

Embrace Sport

PLAYBOOK

A practical guide to building
better body image in
community sport



From Taryn & Zali

Moving our bodies is so good for us, and sport is the foundation of our communities and our culture.

But when our young people are worried about how they look, they can't focus on playing the game.

We are here to change that.

To make sport and physical activity settings safe, supportive and inclusive for everyone.

To keep young people playing longer.

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2023 Australian of the Year

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Foreword



Kieren Perkins OAM
CEO
Australian Sports Commission

Whether you are a coach, parent or club champion, we all want to create safe, welcoming, inclusive and fun sporting experiences. The Embrace Sport Playbook is a timely and important reminder that sport should never focus on what we look like while we play - sport should always be about having fun.

We know that a love for sport and physical activity begins at an early age. Sport is also a powerful vehicle for personal growth, community building and positive social change. The myriad benefits of sport should be accessible to everyone - no matter what their age, background, gender, ability or appearance.

This Playbook unlocks simple ways to ensure everyone has a rewarding sporting experience from day one. By promoting positive body image, we can foster a community sporting environment that sparks lifelong involvement in sport.

Acknowledgement

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What helps young people stay in sport and engage in physical activity for longer?

- When they feel safe, supported, accepted and valued
- When they feel like they are good at it
- When they feel confident and comfortable in what they are wearing
- When their friends are there and...

When they are having

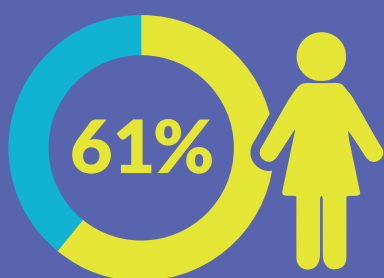
FUN



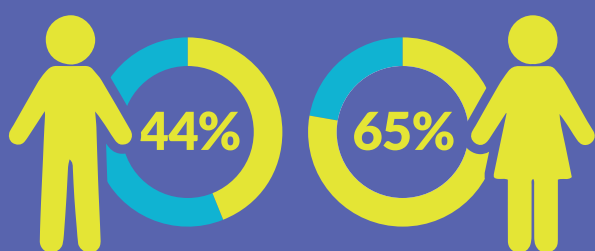
Background: Body image

Body image is how we think and feel about our body size, shape, weight and overall appearance. It's not about how we actually look, it's how we feel about how we look.

How does body image relate to sport?



61% of girls reported 'feeling judged' as a significant barrier to engaging in sport and physical activity (Sport England, 2022).¹



44% of boys and **65% of girls** agreed that they don't like others watching them while playing sport.¹



56.9% of boys and **33.1% of girls** report being called names in relation to their size and weight from same-sex peers, and **12.4% of boys** and **36.2% of girls** reported teasing from opposite-sex peers in sport.²

Young people can drop out of sport and exercise because they feel self-conscious.



How can we help them feel more at ease to enjoy the benefits of being active?

1. Sport England. (2022). Reframing sport for teenage girls: Tackling teenage disengagement. Retrieved from <https://womeninsport.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/2022-Reframing-Sport-for-Teenage-Girls-Tackling-Teenage-Disengagement.pdf>

2. Slater, A., & Tiggemann, M. (2011). Gender differences in adolescent sport participation, teasing, self-objectification and body image concerns. *Adolescence*, 45(2), 175-188. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2010.06.007>.

The Embrace way

Let's work together to end the epidemic of body hate and negativity in young people, so instead of feeling judgement and shame about their bodies, they can learn to move, nourish, respect and appreciate them.

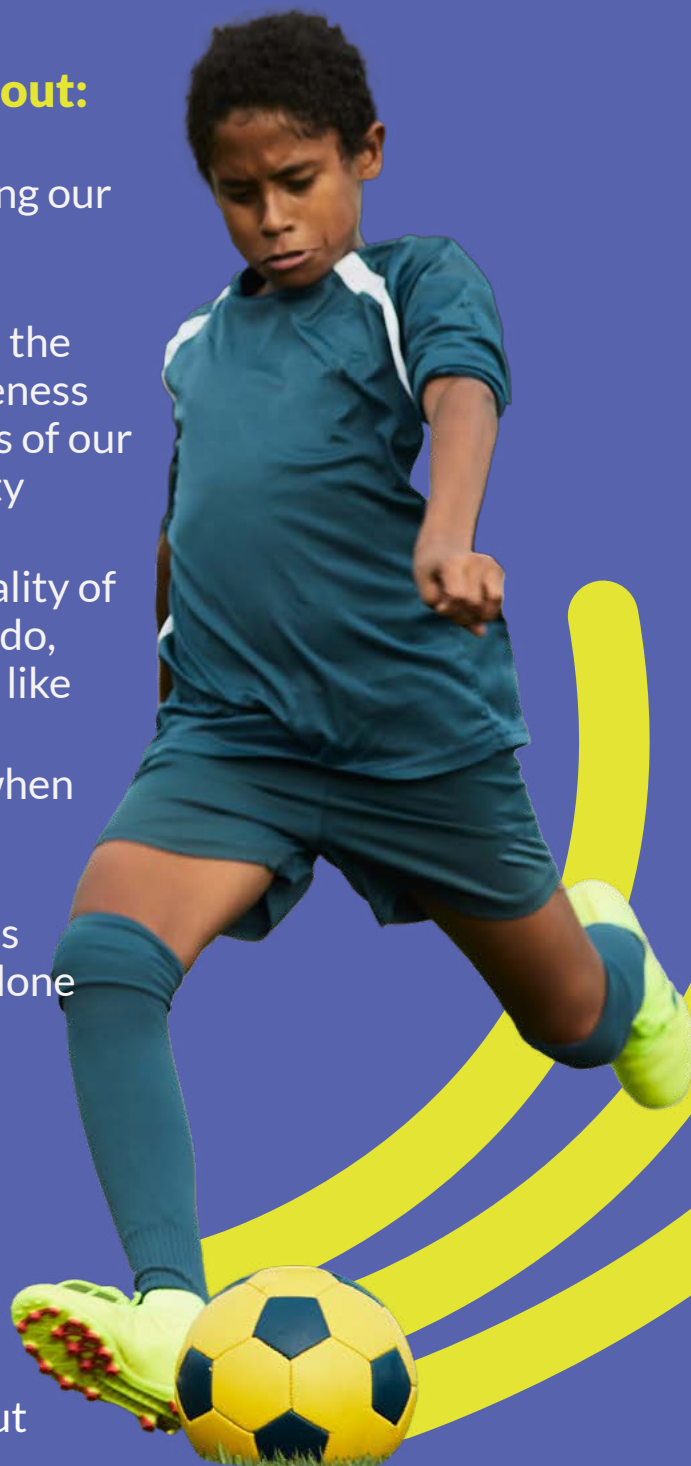
Embracing our body is about:

- 1** Accepting and appreciating our body and appearance
- 2** Celebrating diversity and the strengths that our uniqueness brings to a team - in terms of our appearance and our ability
- 3** Focusing on the functionality of our bodies - what we can do, rather than what we look like
- 4** Being kind to ourselves when we make mistakes
- 5** Following real role models who show us how this is done



So we can:

Do what needs to be done in our sport, without thinking about what we look like while we do it.



About the playbook



How do I use this guide?

This practical guide is for **you** as a community sports coach, administrator, carer or parent, aiming to assist you in creating safe, supportive and inclusive environments for all bodies.

The guide explains simple actions you can take to change the culture at your club to make sports more welcoming and positive for everyone involved.

Feel free to share this guide with your young athletes, parents, caregivers and fellow coaches, and ask them which action they think is most important for your club. You have the flexibility to focus on one action for an entire season or choose a new one to work on each week or month—it's your choice!

The goal is to gather input and gradually implement changes over time that contribute to a more accepting atmosphere for all body types, ensuring that sports remain enjoyable for everyone.

Let's take action

To create safe and supportive sporting environments, we need to take action in terms of what we see and what we say.

What we see (Representation)

Flexibility in uniforms and representing all bodies



What we say (Conversation)

Using kind, supportive and encouraging language about food and bodies



Take action to make sure you are:



Offering flexibility in sport uniforms



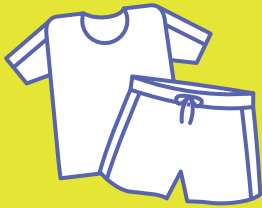
Celebrating diversity and representing all bodies



Banning body talk and body shaming



Focusing on food as fuel



Action 1: Offering flexibility in sport uniforms

Clothing and equipment greatly impact how young people feel about their bodies.

When given a choice to wear clothing that fits well, feels comfortable, and doesn't make them feel exposed or vulnerable, they can focus on the game and having fun.



Best practice

- Provide flexibility and options so that young people can make their own choices about uniforms and equipment.
- Ensure uniforms and equipment are available in a wide range of sizes.
- Provide a gender-neutral approach that ensures all genders have equal choices.
- Allow for uniform modifications to accommodate cultural or religious dress requirements.
- Consider the cost of uniforms and provide options that are affordable for all participants.

What young people tell us

"We had to wear these skin-tight uniforms that made me so self-conscious, I didn't want to go to the game."

"The skirt kept flipping up and showing my undies - I just felt really exposed."

"I was so worried about my arms, I put my hoodie on over the singlet as soon as I could."

Keeping kids playing sport for longer starts with flexibility in what we make them wear while they do it.

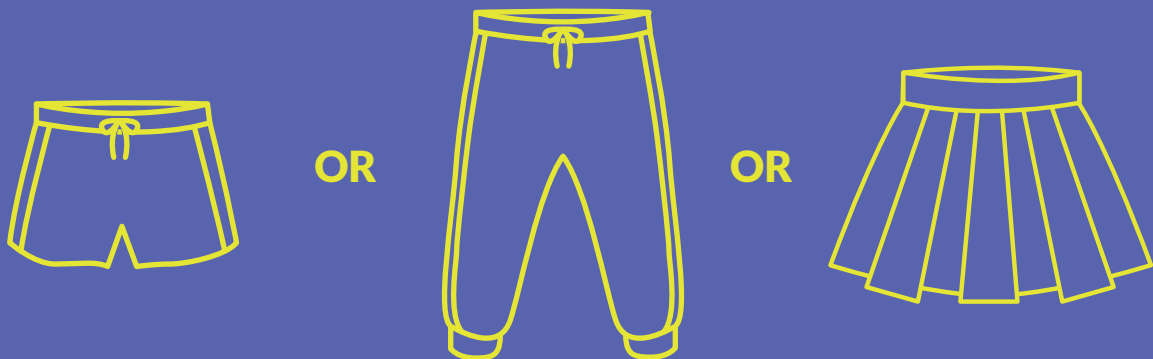


ACTION 1: Offering flexibility in sport uniforms

Examples: What does flexibility in uniforms look like?



Allow a plain top with a singlet or bib to go over it to show team identity



Allow young people to choose what they want to wear on the bottom half in a consistent colour

Consider allowing more options for swimwear and aesthetic sports, and consider if swimwear is actually required for beach sports.

Based on research from Victoria University- see the Australian study [here](#), and the global study [here](#)

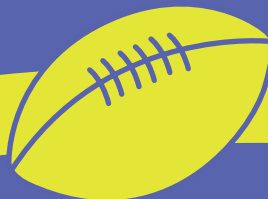
ACTION 1: Offering flexibility in sport uniforms

It can be done!



White shorts scrapped

AFL announces big uniform change to reduce barriers for women and girls playing sport, given the global challenges faced during menstrual cycles.



Dresses are no longer the only option

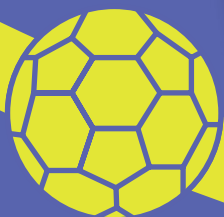
Netball Australia launches a new policy that allows for a 'combination' of uniform items.

See the impact of changes to sport uniform policy [here](#)



Handball allows shorts and tank tops

The International Handball Federation has changed its rules around women's uniforms to allow bike shorts and tank tops instead of bikini bottoms and crop tops.





Action 2: Representing all bodies

Using a diverse range of people in images you use in sport and physical activity settings sends the message that all bodies (and all people!) are respected and celebrated. When young people see themselves reflected in the sporting environment, it helps them feel safe and supported.



Best practice

- Review your social media channels and promotional materials to include images of people with diverse body shapes and sizes, from varied backgrounds, and with different identities, skills and abilities.
- Remove advertising for weight gain or weight loss products and sports drinks wherever possible.
- Showcase positive role models that are diverse, inclusive, and encourage the behaviours you want to see reflected in your club through imagery, guest speakers and conversation.

ACTION 2: Representing all bodies



Did you know: Every time we see an image of someone, we subconsciously compare ourselves to it, and it can make us feel bad about ourselves. Including people in various shapes and sizes makes everyone feel welcome and limits this negative effect.

Here's what you can do:



Young people

If there is something you want to see - say so!



Parents

Advocate for all young people in a team to be featured in newsletters and social media.



Administrators

Conduct a review of your clubhouse and social media, and involve young people in the process of enhancing representation in your communications.

ACTION 2: Representing all bodies

People tell us



“When we were looking for a club to join, we went through the social media feeds and chose a club that genuinely celebrated a diverse range of kids in all bodies, but particularly kids in larger bodies, so we would know that my daughter would be accepted. She fit right in and was so confident, even from the first game as she knew she would find her people there.”

“In the gym there were these posters with really unrealistically thin and muscular people on there, advertising everything from sports drinks to activewear. As soon as I pointed out how they made me feel, they took them down, and it’s such a nicer space to be in now.”





Action 3: Banning body talk and body shaming

How you talk about your own appearance, weight and body can strongly influence a child's feelings about their body. Talking about how young people look can take them away from how their body feels.



Best practice

- Establish a respectful team culture that values diversity and emphasises respect and kindness, discouraging body shaming or negative comments.
- Be a positive role model by avoiding verbal and non-verbal communication about how people look (appearance, body shapes and sizes), instead focusing on the positive aspects of people's personality, enthusiasm and performance.
- Redirect young people, parents, or coaches away from engaging in negative discussions or comments about appearance, either directed towards themselves or others.
- Have a zero-tolerance policy on body shaming, joking, banter or teasing about appearance and include clear consequences for any of these.
- Establish a 'body commentary-free zone', and use appropriate signage to remind young people, parents and coaches to avoid making comments about appearance.

ACTION 3: Banning body talk and body shaming

People tell us

“At swimming, the parents sit on the sidelines and say, ‘Oh, he’s tall’ or ‘Ooh, look at how big she is’. When I hear them, it makes me think they are looking at me and judging me too.”

“In the first week back at gymnastics after summer holidays, my 13-year-old daughter’s coach said, ‘Ooft, it’s getting hard to catch you now you’re so heavy!’ She was mortified, and refused to return ever again.”



ACTION 3: Banning body talk and body shaming

Say this, not that



Instead of:

“You looked great out there.”

“You’re big for your age, so we’ll put you in goals/defence.”

“You are looking so strong and fit.”

“You’ve put on weight since last season - how about you lay off the chocolate?”



Try:

“Your hard work paid off in that powerful shot!”

“You have great presence on the field! What positions would you like to try?”

“Have you been working on your fitness? It paid off in your endurance in that race.”

Saying anything other than commenting on someone’s weight and eating!

Many young people and athletes have shared with us the horrible things people have said about their bodies and appearance that have stuck with them for life.

It’s time to flip the focus to what we can do with our bodies, not what they look like.

ACTION 3: Banning body talk and body shaming

Body shaming happens: Here's what to do

How we respond in these situations depends so much on the context, but in general, we suggest that you:

1 Take it seriously. Most people ignore body shaming comments as they don't know what to do about it. This sends the message that it's okay to talk about people in these ways.

2 Reiterate that it's not funny. Most of the time, the person who commented will say, 'It's just a joke'. To this, you can ask, 'Can you tell me how that is funny?' or explain the seriousness of body shaming comments - that it's like cutting someone with words.

3 Offer your support. Comfort the person the comments were made about. If they heard the comments, they might need you to validate that those comments are not okay, acknowledge their feelings and encourage them to be kind to themselves.

Here's what to say to the person who has been injured with insults:



Validate:

"Something horrible just happened to you, and I will take it seriously."



Acknowledge:

"There is nothing wrong with your body - we all come in different shapes and sizes, and our bodies are good at doing different things. If someone said that to me, I would feel upset about it - how are you feeling?"



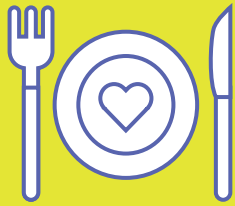
Offer support:

"What do you need right now to make you feel good again?"

"What are some of the things you appreciate about what your body can do?"

"How can you be kind to yourself right now?"

"Is there anything I can support you with?"



Action 4: Focusing on food as fuel

Food is fuel - but the way we talk about food and health is really important. Let's reconsider some of the language we use around food and health.



Best practice

- Avoid conversations about restricting or avoiding foods - even among adults. You never know when younger ears might be listening!
- Young people's bodies are growing, and their food needs change often. It is important that they are encouraged to listen to their bodies when they are hungry or full and the sorts of foods they might like to eat.
- Avoid commenting on young people's food choices - what we're aiming for here is that overall intake is balanced and nutritious, not each meal and snack.
- Coaches and officials who don't have qualifications in nutrition and dietetics should avoid recommending food plans or food restriction.
- Many young people might want to use protein powders or sports drinks, thinking that these benefit their performance... but it is important that young people are encouraged to get their energy and nutrition needs from food first - not supplements.
- Role model enjoying a wide variety of nutritious foods, connecting during mealtimes, and listening to your body.

ACTION 4: Focusing on food as fuel



People tell us

“The coaches told us we couldn’t eat any carbs until after the competition - I was literally starving when I went to bed each night, and I performed so badly. I think it’s really affected some of my teammates, as they seem like they are afraid of anything with sugar in it now..”

“There was a big tub of powder at the back of the training sheds, and people who weren’t making weight were encouraged to use it. It made me feel kind of anxious - I’m not actually sure what was in it.”

“I wish someone had have told us that food is the fuel that powers your mind and body to perform at its best.”



ACTION 4: Focusing on food as fuel

What we say

Food and health

AVOID



DO



Avoid commenting on the 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' nature of people's food choices.

Encourage people to think about how their body feels, fueling their body for sport, and how much they are enjoying their food.

Avoid labelling food as 'good', 'bad', 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' or calling it junk food.

Just call food what it is - hot chips, oranges, chocolate, pasta.

Avoid talking about food as a mechanism to change body size, weight and shape.

Talk about foods that give young people energy and fuel their engagement in movement, sport and physical activity.

Avoid always focusing on what people need to 'cut out' of what they eat.

Consider what young people can add to what they eat to turbocharge the nutrients they are getting. e.g. how can we add more fruit and vegetables?

ACTION 4: Focusing on food as fuel

Food and health: Being a positive role model

Adults play an important role in relation to food and health. As much as possible, adults can role model listening to their bodies and making nutritious food choices. This is, of course, much easier if these options are available and affordable within the sporting club. It is important that adults don't role model food restriction and intentionally changing food intake to try to change the shape of their bodies.



BONUS RECOMMENDATIONS

Pep talks

Try these talks with your team

“Each one of you is different, but when we come together, all of those different strengths, abilities and skills make up a really epic team.”

“Every single person who has ever played sport has felt the way you feel right now. Angry. Frustrated. Disappointed. We can learn from this and we can come back stronger next time.”

“It doesn’t matter what we look like, what matters is what our bodies can do! Tell me what you appreciate about what your body did for you today?”

“There’s no need to compare yourself to others. Just compare yourself to yourself. What you are trying to achieve is hard. It takes practice. And each time we practice, we get better. Let’s go!”

“There’s no point beating ourselves up about it, let’s be kind to ourselves and others and focus on what went well.”

“Your words can hurt people. We don’t speak to each other like that here. Let’s be kind.”

“How does your body feel after doing that drill/ eating that nourishing food? Full of energy and ready to play?”

“What would (insert role model from your sport) do in this situation?”

BONUS RECOMMENDATIONS

Supporting positive club culture

Cut the criticism

Our main aim in sports and physical activities should be to have FUN! Many young people drop out of sport because they feel they're not good enough, often because they compare themselves to others and face criticism from teammates, parents and coaches.

Develop a club culture focused on constructive and positive feedback, rather than comparison or criticism. Acknowledge effort and improvement.



Best practice

- Look for ways to demonstrate that each person is a valuable team member.
- Avoid comparing how young people look or how they perform.
- Teach young people to encourage each other on their efforts, not tear them down.
- Emphasise enjoyment of sport, collaboration and teamwork.

BONUS RECOMMENDATIONS

From this:

“How could you miss that goal? You’ve let the whole team down, spend some time on the bench to think about it..”



“In the last game, Sarah scored three goals, but you only scored one. You should practice more if you want to be as good as her..”



To this:

“It’s not all about winning, it’s about being here, and having fun.”

“Great effort in the game! Great goal - that’s fantastic progress. If you’d like, we can work on some drills to help you improve further.”



BONUS RECOMMENDATIONS

Creating change at your club

Now you know how to create a safe and welcoming environment in your club, it's time to spread the word and get everyone in your club or organisation on board with the Embrace message.

Why not share some of the key messages from this playbook on your club's social media channels, or in your newsletter? You could also survey members to find out what change they'd like to see!

Want to do more?



Host an EMBRACE KIDS film screening



Have a social night with lots of fun food



Have a poster competition to create posters of the Embrace Sport messages



Ask your youth leadership group or representatives about this topic

Action checklist

1



Offering flexibility in sport uniforms

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2



Celebrating diversity and representing all bodies

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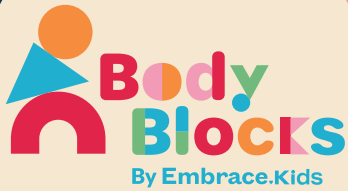
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Other great resources:

- Australian Sports Commission - [Playwell Strategy](#)
- National Eating Disorder Collaboration - [Eating Disorders in Sport](#)
- Australian Institute of Sport - [Disordered Eating in High Performance Sport](#)
- Dove x Nike Body Confident Sport Initiative - [Body Confident Athletes- Program for coaches to deliver to girls aged 11-17](#)



THE Embrace. COLLECTIVE



0-8 year olds

- Professional development program
- Parent pack



9-14 year olds

- Classroom program
- Community screenings
- Parent pack

Embrace.
Kids

13-18 year olds

- Live events
- School changemaker packs

ACTIVATE

by Embrace

Athletes/sport participants

- Sport playbook
- Learning modules

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