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Closing the Gender Play Gap

Re-Engaging Girls and Young Women in Sport

A co-designed strategy

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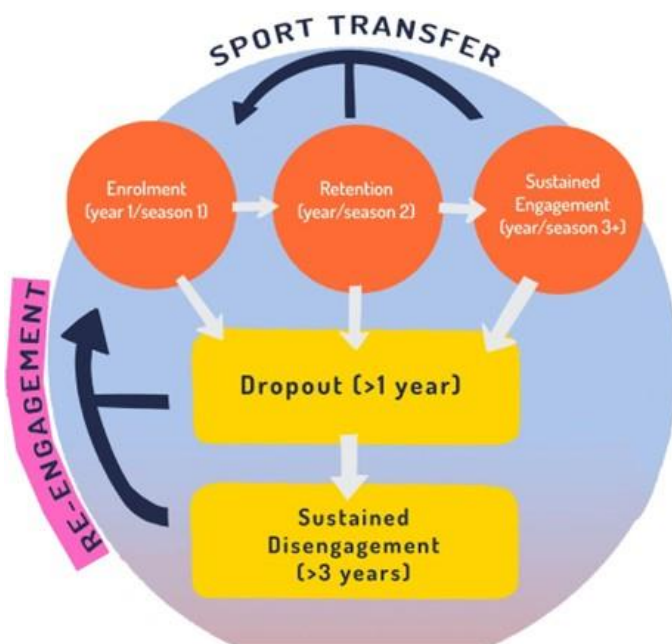
Key Points

- More girls and young women drop out of sport than boys and young men.
- Those who drop out of sport often do not return later in life.
- Re engaging previously dropped out girls and young women may help to increase women's sport participation

What is Re-Engagement?

- Re-engagement focuses on reconnecting those who have previously participated in sport but have since dropped out.
- Marketing research shows us that it can be more effective to re-engage former customers than to attract new ones - the same principle may be relevant to sport.
- To successfully re-engage **girls and young women**, sport clubs and organisations must take a targeted approach that recognises re-engagers as different from new participants.

Re-engagement presents a valuable opportunity to boost both participation numbers and the overall quality of sport experience for girls and young women.



How to Create Opportunities for Re-Engagement



Promotion and Communication

- Be sure to **speak to your audience** and use different promotional strategies for re-engagers.
- Complement your digital marketing with in-person promotional events that shine a **spotlight on sport**.



Equity and Inclusion

- **Provide equitable competition** by placing equal value on men's and women's competitions.
- Allow girls to **play with peers** and avoid prematurely promoting them to senior teams.
- Ensure your sport is a **game for all** by providing appropriate and welcoming competition for everyone.



Social Connection

- Ensure high-quality competition environments are balanced with opportunities for social connection, allowing girls to **belong, play, and stay in sport**.
- Facilitate a range of social opportunities for girls and young women to experience **connection beyond the team**.
- **Leave the door open** to previous participants and let them know they are always welcome back.



Futureproofing

- Ensure that **mentorship** is an **opportunity, not an obligation** for senior women in your sport.
- Prioritise training and development of women who want to coach and officiate to create an environment of **women leading, women learning**.
- Despite **different experiences**, ensure that everyone in your organisation is working towards the **same goal** of achieving equal opportunities for girls and young women in sport.



Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
What is Re-Engagement?	2
Guideline Structure	3
Promotion and communication	3
Futureproofing	3
Equity and inclusion	3
Social connection	3
Promotion and Communication	4
Social Connection	5
Equity and Inclusion	6
Futureproofing	7
Conclusion	8
Acknowledgements	8
Contact	8
References	9



Executive Summary

It is well-known that more girls and young women drop out of sport than boys and young men [1]. Until now, there has been no strategy to re-engage these dropped out participants, meaning those girls and young women who disengage during adolescence often do not return. This contributes to women leading more sedentary lifestyles than men [2], and missing out on the lifelong benefits of involvement in sport and physical activity.

This document presents a set of evidence-based guidelines aimed at supporting State Sporting Organisations and community clubs to re-engage girls and young women in organised sport. Developed through a comprehensive PhD research program co-funded by Flinders University and the Office for Recreation, Sport and Racing, these guidelines draw from global best practices, qualitative research, and an innovative co-design process.

The guidelines focus on four key principles: (1) enhancing promotion and communication strategies; (2) maximising social connection; (3) supporting equity and inclusion; and (4) futureproofing sport clubs and organisations to continue so that they continue to thrive for generations to come. Sporting clubs and organisations are encouraged to use these guidelines to guide the development of sport participation programs which target the re-engagement of girls and young women in South Australia.

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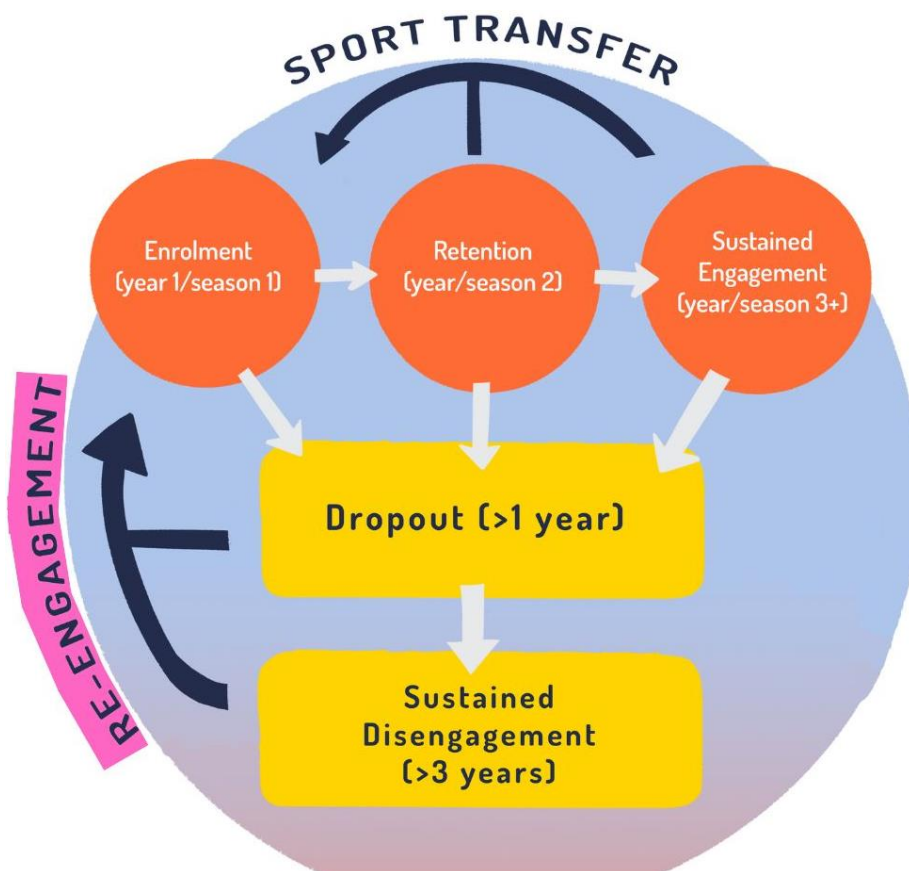
What is Re-Engagement?

While programs aimed at enrolling new participants and retaining current ones are vital to growing sport participation, re-engagement offers a distinct and complementary approach by focusing on bringing back individuals who have previously dropped out [3]. Research from marketing shows that it can be far more effective to re-engage former customers than to attract new ones, and the same principle may be applicable to sport [4].

Girls and young women who have played sport before are already familiar with clubs, schedules, and rules, which can make it easier for them to return compared to someone with no prior experience. They may still have equipment or uniforms, reducing financial barriers to participation. Despite these advantages, most sport organisations focus their efforts on recruiting new participants [5].

Sport clubs and organisations should consider adopting a targeted approach to re-engage girls and young women rather than relying on broad participation initiatives that may inadvertently reinforce existing social barriers [6], making it harder for underrepresented groups to return to sport.

Re-engagement presents a valuable opportunity to increase both participation numbers and the overall quality of sport experience for girls and young women.



Guideline Structure

The guidelines are structured around four key principles, each further divided into two or three specific focus areas. These principles were developed directly from research findings with significant input from the co-design group.



Principle 1: Promotion and communication

- Be sure to **speak to your audience** and use different promotional strategies for re-engagers.
- Complement digital marketing with in-person events and collaborate with local clubs and associations to turn **interest into involvement**.

What this might look like: Women-only programs aimed at re-engagers; bring a friend to get discount off fees.



Principle 2: Social connection

- Ensure high-quality competition environments are balanced with opportunities for social connection, allowing girls to **belong, play, and stay in sport**.
- Facilitate a range of social opportunities for girls and young women to **connect beyond the team**.
- **Leave the door open** to previous participants.

What this might look like: Girls and women-only messenger/social media groups; opportunities for former players to 'fill in' for games or attend training.



Principle 3: Equity and inclusion

- **Provide equitable competition** for women and men.
- Allow girls to **play with peers** and avoid prematurely promoting them to senior teams.
- Ensure your sport is a **game for all** by providing appropriate and welcoming competition for everyone.

What this might look like: Involving girls in the decision to play in senior teams; women's-only competitions being available where appropriate.



Principle 4: Futureproofing

- Ensure that **mentorship** is an **opportunity, not an obligation** for senior women in your sport.
- Prioritise training and development of women who want to coach or officiate to create an environment of **women leading, women learning**.
- Despite **different experiences**, ensure that everyone in your organisation is working towards the **same goal** of achieving equal opportunities for girls and young women in sport.

What this might look like: Women-only coaching/officiating courses; discounted coaching/officiating accreditation for women; a specific girls and young women participation strategy.

Principle 1: Promotion and Communication

One contributing factor to many girls and young women not re-engaging with organised sport is that they may lack awareness of what activities are available or have concerns that clubs/organisations will not be inclusive and welcoming to them. Participants who have previously participated are likely to be familiar with sport and have a higher skill level than beginners. Promotional material aimed to increase re-engagement should leverage participants' prior experience rather than present generic programs designed for beginners.

Focus area	What should you do?	What should you avoid?
Speak to your audience	<p>Tailor promotional materials specifically to re-engaging participants.</p> <p>Recognise participants' prior knowledge of the sport and highlight any recent program changes that may address previous reasons for dropout (e.g. new women-only teams or competitions).</p>	<p>Relying on broad and generic promotional material.</p> <p>Assuming that your high-quality programs will attract previously dropped out participants without clear strategies to promote them.</p>
Turn interest into involvement	<p>Complement digital marketing with in-person promotional events targeted at girls and young women.</p> <p>Consider incentivising girls' and young women's membership via promotional offers or reduced fees (e.g. bring a friend for a discount off both players' fees)</p> <p>Explore partnerships with local clubs and associations to support girls and young women in sampling and transferring between different sports, benefiting all sports through shared participation.</p>	<p>Relying solely on digital and social media marketing.</p> <p>Disincentivising young women from participating in multiple sports concurrently or leaving one sport to try another.</p>

Principle 2: Social Connection

Social opportunities are often cited as a prominent reason for continued participation in sport [7], with social connection acting as a driver of participation among girls and young women [8]. Sport clubs and organisations may benefit from creating environments that balance competitive sport with opportunities for social connection, allowing sport to be both fun and fulfilling for girls and young women. Rather than considering dropped out participants as 'lost', clubs and organisations may find it valuable to maintain a social connection with previous participants, letting them know they are always welcome to return if they choose to re-engage with the sport.

Focus area	What should you do?	What should you avoid?
Belong, play, stay in sport	<p>Ensure high-quality competition and training environments are balanced with opportunities for social connection.</p> <p>Allow girls and young women the freedom to play with or against friends, even at a lower competitive level if they choose.</p>	<p>Prioritise either social opportunities or highly competitive competition at the expense of the other.</p> <p>Place pressure on girls and young women to play at the highest level possible, particularly if it means no longer playing with their friends.</p>
Connection beyond the team	<p>Facilitate a range of in-person and online social opportunities for girls and young women (e.g. girls and women-only messenger/social media groups).</p>	<p>Making social opportunities a compulsory element of being part of the team.</p>
Leave the door open	<p>Where possible, maintain a connection with dropped out participants.</p> <p>Let those who have dropped out know that they are still welcome at the club (e.g. create opportunities for those players to 'fill in' for games or attend training).</p>	<p>Persistent follow-up with individuals who have clearly indicated they're not interested in re-engaging.</p>

Principle 3: Equity and Inclusion

Girls and young women often do not have the same access to high-quality competitive sport as boys and young men. In addition, a smaller participation pool can result in girls and young women being prematurely promoted into senior teams which can diminish the social and developmental benefits of sport and contribute to dropout or reluctance to re-engage. While it is not necessary for sport structures for girls and young women to exactly mirror those for boys and young men, clubs and organisations should aim to provide equal opportunities for all.

Focus area	What should you do?	What should you avoid?
Provide equitable competition	<p>Place equal value on men's and women's competition.</p> <p>Ensure competition for girls and young women maintains its competitive integrity rather than being replaced by social alternatives.</p>	<p>Providing girls and young women with only social and casual opportunities without a high-quality competitive pathway.</p> <p>Using women's teams as 'stepping stones' to male teams for staff.</p> <p>Inequitable grounds and facility allocation between men and women.</p>
Play with peers	<p>Ensure girls aged under 18 are actively involved in the decision to play in senior teams.</p> <p>Ensure girls playing in senior teams still have opportunities to train and compete with peers (e.g. alternate weeks in senior and junior teams).</p>	<p>Breaking the social bonds formed between girls and young women by prematurely placing under-18s in senior teams against their will.</p> <p>Prioritising competitive results over social connection and development.</p>
A game for all	<p>Provide welcoming and age-appropriate competition for girls and young women.</p> <p>Ensure women-only competitions are available where appropriate.</p>	<p>Significant gaps between age groups for girls' and young women's teams.</p>

Principle 4: Futureproofing

Sport clubs and organisations may benefit from taking steps to ‘futureproof’ themselves and ensuring that girls and young women of the future have multiple women as role models and a strong women’s community in their sport. Fostering a culture of allyship and encouraging people of all backgrounds to work together can play an important role in ensuring sport organisations are ‘futureproofed.’ Although opportunities for women and girls in sport have improved in recent decades, continued work is needed to ensure girls and young women have the same opportunities as boys and young men.

Focus area	What should you do?	What should you avoid?
Mentorship: opportunity not obligation	Identify and support women acting as role models/mentors (e.g. by providing training and support to connect them with adolescents seeking guidance).	Coercing women to fulfil mentoring roles just because they are the most senior woman at the organisation.
Women leading, women learning	<p>Prioritise training and development of women wanting to coach or officiate (e.g. women only courses, discounted accreditation for women).</p> <p>Where possible, assign women to coach/officiate girls’ teams, ensuring that girls and young women have accessible role models.</p>	Placing women in coaching or officiating roles without adequate training and development.
Different experiences, one goal	Make women’s sport an important topic for everyone at the club/organisation (e.g. part of strategic plan or a specific girls and young women participation strategy).	<p>Encourage efforts to be advanced exclusively by women.</p> <p>Turning men away from helping with women’s sport initiatives.</p>

Conclusion

This document provides evidence-based guidelines to support the re-engagement of girls and young women in sport. It is acknowledged that each club and organisation has different capacities, strengths, and areas for development. These guidelines are intended to be flexible and can be adapted to suit each club or organisation's unique context. Even small changes can make a meaningful difference, and clubs are encouraged to build on what is already working and introduce the ideas in this document at an appropriate pace for them.

Given the current limited focus on re-engagement in sport, it is anticipated that sport organisations across South Australia will find value in the guidance provided. While these guidelines are informed by a rigorous research process, it is acknowledged that they may not fully reflect the diverse experiences of all girls and young women.

Although this document focuses on re-engagement, implementing these guidelines may also support broader improvements in women's sport participation, including higher rates of retention and sustained engagement.

Re-engaging girls and young women in sport presents a valuable opportunity to enhance participation and improve experiences in women's sport across South Australia. Through thoughtful action, sport organisations can help ensure that young women feel supported, encouraged, and empowered to stay active, connected, and confident through sport.

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