

HERE GIRLS CAN

***Jess Carson, Lois Dodwell, Lilly Griffiths, Evie Howard,
Phoebe Knill, Iris More and Beky Williams***

Here Girls Can is Herefordshire's localised version of the national This Girl Can campaign. Delivered in partnership between Stride Active and Active Herefordshire & Worcestershire, Here Girls Can aims to inspire and empower girls in Years 5-8 to be physically active. The Here Girls Can festivals, which run one to three times a year depending on funding, are a catalyst for creating a sustainable behaviour change in girls' physical activity levels. Since the first festival in September 2022, we have engaged over 500 unique participants from 47 schools (equivalent to over 40 per cent of schools within Herefordshire) and trained 88 Girls' Champions to support ongoing delivery.

The festival is designed by girls for girls and follows four design principles that were established by young people ahead of the first pilot event. They are:

- **Not being judged:** Girls want to be active with people like them; for most, this excludes boys and 'sporty' girls. They do not want to be with anyone who makes them feel intimidated for not being very good. They tend to prefer individual rather than team activities to help to achieve this.
- **Feeling comfortable:** It is important for girls to be comfortable and confident to take part; this includes the environment and what they can wear. Most want to be able to wear their own clothes, which are baggier and more covering than PE kit.



- **Choice and mood:** Girls want to have a choice of different activities that vary in intensity (some calm, some energetic), although some of the more traditional sports are still of interest to primary-aged girls. Girls want shorter bursts of activity.
- **Fun:** One of the main motivators for girls to be active, is fun. They want time to be with their friends, to chat during activities and include music too.

For each festival, we check and challenge the four principles by asking girls to tell us what would help to break down barriers to their participation.

Prior to the festivals, Girls' Champions are selected. They are a small group of Year 10 students, selected from local high schools. The Girls' Champions play a vital role by buddying, supporting and role modelling positive behaviours to participants. All Girls' Champions receive training ahead of the festival so that they feel confident and comfortable.

Girls' voices are at the forefront of the project. Consequently, six Girls' Champions have co-authored this article. **Jess** and **Lilly** begin by describing the training they took part in.

During our training to become a Girls' Champion, we were given an insight into the festival, where we learnt about the type of characters that we would meet there: mainly hesitant and less-active girls. This gave us the

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confidence to interact with them on the day, so we could make the most out of the festival and give the girls the best experience possible.

During the training, we talked about the barriers that some girls can face when it comes to PE and sport in school, like worrying about being judged, feeling self-conscious or thinking they're not good enough – common barriers that many girls face and should be approached with empathy, care and responsibility. We realised that these were completely normal feelings and, because of our own experiences and having been in their shoes, it helped us to connect and communicate with the girls more effectively. This made it easier to interact with the girls who attended.

A big part of the training was understanding how we could make girls feel safe, welcome and included. We also learnt how to build positive relationships by listening, using open body language and making sure we come across as friendly and approachable. This helped us to support others without taking over and gently involve girls who might be feeling nervous or left out. Also, we learnt to recognise when someone might be struggling and how to respond with encouragement rather than pressure.

We also learnt how to create a positive environment for participants, aiming to build a supportive and encouraging atmosphere, free from judgement, by being upbeat and friendly, but also free to answer any questions.

During the session, we were also told about the safeguarding requirements, to make sure that everyone who attends is safe and secure. This gave us responsibility and knowledge of how to raise a concern to an adult; this is a very important life skill, one that we can now use in everyday life.

The training helped us to feel confident and ready to support the girls who would be attending the festival. It prepared us to know what to expect and how to step in with kindness and patience. It gave us the confidence to become the best Girls' Champions we can be, by teaching us how to manage certain problems, tap into our empathy and, overall, be approachable and fun.



Schools are asked to submit an expression of interest to take part in the festival, identifying the issues they are seeing and the girls they think would benefit from this intervention. We encourage schools to select the girls who are least active and lack confidence and who may struggle with body image. We reinforce the importance of making sure the 'right' girls attend, so that we can create a safe, inclusive and judgement-free environment.

The festival takes place on a trading estate where several community providers are based. This non-traditional environment removes the first barrier to participation and allows girls to experience the community settings directly. All of the activity providers receive a full briefing on the festival's ethos, the targeted girls and the outcomes we want to achieve. We are fortunate that the providers really value their involvement in the project. Physical activities include roller skating, functional fitness, aerial hoop, yoga, mixed martial arts, dance and net-fit – an adapted version of netball. In addition, a girl talk session provides a safe space for girls to learn more about periods, sports bras and mental wellbeing, all focused on supporting their ongoing participation in physical activity.

Lois and **Evie** describe the festival, their role on the day and what makes this intervention stand out from others.

When we arrived at the event as Girls' Champions, you could immediately feel the welcoming and inviting atmosphere. The leaders created a safe and non-judgemental space for everyone, allowing the girls to explore new activities and be comfortable whilst doing it. There was a huge range of activities for the girls to choose from which gave them a broader representation of PE and the diversity you can find. For example, aerial hoop, which many of the girls found fun and interesting, and yoga, which showed them a new version of exercise they may not have experienced before. We think this was beneficial as many physical exercises can seem quite daunting due to their intensity and competitive nature; this provided an alternative, calmer option.

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Our role was to welcome the girls and make them feel comfortable and safe in a new environment. This included doing a conga line with the girls, which we also took part in, and a mass warm-up to start the day with an upbeat but relaxed feel. In the girl talk session, we shared our own experiences and advice as the aim was to help them to learn about the changes they will go through and break the stigma around periods.

As Girls' Champions, we are there to encourage, uplift and support all of the participating girls as well as be role models. We aimed to be approachable and offer a friendly face for them to talk to; this is important as not all girls have a female figure who they are happy to chat to and ask about the sorts of topics we discussed. The most important aspect of our role is to be judgement-free and supportive of the girls. It has been an absolute pleasure to be part of an event of this importance, and it is lovely to see the impact it has had.

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things perfectly. After speaking with some of the girls, we feel that the festival presented a new representation of exercise that had not been apparent to them before, giving them a fresh outlook on PE, about which they may have felt negatively previously. In school, many PE activities are group orientated, making some pupils feel left out, unconfident and deflated, for example comparing themselves to others or not being picked for a team. Here Girls Can removes the pressure of needing to be the best, replacing it with a confidence-boosting, supportive experience that allows girls to express themselves and, potentially, find a new love for physical exercise.

It is particularly important that the impact achieved through the festival is sustainable. Examples of long-term change are increased participation in extra-curricular clubs, greater confidence to engage in PE lessons and whole-school changes, such as alternative kit or girls-only sessions.

Phoebe and **Iris** share their perspective on the legacy of Here Girls Can, both for themselves and their school.

Since being a Girls' Champion, we have become more comfortable in discussing topics such as periods and sports bras. We hope we have had a similar impact on the girls we worked with as we believe it's important to feel confident when talking about your body and the changes that it goes through. We also appreciate the conversations about puberty which may not have happened when we were that age. We have asked the girls who attended the festival to give feedback on changes they would like to make in their PE lessons.

One change that has occurred in our school is the introduction of period products in changing rooms and certain toilets. This helps girls who aren't as confident in asking for help when it comes to menstrual issues.



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In the girls' changing rooms, we have information that encourages girls to wear sports bras for their breast health so they're more comfortable during physical activity. A Here Girls Can trampolining club has also been introduced at school, supported by Girls' Champions. This encourages girls who have never taken part in extra-curricular activities to join in and do exercise in a fun way without feeling self-conscious.

We want there to be more open conversations about changes in girls' bodies and break the stigma surrounding periods. Also, we wish for schools to introduce more fun, judgement-free, exciting ways to exercise in PE. This would encourage students who aren't as confident to take part. Establishing individual sporting activities could help girls to feel less uncomfortable during lessons.

Now we have evidence of long-term, sustained impact and behaviour change, it is even more imperative that we continue to deliver and develop Here Girls Can in Herefordshire. Here Girls Can envisions a future where every girl feels empowered to participate in physical activity. Our mission to inspire confidence and create inclusive opportunities for girls will continue with our next phase: a Girls' Champions conference, training 60 secondary school students to be Girls' Champions in their own school. Students will have the opportunity to experience an enhanced training programme, focusing on topics such as sports bras and periods, whilst helping them to understand how they can enable change. This will help to broaden the reach of the project and ensure more girls can benefit from the support of Girls' Champions. More Here Girls Can festivals will also be planned to support a new cohort of the least active girls. We will continue to embed collaboration and co-design into Here Girls Can, ensuring that girls' voices are heard and listened to, to make a lasting impact and level the playing field. ■

Jess Carson, Lois Dodwell, Lilly Griffiths, Evie Howard, Phoebe Knill and **Iris More** are Girls' Champions from The Bishop of Hereford's Bluecoat School.

Beky Williams is Managing Director of Stride Active.