

GIRLS TO THE FRONT



Play, Voice, Confidence:
Rethinking Spaces for Girls



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INTRODUCTION

We know from research that being active is really good for young people. It can boost mental health, self-esteem, body image, confidence, and overall wellbeing [1–7]. This is particularly important because we're seeing concerning trends where young people's wellbeing is getting worse, especially for girls and those who prefer not to share their gender identity [8].

Girls are often less involved in physical activity compared to boys [9]. For example, a report by Women in Sport found that 43% of girls who once thought of themselves as "sporty" stopped taking part after leaving primary school [10]. And this doesn't even include the number of girls who never felt sporty in the first place. It's also important to remember that being active isn't just about sport - play is just as valuable. Older children and teenagers want to play too [11, 12].

There are lots of barriers that stop girls from taking part in activity. The main ones include worries about body image, PE kit and uniforms, periods, and the focus on competition rather than fun [9, 13].

In schools, these barriers often show up in PE lessons, where sport and competition are treated as the most important things, instead of building enjoyment, confidence, and independence through movement [14–16]. But research shows that enjoyment and confidence are key to wellbeing, and that developing physical literacy (the skills, confidence, and motivation to be active) is what really supports an active life [5].

On top of this, there are still gender stereotypes around what is "acceptable" for girls to do. Even though more girls are now playing football and rugby [17, 18], negative attitudes are still common. You only need to look at the comments section under posts about female athletes to see this. Since young people spend a lot of time online, these messages around gender and body image on social media can be powerful, and often harmful [19].



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THE MISSION

Girls To The Front (GTTF) was set up to challenge these issues. It creates spaces where girls can find their voice, try new things, and take part in play and movement without worrying about being judged. GTTF is guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), especially Article 12 (the right to be heard) and Article 31 (the right to play). Its approach is based on fun, creativity, and autonomy, with an emphasis on co-production; making sure spaces and activities are shaped together with young people, using principles like shared power, respect, and collaboration [20].

Girls To The Front is a community-driven organisation empowering girls to make space for themselves and others, be their own brand and find their voice. By combining inclusive fitness sessions with DIY zine-making workshops, it helps girls build confidence and challenge societal norms building towards a future where every girl feels seen, heard, and has the power to change the world around them.

GTTF is filling a critical gap for accessible, youth-focused activities that support girls in becoming leaders in their own lives and communities. This includes:

- Functional Fitness Sessions: Sessions that build confidence in safe, inclusive spaces.
- Knowledge Dissemination: Social media and podcasts that share content on health, wellbeing, and societal issues shaped by girls' voices.
- Creative Workshops: Giving girls a platform to find their voice.
- Workshops: Covering leadership, period education, physical activity, and issues driven by community needs.
- Resource Development: Courses, zines, and other tools to support empowerment, advocacy, and public education.

CREATING THE SPARKS FOR YOUNG GIRLS TO FIND THEIR VOICE & MAKE SPACE FOR THEMSELVES & OTHERS.

This report shares learning from a 10-week programme of sessions that gave girls supportive spaces for movement, creativity, and play. The aim is to offer insights into how we can co-design spaces and places that encourage girls' to grow in confidence. The aim is to give practical ideas for teachers, practitioners, and community leaders who want to do the same.

LINKS TO THE CURRICULUM

The Health and Well-being Area of Learning and Experience in the Curriculum for Wales [21] is based on five key "What Matters" statements. These focus on lifelong health, resilience, relationships, decision-making, and connecting with the natural world. The Girls To The Front findings show how these ideas can be put into practice in real settings.

- **Physical health and wellbeing for life:** Giving girls freedom and choice means they can choose and co-design activities they enjoy, which help them stay engaged. Linking movement with creative activities shows that being active doesn't just mean sport but it can also be playful. This helps girls build positive associations with movement that can support their physical and mental health in the long term.
- **Emotional wellbeing:** Keeping sessions flexible and adapting to the girls' needs shows that their voices and feelings matter. This helps them feel supported, which can boost emotional wellbeing. Creative outlets also gave the girls a safe way to express and process their feelings.
- **Healthy relationships:** Conversations play a big part in building trust and safety within groups. Open discussion shows the girls that their voices counted. Working through challenges together also strengthened empathy, support, and group bonds.
- **Decision-making:** Co-producing the sessions with the girls helped them see how their choices could shape the activities. This builds a sense of autonomy and agency, showing them that their decisions matter and has real outcomes.
- **Connection with the natural world:** When outdoor activities are included, they highlight both the benefits and challenges of engaging with outside spaces. Reflecting on these moments gave girls opportunities to think about how the natural environment can support health and wellbeing.



CREATING SAFE, INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR GIRLS TO MOVE AND BUILD CONFIDENCE REQUIRES MORE THAN JUST PROVIDING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY OPPORTUNITIES.

It's about making spaces where girls feel a sense of ownership; where their voices are valued, and where creativity, conversations, and challenges are seen as essential parts of the experience. Findings from the Girls To The Front sessions highlight key themes...



1. Making Space for Autonomy and Choice
2. Conversations Count
3. Taking A Flexible, Responsive Approach
4. Providing Creative Outlets (Play Is More Than One Thing)
5. Transforming Challenges To Changes

MAKING SPACE FOR AUTONOMY & CHOICE

A recurring theme across the sessions was the importance of giving girls space to make and navigate choices. By being able to shape activities around their preferences, the sessions moved beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and instead prioritised autonomy as the foundation. This was reflected in small but important moments where girls expressed their preferences and needs and saw them acted upon.

"E has asked to do bench press in the next session"

"They are really engaged at times and able to advocate for themselves."

The theme extended beyond physical activity into creative outlets, where requests were equally valued. On one occasion, girls requested zine supplies so the session became an impromptu zine workshop and in another, one of the girls asked to interview the facilitator. Responding to these requests reinforced that their voices mattered, creating trust and ownership over the space, sessions and overall Girls To The Front message. Facilitators also reflected on how autonomy supported positive engagement, particularly for those who needed more tailored approaches.

"If I give E space to ask for her own exercises, she engages really well..."

"...there is something to be said for the session feeling safe enough for girls to engage on their terms."

Taken together, these examples show that autonomy was not simply about letting participants choose activities, but about creating an environment where preferences and needs were asked about and respected. This approach turned sessions into spaces where girls could express themselves. The ability to advocate for yourself is really powerful, not just in these kind of spaces but also in the wider context too. Particularly for those who may not always feel that their voices are heard in other aspects of their lives. It's a cornerstone of helping people feel empowered. Within these sessions, opportunities to state preferences, whether requesting to learn a movement, asking for zine supplies, or suggesting an obstacle course, became more than just activity choices. They were moments of agency where girls practised articulating their needs, preferences, and interests in a supportive environment.

By speaking up and having their choices respected, girls were reassured that their voices carried weight and could shape the direction of shared spaces. Learning to advocate in a safe and inclusive environment lays the groundwork for wider life skills; encouraging them to carry this confidence into school, relationships, and future workplaces or adventures.

Success of sessions wasn't measured by group-level achievement, but by the opportunities each girl had to engage in ways that suited their interests. Some gravitated toward physical challenges like bench presses, tyre flips, or sled pushes, discovering new capabilities and pushing themselves at their own pace. Others found their voice through creative activities, producing zines or contributing ideas in games. Girls chose when to participate in certain activities and when to step back, often supporting their peers through encouragement, cheering, and celebrating each other's efforts. Leadership naturally emerged as some guided and coached others with patience and confidence, showing that giving girls space to make choices also nurtured initiative and responsibility.

A key point here is about making spaces where your voice, and the voices of others are heard and respected. Everyone has a role to play in ensuring all participants felt valued and this shows the power of instilling empathy and compassion. Supportive communities excel when all those involved take an active role. By making space for autonomy, the sessions created an environment where girls felt empowered to take risks, try new things, recognise their own strengths all while supporting others to do the same.



CONVERSATIONS COUNT

Throughout the sessions, conversations emerged as a central thread. These discussions ranged from everyday topics to sharing more personal concerns, and each played a role in building trust, understanding, and connection within the group.

Sometimes, conversations offered a space to process challenges outside the session. For example, one girl arrived early and spoke about a new school toilet policy that was causing frustration, particularly during break times or when managing periods. Simply having the space to voice her concerns could have allowed her to feel heard and supported, while also helping the facilitator understand the real-life issues affecting the group. In another instance, a girl shared a complicated situation with a friend that had escalated to involve parents. Discussing it in the session created a safe space to reflect and seek advice.

Other conversations were lighter but equally as important. The girls often engaged in light-hearted discussion, laughter, and telling stories, which strengthened their relationships and helped new members feel included. Even when the discussion wasn't focused on a specific topic, the simple act of listening and interacting, like hearing two girls laugh and talk while making zines, fostered a sense of community.

Giving time for conversation, whether at the start of a session, between activities, or during focused exercises, allowed the girls to ask questions, share experiences, and explore ideas together. Sometimes, the most meaningful learning happened in these moments of discussion rather than during structured activities.



TAKING A FLEXIBLE, RESPONSIVE APPROACH

Flexibility and responsiveness emerged as crucial features of the sessions, ensuring that activities could adapt to the needs of the group. This adaptability helped create an inclusive atmosphere where every girl could find meaningful ways to engage. Sometimes this flexibility meant reshaping the entire structure of a session based on participants' requests.

During one session, when one girl expressed a strong interest in learning a particular exercise, the session shifted to focus on exploring that movement in more depth. This adaptation didn't just meet her needs; it ended up creating a session that the entire group engaged really well with.

Each girl experimented with variations, discovering what worked best for them and building confidence along the way. By giving one participant ownership of the session's focus, the group also benefitted reinforcing that everyone's preferences and abilities could be accommodated while still creating an experience that places value on individual voice and advocacy. When numbers were low, a physical activity session was replaced with a creative one:

"Low attendance today so instead of movement I offered an impromptu zine session. The girls jumped at it so with very little supplies, we made zines using paper and the heat printer."

What could have been a challenge became an opportunity. Sometimes, plans needed to change on the spot, and that shift could open different opportunities. These unplanned moments showed that adaptability not only kept the sessions engaging but also demonstrated to the girls that creativity, play, and learning can happen anywhere, with any resources, and at any time. Adapting to the differences between participants was also key. Age and engagement varied, and this required thoughtful responses. Even within structured workouts, adaptations were made to suit individual needs, with facilitators observing:

"The tabata at the end was most successful as E was able to stay on a rower which she liked while the others did PTOH and Sit Ups. This autonomy really helps."

Flexibility also meant continuous learning on the part of facilitators. Finding ways to balance different needs and preferences was not always straightforward, but when it worked, the benefits were clear: "Finding the balance for everyone was awesome.". These examples demonstrate that flexibility is not simply a fallback when things don't go as planned. It is a proactive way of working that centres girls' voices.

PROVIDING CREATIVE OUTLETS (PLAY IS MORE THAN ONE THING)

Creative activities offered the girls another way to engage, explore, and express themselves, demonstrating that play isn't just about movement. It can take many forms. In zine-making sessions, for instance, the girls were introduced to a simple prompt: what would you tell someone who doesn't feel seen or heard? Some chose to focus on their favourite bands, while others used collage as their first creative outlet, finding their own voice. For some, the sessions provided a calm, supportive environment in which they could quietly focus while also engaging in gentle discussion with peers.

For others, there were moments of overwhelm when ideas didn't come immediately, but the structure of the session, alongside support, allowed everyone to engage at their own pace. These creative activities highlighted that play can be dynamic in ways beyond physical movement. Even without structured exercise, the sessions were engaging, productive, and meaningful, giving the girls space to reflect, experiment, and connect. By providing many different ways to participate, girls could find a way to be involved, develop their skills, and feel valued.



TRANSFORMING CHALLENGES TO CHANGES

Another key theme to emerge from the sessions was the role of challenges in shaping both practice and growth for the facilitation of sessions. The environments created for the girls were not without difficulty, whether due to creative blocks, external disruptions, or engagement. Yet these challenges became valuable opportunities for reflection, adaptation, and learning.

This underpins the importance of being reflective as a facilitator and the importance of keeping logs of feedback or impact. Creativity, for example, did not always flow easily.

"Inspiring some of the group with ideas was challenging today. Two girls were unable to fully make a start due to having blanks of creativity. This has always been a bit of a sticking point – need to think about ways to overcome this."

Similarly, in a zine-making session, "Half the group were able to focus and deliver an idea or concept where the other half struggled. I think this was a creative block."

These moments illustrate the need for prompts and scaffolding, rather than being seen as failure, these blocks were reframed as learning points. These are reminders that not every session will flow seamlessly, and that building supportive strategies is part of the process.

Individual engagement also presented ongoing challenges, as not all participants were equally motivated or ready to take part in the same way. For some, this meant periods of disengagement, breaks, or choosing alternative activities. While this could be difficult to manage in a group setting, facilitators recognised the importance of balancing structure with flexibility. By paying attention to what activities resonated most with individuals and setting clear but supportive boundaries around participation, challenges were reframed as opportunities to adapt. This approach helped ensure that every girl could find a way to engage meaningfully, while also maintaining a positive and inclusive group dynamic.

External factors also created difficulties. One session outdoors was interrupted when "two men shouted at the girls. This made some of the girls feel really uncomfortable and not want to go [take part]." The facilitator acknowledged their own disappointment in how they handled the situation but recognised the importance of setting firmer boundaries with the public as well as within sessions:

"The interactions weren't positive. Need to hold firmer boundaries not just with the public but also members entering the sessions."

These reflections show how safeguarding and creating a protective environment is not static but constantly a work in progress. Something that can be co-created with participants. These reflections demonstrate that challenges are not a sign of weakness within the sessions but a valuable aspect of creating inclusive environments. They encouraged facilitators to adapt, to reflect on their practice, and to model resilience for the girls. In this way, challenges were consistently transformed into opportunities for change and improvement.





WE CAN SUPPORT THE CREATION OF SPACES AND MOVEMENTS THAT ARE CO-PRODUCED, SAFE AND INCLUSIVE. COLLECTIVELY, THESE THEMES SHOW THAT WELLBEING IS NURTURED NOT JUST THROUGH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, BUT THROUGH EXPERIENCES THAT INTEGRATE MOVEMENT, CREATIVITY, INTERACTION, AND AUTONOMY, PRINCIPLES WHICH ARE EMPHASISED IN THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING AOLE OF THE CURRICULUM FOR WALES.

Future practice should continue to prioritise autonomy, choice, and responsive facilitation, ensuring that girls can shape activities, explore challenges, and express themselves creatively. Spaces should provide opportunities for conversation, while remaining flexible to adapt to attendance, interests, or unexpected circumstances. Ongoing reflection and evaluation is key to refining practice and sharing insights with schools, youth organisations, and policymakers to support inclusive, environments that help young girls feel empowered.

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