health benefits and more importantly supports the development of positive benefits that can be realized over a lifetime. What reasons do girls give for their lack of participation in physical activity? A variety of intrapersonal, social, and physical factors are cited when girls respond to this question.

- *Lack of time*; doing homework, part-time job, family responsibilities
- *Influence and lack of support of peers, parents, teachers*; no role models
- *Self-efficacy*; inability to set and reach one's goals, fear of failure
- *Body-centered issues*; views of femininity, appearance, male comments, sweating, menstruation
- *Competition*; negative views of participation, stress, lack of enjoyment
- *Social networking*; preference for phones, Internet, television
- *Concern for safety*; out at dark, unsafe playground areas
- *Transportation and facilities*; availability, cost

Over the next year, Starfinder will be designing and testing new programming to address these barriers. The foundations of the programming will include these components.

- Ongoing mentoring from supportive peers, coaches, and other adults
- Innovative activities that develop strong self esteem, self confidence, and self efficacy;
- Knowledge acquisition about physiology, health, nutrition, and gender stereotyping;
- Opportunities to participate in physical activity that lead to positive outcomes.

We are hopeful that this innovative programming will provide a tremendous new learning program for girls participating with Starfinder. The research demonstrates that early intervention to help girls understand the importance of physical activity can create a strong foundation for future school and job success. With improved health and well-being, multiple doors may open for these girls and their chances for high school graduation and post-secondary education may be greatly enhanced.