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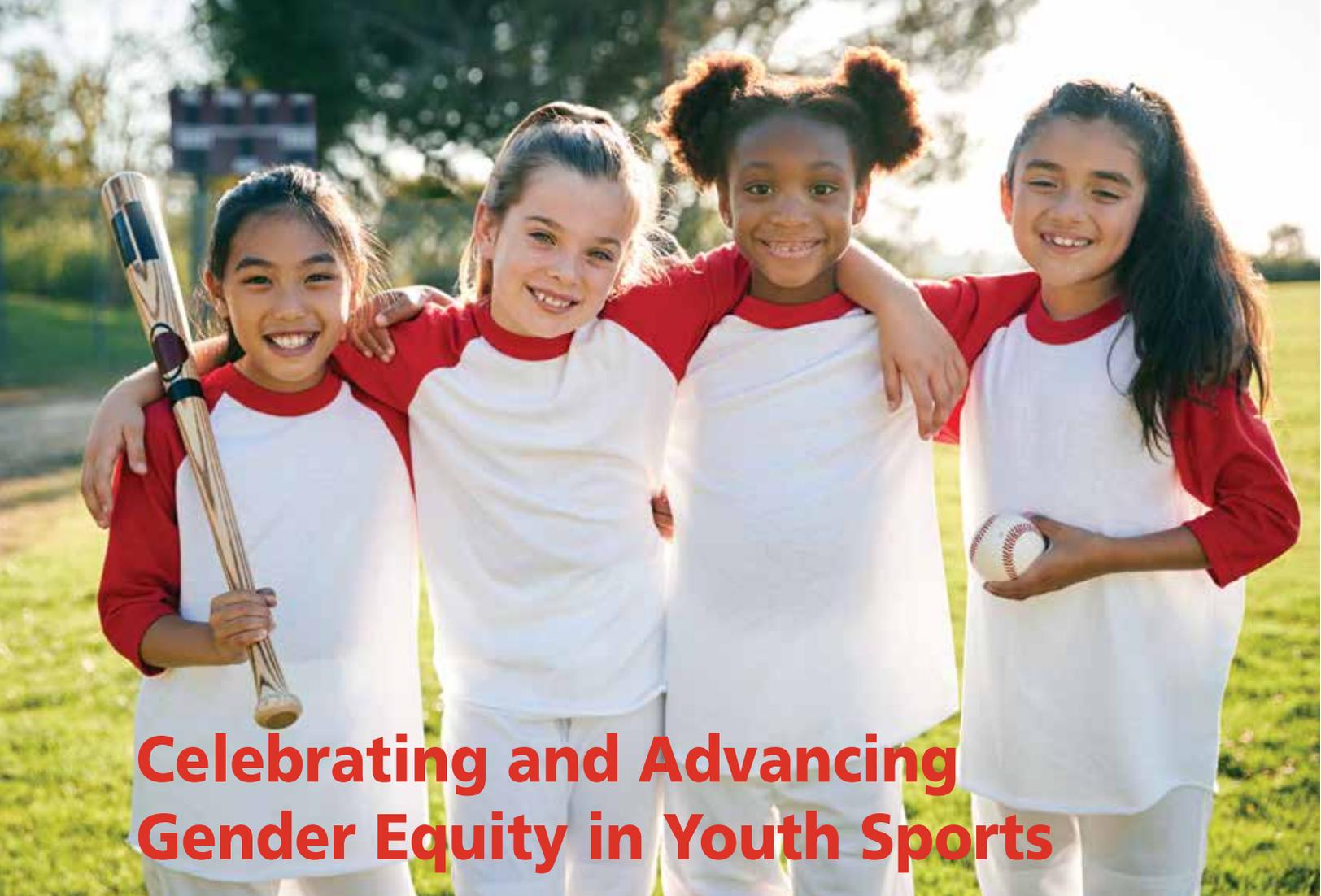
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## Celebrating and Advancing Gender Equity in Youth Sports

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Any girl, wanting to run around, be healthy and make friends, can get their start through park and recreation youth sports programming — especially if they get that chance to play, feel welcome and are encouraged to come back by supportive coaches, staff and community members.

This June 23 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Title IX, the federal law requiring gender equity in publicly-funded educational programs, including K-12 and college athletics. California also has an innovative law requiring gender equity in youth athletics run or hosted by the state’s park and recreation agencies—AB 2404, passed in 2004—mirroring Title IX.

While girls and women have come a long way in opportunity and equity in athletics, there is still much progress to be made. Girls of color in low-income areas are particularly lacking in opportunity to play sports in existing programs. Plus, girls generally often get a far smaller share of sports opportunities in school and park and recreation-facilitated programming, as well as “uneven playing fields.”

There are countless inspiring reasons to promote gender equity in sports. Research shows that girls who participate in youth athletics experience greater lifelong mental and physical health and educational attainment, as well as higher wages as adults, compared to non-athlete peers. To help girls and young women experience greater equity in athletics, park and recreation professionals from agencies of all sizes and demographics herein share many road-tested tips to help girls get into and stay in the game. National Girls and Women in Sports Day, celebrated on Wednesday, February 2, 2022, and the Title IX anniversary in June, mark two milestones to begin exploring and applying these tips!

### Barriers Girls Commonly Face in Youth Sport

Typical barriers identified include a lack of attention and conversation around gender equity in program offerings, staff training and equity-minded resource allocation. It is also noted that girls and young women disproportionately shoulder family, household and caregiving responsibilities, reducing the amount of time some can give to sports, even if they wholeheartedly want to participate. Safety is regularly raised around girls’ access to sport activities – such that a field or gym, for example, may exist in a space where it does not feel safe for girls due to facilities issues, and times of day for practices and games. Girls and their advocates further



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share it can be hard to occupy athletic spaces where boys' and men's programs are ongoing nearby. Thankfully, there are many easy ways to tackle these barriers identified.

For this Title IX 50th Anniversary, we present nine keys for achievable changes in little and big steps to instill gender equity into the future!

### Start Early

Agencies can recognize early entry points for younger girls to be introduced to sport and build a positive lifelong relationship with athletics activities. Ensuring offerings and advertising from the agency or the third-party running toddler/PreK/youth programming is gender inclusive helps invite families, and thus girls. Flyers picturing girls of all ages engaged in sports, as well racial, socioeconomic and family diversity go a long way to signal that girls can jump into the game at any age and level of experience.

### Ask Girls What They Need in Youth Sports

Park and recreation professionals recommend reaching out to girls—and also their parents, guardians, families, coaches and sports organizations—to ask core questions: *e.g.*, do you want more practice/game time and space, what sports do girls want to play, what sport barriers are girls and their teams facing, what would help get girls interested and keep coming back to sports? Such formal or informal viewpoint gathering will help the agency and stakeholders move forward with effective plans to ensure





leagues are organized with girls’ preferences and motivations in mind. Making queries culturally-informed is also instrumental, such as conducting a simple survey in different languages.

### Support Women Coaches and Staff Role Models

Tapping, training and supporting women coaches as role models, coaches and program leadership is a key part of the gender equity playbook. Many department staffers express the power of having a dynamic set of coaches and staff members to anchor programs, especially women empowered to run programs, coach and inspire girls to play and keep girls coming back. Coaching Corps and its partners have a wide range of resources that can help train great coaches to support girls. Roughly one-quarter of youth coaches are women and even fewer are women of color. Recruiting, retaining and supporting women coaches to serve as “game-changing” role models for girls, and all kids, is critical.

### Schools and Agencies Can Work Hand-in-Hand

Park and recreation agencies can do a great deal to coordinate with local schools and other area programs to maximize girls’ access to sports and activity. For example, if an agency is low on facilities space, communicating directly with schools to establish joint use agreements can ensure all youth get that chance to play, such as expanding space for a growing girls’ basketball or volleyball league. Further, recognizing the pipelines in youth sports is essential so that park and recreation offers sports also available as girls enter middle and high school programs. Addressing safety concerns by offering youth sports to girls on their campuses or at close recreation centers can mitigate transportation and safety issues—girls/parents/guardians usually already know and trust those community-centered facilities.

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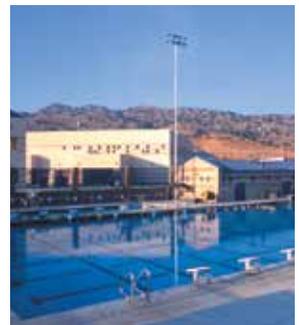
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## Recognize that Girls Want to Play!

Recognizing that girls *want* to play in far higher numbers is a central component of working toward gender equity in sports. Misguided attitudes will sometimes arise such that some presume girls are not especially interested in playing sports. Many girls love sports and want to play in much greater numbers! Start dialogue with the assumption girls want to play, will play, and will come back with the right, persistent approaches.

## Get the Ball Rolling

Sometimes it can feel daunting to instill long-term changes, but starting, even in small measures, to assess for and further gender equity can have a big impact. Begin by talking about gender equity with the city, town or county leadership, and staff, plus third-party groups (*e.g.*, Little League softball and baseball, AYSO) is critical to work on buy-in and understanding of mutually shared goals such as youth sports being accessible, equitable and enjoyed by all who wish to play. Departments can use the Title IX 50th anniversary or similar gender equity milestones as a starter for conversation to celebrate girls and women in sports, equity and the impetus for charting next steps.

## Assess and Equally Allocate Space

Ensure rotation of permits to user groups, including girls' teams and leagues. In many towns and cities, permits are assigned to the last "historical" users posing challenges for relatively new girls' teams and leagues to get necessary structured, safe space. A department can ask groups using public facilities about their program participants and rotate use to equalize space and access among all. Getting estimates from leagues and teams on the number of program participants and the overall make-up (*e.g.*, share of girls participating) of the leagues, teams and divisions, as a part of granting permits, as a condition of granting permits, can provide helpful baseline data to determine if all groups are getting equitable usage. Monitoring teams to stay within their areas and times also helps girls' teams utilize facilities, confident and secure they will be able to fully focus on their play.

## Conduct Proactive Outreach

Several agency staff members stressed the importance of outreach and targeted, repeated advertising. Agencies have



successfully installed in local recreation centers bulletin boards where girls' sports opportunities are announced and explained with vibrant displays and pictures of girls actively playing and interacting in fun athletic league play. Ensuring such information is also available on the web, on social media, in flyers and in multiple languages helps link with a wide community cross-section.

## Re-Examine Co-Ed Offerings and Offer All Girls' Teams, Divisions, and Leagues

Many agencies offer "co-ed" sports opportunities for all ages, yet girls repeatedly note in agency assessments they would prefer all girls' play. Of course, some girls enjoy co-ed sport environments and that can be an option. Yet, if surveys, outreach and focus groups reveal that girls (of any age) would opt toward all-girls' sports, re-examine whether co-ed is working, and balance your offerings of all-girls teams, leagues, divisions and clinics.

There are so many wide-ranging ways park and recreation agencies can discuss and work on gender equity in their area and many agencies have already made great strides that others can emulate. Just starting is key and great progress for girls can be charted with sustained, intentional efforts and persistence.

*Kim Turner serves as the Gender Equity Initiative Director for the nonprofit Coaching Corps and is a lifelong athlete, youth coach, and longtime nonprofit Title IX attorney ([kim.t@coachingcorps.org](mailto:kim.t@coachingcorps.org)).*