Longitudinal trends in sport participation and retention of women and girls

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**Background:** Measurement and analysis of sport participation data is important to understand trends, to inform decision making related to sport policy and strategies, in an effort to get more people playing sport.

**Aims/Methods:** This study analysed sport participation, retention and drop-out of women and girls over 7 years (2010-2017) in a popular Australian female team sport.

All participants (n= 29,225) in the base year (2010) were tracked over the 7 year period. Participants were classified as the total number of years played, as well as their overall pattern of participation.

Differences between age groups were analysed.

**Results:** Overall, there were considerable differences in the years playing the sport. Across the whole age range (4-96 years) 15% of players played continuously for the 7 years.

Continuous participation peaked for those aged 6-9 years, before decreasing to the lowest retention amongst 15-19 year olds. This was also the age where there was the highest single year only participation and the highest rates of drop-out and no return.

**Conclusion:** The optimal age of entry to sport for retention in participation was 6-9 years.

It is recommended that sport has a specific focus on retention, and not just on increasing participation numbers annually. Given the large drop-out of sport during adolescence, sport should prioritise retention especially amongst adolescents. This may include other forms of sport above and beyond the traditional competitive model. We also need to acknowledge that during adolescence many, particularly girls, prefer to play in more individual, non-competitive and unstructured types of physical activity.

Consideration needs to be given to the age appropriateness of sports programs and competitions to very young participants, as they may not be developmentally ready for organised sport programs and competition.

Further, sport needs to consider sport programs offerings for those who want to enter sport later in life and who do not have the sport-specific skills relative to their peers who currently play.

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