



## Early Adolescent Girls Develop their Self-Worth through Participation and Achievement

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*2022 marked 50 years since the passing of Title IX, which allowed girls and women to have equal opportunities to participate in sports. One of the impacts this bill has had on girls is that participation and achievement in sports help early adolescent girls develop their self-worth. A finding from a recent phenomenological study on early adolescent girls' self-worth found that girls develop self-worth through feeling competent in important capacities in their lives. This article will focus especially on the development of self-worth as it connects participation in sports to the impact of Title IX on girls. Furthermore, the participants' related understanding of misogyny, violence against women, and achievement in a patriarchal society will be discussed in order to improve safety and inclusion for girls in sports.*

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Adolescence is a time when many girls struggle to develop positive self-worth. Girls entering early adolescence experience a significant drop in how they feel about themselves; scholars and girls are unable to understand the cause of this drop (Biro et al., 2006; Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005; Steiger et al., 2014). The decrease in feelings of self-worth has a long-lasting impact on their mental health (Steiger et al., 2014; Trzesniewski et al., 2006). A recent phenomenological study of how adolescent girls understand self-worth found that a significant way early adolescent girls develop their self-worth is through their participation in and excelling at sports. Before 1972 this participation would not have been possible.

Title IX which was enacted in 1972, is the federal law prohibiting sex discrimination in education. This law was enacted to not only ensure that girls are not discriminated against in school but also that girls and women had equal rights to participate in sports at institutions that receive federal funding and that they were free from discrimination in the arena of sports (Title IX, 2018). According to the Women's Sports Foundation (2019), since the enactment of this law "there has been a 545% increase in the percentage of women playing college sports and a 990% increase in the percentage of women playing high school sports". This law has greatly impacted

generations of women and girls for whom this opportunity has shaped their life, including as an avenue for developing their self-worth.

### **Girls in Sports: The Longterm Impact of Title IX**

Many studies report the impact sports have on how girls feel about themselves: the finding of the current study furthers this research by providing an understanding of the importance of sports in the development of self-worth (Bang et al., 2020; Daniels & Leaper, 2006; DeBate et al., 2009; Zarrett et al., 2018). The generation of girls who participated in this study was raised in a world where girls are encouraged to excel in sports by the adults in their lives. This could be in part because their mothers were the first to feel the joy of being an athlete due to Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 (2018). Title IX paved the way for equity and introduced new opportunities for girls and women while also significantly increasing the participation of girls in sports. The increase in opportunity and female athletes may have also influenced the importance of excelling in academics and sports. Since girls' self-worth is developed through participation and achievement in sports the importance of Title IX is paramount for the preservation of self-worth in girls.

Title IX has three main provisions for schools that receive federal funding. First, accommodations are based on student interest and abilities. Second, scholarships for all athletes. Finally, a significant list of benefits for the athletes includes but is not limited to access to equipment and supplies, per diem for travel, training facilities, coaches and trainers, and publicity (Women In Sports Foundation, 2019). Another significant part of the act is protection against sexual harassment. This area of the act states that all students including student-athletes are protected from sexual harassment and assault by coaches, faculty and administrators, and other students (Education Amendments Act of 1972, 2018). It goes on to state that harassment based on gender is an explicit violation (Education Amendments Act of 1972, 2018). This ideal set forth by Title IX was not how the participants understood the world they live in, a world filled with misogyny. Girls as young as 11 expressed concerns about being assaulted during their lifetime. Safely participating in sports is important in developing positive self-worth and ideally is protected under Title IX (Education Amendments Act of 1972, 2018).

The protections of Title IX have laid the groundwork for girls and women to participate in sports for more than a generation. There has been a significant increase in participation in sports since the enactment of Title IX. Within the first 20 years of Title IX girls' participation in high school sports increased from 1 in 27 to 1 in 3 (Stevenson, 2007). Other research has found that participation in sports has a positive impact on self-esteem (Bang et al., 2020; Daniels & Leaper, 2006; DeBate et al., 2009; Zarrett et al., 2018). This phenomenological study set out to answer the question: "How do early adolescent girls understand self-worth?" One key finding suggests that participation and success in sports is a key to development of self-worth.

## **Methods**

### **Inclusion Criteria**

The inclusion criteria for this phenomenological study were cisgender early adolescent girls between the ages of 11 and 14. This study focused specifically on cisgender girls because transgender girls will have vastly different experiences with their self-worth. Their experiences should be explored in a separate study of their unique experiences.

### **Sample Size**

Adolescence is described in three parts: early (10–13), middle (14–17), and late (18 to early 20s) (Smetana et al., 2006). According to the American Community Survey (2016) there are just over 10 million early adolescents (10- to 14-year-old) girls in the United States. The sample for this study was 20 girls aged 11–14 recruited from across the United States. At this number of participants themes were confirmed and saturation was reached.

The participants were chosen using a purposive sampling method. This sampling method is used when the researcher seeks specific information that can only be provided by a specific population (Padgett, 2016). The age breakdown for the sample was five 11-year-old girls, seven 12-year-old girls, three 13-year-old girls, and five 14-year-old girls. The grade level breakdown was as follows: one 5th grader, four 6th graders, eight 7th graders, two 8th graders, and five 9th graders. The racial breakdown was as follows: five identified as Black or African American, one identified as Black and Native American, one identified as Latina, and 13 were White. This racial breakdown mirrors that of the adolescent population of the United States of America. Half of the participants were from New York State, with eight being from the NYC Metropolitan area. Four participants were from Colorado. Three participants were from Texas. One participant was from Minnesota, one from Tennessee, and one from Pennsylvania. There were two sets of sisters among the participants and one group of cousins.

### **Semi-Structured Interview**

The interview was piloted on two early adolescent girls, both age 11, specifically to make sure that all questions were easily understood by the youngest age in the sample. They both agreed that the questions were clear. The interview guide started with the least sensitive questions, building toward more sensitive, personal questions. Questions about demographics and general questions were asked to begin developing a rapport. Once a rapport was developed, the researcher began to ask questions related to the research question. The first group of questions were about relationships. Each participant filled out a diagram (what kind of diagram), visually describing her relationships; the participant was in the center of the circles, with people in her life arranged in order of closeness of relationships. Questions about friendships and relationships with adults occurred in this section. Next, to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of self-worth, developmentally appropriate language was used to ask questions about how the participant felt about herself, her understanding of the construct of self-worth, and how safety influenced feelings of self-worth. The research used Exploring New Options image cards (<https://visualsspeak.com/product/exploring-new-options/>) to assist the participants if they were struggling to find the words to describe what they were feeling. The cards had photos and drawings with different images. Next were general questions about what it was like to be an adolescent girl. Once the interview questions were complete, the researcher asked the participant

to fill out a second diagram describing a perfect support system. At the end of the interview, the researcher asked the participant if they had any final thoughts.

### **Data Analysis and Triangulation**

The phenomenological approach was used to analyze the data using four phases: stating the researcher's experiences with self-worth, developing a textual description, developing a structural description, and writing the essence of the phenomena based on the textual and structural descriptions.

Triangulation was used to ensure the validity of this phenomenological study. The data used in triangulation were the interviews, the field notes, and consulting with other scholars. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed directly after the interviews. The field notes were used to confirm the information transcribed. The researcher also consulted with other scholars as themes were emerging.

In Phase I, the researcher stated her own experience with self-worth so the focus was on the participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2007). This included the researcher's full description of her experience with self-worth, as an adolescent girl and as a female clinician working with adolescent girls (Moustakas, 1994). This is an important part of heuristic, phenomenological research.

During Phase II, the researcher identified a list of significant statements about the phenomenon based on the transcripts from the individual interviews. Once the statements began to take shape, she created a code book listing the statements ensuring that they were not duplicated (Moustakas, 1994). The list helped to form the meaning units, and the essence of the phenomena began to emerge (Creswell & Poth, 2007). Finally, these codes/themes were further textualized using the researcher's reflections on the interviews (Moustakas, 1994).

Phase III, a structural description of the phenomena, was developed. The researcher considered the context, including the age and race of the participant, and the setting of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2007). Based on what emerged, further questions were added to the following interviews.

In Phase IV, the researcher wrote the essence of the phenomenon based on the participants' similar experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The structural description of the themes helped the researcher to identify not only the essence of the phenomena but the ways in which the participants interacted with it. An impactful part of the phenomena that emerged was the development of self-worth. The development of self-worth was understood using the participant's discussions about the influential areas of their lives, including sports, and how this impacted their self-worth.

## **Findings**

### **Developing Self-Worth Through Participation in Sports**

The participants of this study indicated that participation and success in sports was key to their development of self-worth. They also had a keen understanding of the misogyny and

violence they face as girls and women; they discussed their worries about being assaulted at some point in the future. They also expressed shock at the inequity in sports. These findings highlight the importance of the enforcement of Title IX and the rules set out to create safe and equitable places for girls to participate in sports. This key to the development of self-worth would not be possible without the rights ensured by Title IX.

Early adolescent girls develop self-worth through feeling competent, and excelling in important capacities in their lives. This article will focus on the development of self-worth through participation, and excellence in sports examining the impact of Title IX on girls. Participants reported the importance of doing well enough to serve a purpose. This happens through not just the achievement of the goal, but also from the determination to achieve the goal. Goals evolve, making achievement a constant aspect of the lives of these participants. This is evidenced by the participants communicating that when they cannot compete at their highest level, they will have less interest in participating. Furthermore, girls' current level of self-worth also affects their achievement and the degree of competence in the activities they love.

All the participants described activities they really enjoyed. Achieving success, contributing, and being capable in these areas of their lives were among the things that helped them to develop their self-worth. Feeling good about themselves helped them to be able to achieve in sports. Inversely, doing well in sports also made them feel good about themselves: it gave them a sense of pride and of purpose. This connection between success and how they feel about themselves is a two-way street running throughout their lives. They also reported that just thinking you are bad at something can actually make you do poorly. Participant 17, a 14-year-old white girl from Texas, said that how she feels about herself impacts her mood "If I'm in a really bad mood, then I play really poorly in soccer." She also describes how her mood can impact soccer.

*If things aren't going too well in soccer and like if I was having a really bad game or practice, it'll make me feel like I'm not very good or... it makes me feel like I'm not, like I don't belong on the team I am. And then I have to prove myself like over the week at practice and I just have to try and keep improving and then I go back to being better like in my head.*

This quote is an example of how achievement impacts self-worth and how self-worth impacts achievement; it is also an example of the drive to achieve the things a girl loves. Participant number 12, a 12-year-old Black girl gives another example of how participating in sports influences her feelings and mood

When I, if we win games, if we win tournaments, um, or if my coach tells me that I've been doing good, I feel a lot better. Um, it just kinda like increases mine (sic) mood, I guess.

The development of self-worth was discovered to come from competence in capacities that were valued by the participants. Playing sports was valued among most of the participants. This happened in various ways, including it bringing them joy. Participant number 5, a twelve-year-old African American girl from NY stated: "Playing sports like makes me happy and I just know that every day after school I do something that makes me happy and that's fun."

The participants independently discussed a drive to excel in sports that came from within themselves. Excelling improved their feelings of self-worth and made them feel competent,

which came from within. The access to sports given by Title IX had an unintentional impact on the ways girls feel about themselves and the way they develop their self-worth.

### Understanding of Misogyny and Its Impact on Sports

The definition of misogyny is currently being debated by feminist scholars (Wrisley, 2021). In this article when discussing misogyny the definition will be “serve[s] to police and enforce a patriarchal order, instantiated in relation to other intersecting systems of domination and disadvantage that apply to the relevant class of girls and women” as it relates to girls and specifically their experiences with sports (Wrisley, 2021).

The participants expressed an awareness that females were seen as inferior to males. They knew that women are not paid equitably, that they are not able to play all the sports boys are, and that if they did, they were seen as female athletes instead of simply athletes. An 11-year-old girl from New York City, Participant 1, talked about the difference between boys and girls and sports.

*The teachers wouldn't let us play football because they said the boys were too strong for us. And like when we did like the track tryouts and stuff, they had separated by boys and girls and like who's the fastest out of a boy? Or like there's this thing, it was a poster that I thought was really cool. And it was of Serena Williams and it says the best female athlete, but then it crossed out.*

This quote addresses the ways that women are subjugated in sports, as it was understood by an 11-year-old girl.

Another participant, a 12-year-old girl explains feeling empowered by her experience and a friend's experience playing non-traditional female sports.

Yeah. I feel really empowered by my friends and especially I have one good friend, she is in wrestling and I'm in golf and ... we both kind of have not a lot of women ... So, we're still trudging through and so is she, because a lot of people do don't believe that... people like girls should be wrestling. And so, I'm very close with her and I feel really empowered and we both empower each other.

The lens of sports is what the participants used to voice their understanding of the inequities faced by girls. This was shown by their interpretation of the 2019 Women's World Cup. At this time the media was highlighting the pay disparity between the men's and women's soccer teams. The participants reported that this was an injustice, and they were in disbelief that others did not also see this was wrong. Participant 12, a 12-year-old from Texas talks about this injustice.

*I feel like, um, girls are underestimated a lot and guys are given more opportunities. Like the women's soccer team, they get paid less or at least are getting paid less, less than the men's team and they've won more games...the woman's team is a lot better than the men's team.*



These findings pose questions about the ways that girls internalize the messages they receive about the differences between girls and boys. The participants learned by hearing messages at school, seeing who can play what sport, and how people were chosen for sports. Will girls decide at some point that they are not as good as boys and not continue to strive for success in sports?

### **Understanding Violence Against Women and Girls and Its Impact on Sports**

Another significant finding from this research that has an impact on how we can improve Title IX is the deep, specific, and prominent concern early adolescent girls have about misogyny and gender-based violence. An explicit violation of Title IX is harassment based on gender (Title IX, 2018). The participants communicated a striking awareness of misogyny and patriarchal oppression in girls and women. A 14-year-old from New York distills this understanding.

*I mean on one hand I can wear a dress and then I can wear pants. And even though if I wore a skirt, I would have to worry about if that skirt is like showing off too much or like if anybody looks at me the wrong way. But I mean they get to wear like a dress and a boy doesn't, so that's nice...I just feel like a boy has less to worry about overall and a girl does.*

Some mentioned fears of being attacked in the future and not being believed if they were to tell someone about it. A 12-year-old White girl from upstate NY, Participant 13, talked about this when answering, what it is like to be a girl right now.

*When I get older you know, I [will] have to worry about people slipping things into my drinks cause then I [won't] be able to go alone and I [will] have to like go in a group.... My mom told me that, uh, when you get older and you go to a bar, you always want to make sure you have at least two people with you. So then when you go, when you get up to go to the bathroom, nobody changes your drink or put something in your drink to like convince you to go with them.*

The researcher was struck by the specificity of the girls' understanding of their place in the world and how this impacts their understanding of the violence against women. The specificity of the participant's understanding of the violent nature of what it is like to be female in the world was remarkable. Their understanding of this was supported by the statistics that one in four women will experience sexual violence, assault, or stalking by an intimate partner during their lifetime (Smith et al., 2018). This specific understanding of the misogyny and gender-based violence they face highlights the importance of sports being a safe place for girls. Recently Larry Nassar was sentenced to prison for years of sexual assault on the USA gymnastics team (Dyer, 2018). Such instances are an abuse of power and take away a place where adolescent girls create positive self-worth. Title IX provides protection for people who have been abused in an academic setting (including athletics) by addressing sexual assault as a civil rights violation (Morton, 2016). Upholding and enhancing Title IX while helping girls understand its protections can empower girls with the knowledge that they are meant to be safe while playing sports at

school. Extending a similar set of regulations to ensure safety in all sports, including those played outside of school, would help all female athletes feel safe while playing sports. Self-worth cannot be developed while girls are feeling unsafe or willing to participate due to fear.

## **Implications**

### **Development of Self-Worth**

The development of self-worth was discovered to come from competence in capacities that were valued by the participants and through the development of trusting relationships. The development of self-worth happens within the context of competence in activities participants enjoy. The participants discussed a drive to excel in sports that came from within themselves. This finding was unexpected due to the researcher not explicitly asking questions about sports. Excelling improved their feelings of self-worth and made them feel competent. The desire to participate and excel in sports is likely influenced by their increased access to participation in sports which is directly related to Title IX.

### **Reducing Bias**

The findings indicate that Title IX's (1972) improvement of the inclusion of girls in sports has had an impact on the ways that girls navigate the world and develop their self-worth. While this study supports that there has been an increase in girls participating in sports, there are still things that can be done to improve this inclusion. Several girls discussed hearing and seeing implicit bias surrounding girls and sports, such as girls being unable to play football. During the 2021 NCAA basketball championship, these biases were seen on a national stage. Women athletes reported and shared photos of their weight room which was understocked especially in comparison to the men's. Mandating implicit bias training surrounding gender and sports would be a good step in reducing girls' experience of feeling inferior to boys in sports. This would be a welcomed addition to Title IX. Exploring what equal actually means. It is fair to say that the example listed above would be understood as unequal. Furthermore, offering opportunities for boys and girls to participate in sports together in school and competitive sports would show that it is important for everyone to engage in sports equitably. Allowing boys and girls to participate in sports that are primarily geared toward one gender or another (for example, wrestling and football for girls, or field hockey and rhythmic gymnastics for boys) would help to normalize participation regardless of gender.

### **Creating Safe Spaces in Sports**

Title IX provides protection for people who have been abused in an academic setting (including athletics) by addressing sexual assault as a civil rights violation (Morton, 2016). Upholding and enhancing Title IX while helping girls understand its protections can empower girls with the knowledge that they are meant to be safe while playing sports at school. Extending a similar set of regulations to ensure safety in all sports, including those played outside of school, would help all female athletes feel safe while playing sports. Self-worth cannot be developed



while girls are feeling unsafe or willing to participate due to fear. In fact, the more instances of violence and harassment against women that occur while they participate in sports the less willing to participate, they will be.

### **Limitations**

The parents of the participants needed to give consent for their daughters to participate, creating a possible limitation that parents who are likely to be involved in their daughter's life would also support their involvement in sports and in this study.

### **Future Directions of Research**

#### **The Impact of Sports on the Development of Self-Worth**

The effect of participation in sports on the development of self-worth is an area for further research. It would add new information to the importance of sports in a girl's life. It would also provide a deeper understanding of the ways self-worth is developed. Sports emerged as one of the most important capacities in a girl's life. A qualitative study on the ways that participation in sports affects self-worth would not only deepen the understanding of the importance of sport but also how it impacts the development of self-worth.

This research is a good starting point for future research about adolescent girls and the ways in which women are experiencing and understanding self-worth. More research into the overall impact sports have on how girls and women feel about themselves would support the importance of Title IX and the need to uphold and enhance its rules.

### **Conclusion**

Girls' participation and working towards and achieving goals in sports is essential for their development of self-worth. The protections and rights guaranteed by Title IX helped to create the environment for this development. More can be done to ensure that girls are protected against the misogyny and implicit biases they face that keep them from achieving at their desired level of achievement.

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