



COACHING WOMEN AND GIRLS

coach 

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of the AFL Women's (AFLW) competition in 2017 led to a boom in Women & Girls participating in football across the country.

Since the establishment of a national competition, the number of girls and women playing has increased from circa 319,000 in 2015 to 353,000 in 2021 with nearly 2700 women's & girls community football teams competing across the country.

Women & Girls who umpire, coach and administer our sport are still under-represented at all levels of the game. This is particularly evident in our elite competitions.

The AFL is committed to Gender Equality at all levels of the game.

Greater diversity in Community Football will drive greater innovation and improved decision making, shaping a future that benefits us all.

The better the balance, the better the world.

The purpose of this guide is to support coaches of Women's & Girls' football teams at all levels.

As such it focuses on general principles relevant to varying skills and abilities. It has been designed to offer coaches practical ideas and strategies that they can implement at their Club, School or Auskick Centre.



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UNDERSTANDING WOMEN AND GIRLS

It is commonly known across the education and sporting sectors, that there are more similarities than differences when teaching and coaching girls compared to boys. Research recently conducted by the Women's Sports Foundations found that it is not the elements of sport itself that can be a barrier to women & girls participating. In fact, on average, women & girls enjoy the key elements of sport such as; competitiveness, team building, achieving goals and feeling athletic¹.

Cultural norms that centre around gender continues to be the number one factor in attracting and retaining women & girls. This could include the belief of parents and friends that football is a 'boys' sport' as well as a lack of women & girls as role models.

According to [AUS Sport](#), some of the barriers for women & girls playing sport are²;

Barriers (Women)

- » Not enough time/too many other commitments
- » Cost (child care, transport, facilities, specific clothing / equipment)
- » Concerns / self-consciousness about appearance, body image, skills
- » Poor health or injury
- » Competitive / male dominated sports culture
- » Limited media coverage / role models
- » Social stereotyping (sexuality and ability), harassment
- » Peer pressure (to not participate)

Barriers (Girls)

Being the wrong age (too old / young) for available activities is the primary barrier for children up to 8 years.

For girls 9-14 years the main barriers are:

- » Lack of confidence (in competence / self)
- » Don't like sport or physical activity
- » Not enough time / too many other commitments
- » Cost of activities / transport
- » Peer pressure (to not participate)

As a coach of a women's or girls' Australian Rules football team, you have the opportunity to help overcome some of these barriers. The same research by the Women's Sports Foundation found that a participant's relationship with their coach is one of the biggest factors in whether a participant will be continue to play¹.

Just like coaching men & boys, women & girls as athletes are all different and have varying skill levels. Coaches may adopt good coaching principles and practices such as striving to meet individual needs so that their players, regardless of gender, experience optimal enjoyment and performance.

Understanding the context and needs of your playing group, as a team and as individuals, will enable you to tailor your coaching to suit. For example, are you coaching a State League team which is focused on competing and team performance, or are you a community club team who are playing more for social reasons - to connect and have fun? Coaches can change up their approach to suit the goals and needs of the team they are coaching.

MAXIMIZING GIRLS' PLAY & POTENTIAL

GIRLS LOVE TO PLAY & COMPETE

93%

OF GIRLS AGES 7-13 WHO PARTICIPATE IN SPORT LIKE (OR LOVE!) TO PLAY

3/4

OF GIRLS WHO LOVE TO PLAY PLAN TO PLAY IN HIGH SCHOOL & BEYOND

96%

OF GIRLS LIKE COACHES WHO FOCUS ON "FUN & DEVELOPING SKILLS" OVER "WINNING"

COACHES ARE CRITICAL

GIRLS WHO LIKE THEIR COACH



KEEP PLAYING SPORT



GIRLS BENEFIT FROM FEMALE COACHES

GIRLS WITH FEMALE COACHES ARE MORE LIKELY TO SAY THEIR COACHES ARE:



POSITIVE ROLE MODELS



GOOD LISTENERS



PEOPLE GIRLS CAN COUNT ON

THE SIX PRIMARY COACHING COMPETENCIES

The International Sport Coaching Framework developed by the International Coaching Council of Excellence (ICCE, 2012), specifies six primary functions that fulfil the broader coaching role of guiding athlete improvement and development³. The six functions or competencies are underpinned by key performance elements that will vary depending on the context of the coach. However, it is widely recognized that the more effective coaches are those who embrace, attend to and master these broader competencies.

The AFL has embedded the six ICCE coaching competencies in its various coach accreditation courses and programs. The following table outlines the six coaching competency themes and provides the practical application and performance element descriptors for further clarity.

Competency	Performance Elements	Descriptors and Examples
Create a vision and philosophy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Appreciate the big picture - understand your coaching context and any implications for your coaching programs » Develop and effectively communicate a personal coaching philosophy which articulates your purpose, principles and values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Your philosophy » The big picture for your coaching program » What is your why » Purpose
Shape the environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Engage a mentor to assist with season planning, coaching practice and growth as a coach across the course of a season » Understand and apply the principles of season planning including reference to the six coaching competency themes » Establish a positive team culture within and around the team and club incorporating individual and team standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Understanding how to build a culture » Applying and living values » How do you create the right team environment? » Player development » Influencing wider community
Build relationships and guide learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Build and maintain healthy connections with players, parents, officials club coaching coordinator and committee members » Prepare a safe and effective environment for maximising learning and improvement » Understand and implement athlete wellbeing principles and practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Dealing with people » Coach/athlete relationship » Feedback » How people learn and being learner-centred » Managing expectations » Showing you care/emotional intelligence

<p>Coach at training</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Understand and apply skill acquisition principles to teach and develop advanced skills of football » Incorporate the principles of the demands of the game when programming representative practice design. » Demonstrate effective coaching practice and behaviours utilising game sense and constraints-based approaches at training » Apply the principles of Positive Sports Coaching in coaching practice to improve player optimism and resilience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Application of Skill acquisition principles » Principles of play at training » How to set up training » Communicating during training » Planning » Video » Running activities
<p>Coach the game</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Apply advanced tactics and strategies of football in a competitive situation » Observe, analyse and provide feedback - demonstrate effective noticing skills of player and team in practice and competition and offer feedback and instruction. » Understand the principles of games analysis and supporting tools such as video to gather and examine data to gauge progress and improve performance » Apply the rules of football in skill sessions and game strategy planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Team playing strategy » Principles of play in the game » Game day communication » Game day structures » Game day planning » In the coaching box » Feedback during a game
<p>Personal learning and reflection</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Constantly seek opportunities for formal and informal learning to ensure continuous growth » Know your strengths & weaknesses; self-reflect on coaching practice with the help of a mentor - incl. a review of the season and actions to progress & improve. » Manage personal development and own health and well being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Formal and Informal learning » Reflections » Mentoring » Self-care

CREATING A POSITIVE TEAM CULTURE

Creating a positive team culture around your team's vision, goals and behaviours is another great way to understand your footballers and help create connection between players and you as a coach. Team culture has been defined as a pattern of shared assumptions that guides behaviour.

In his book *'Coaching Better Every Season'*⁴, Wade Gilbert provides examples of successful coaches and how they instill their purpose and core values to build team culture. These coaches referred to team culture as a mind-set and "the way we do things around here" - instilling this culture 'starts with clearly communicating a small set of the core values specific to their team and their environment'. Whilst values will vary among teams and coaches, Gilbert grouped them into three types of core values:

1. Relationships - building trust,
2. Behavioural - daily actions and
3. Strategic - skills and tactics fundamental to achieving success.

Here, Michelle Cowan, West Coast Eagles AFLW Head of Operations and Player Wellbeing, and former Fremantle AFLW Senior Coach, shares how she used the teams core values to create a positive team culture with her State U18 youth girls team.

"I believe in the four C's of coaching: communication, character (the people), culture and care. Culture is such an important element to the success of a team. Creating a positive culture that people want to be a part of for a long time"

B.U.D.S (WA U18 Youth Girls Team)

We spent an hour and a half on a Saturday with our U18 Youth Girls team working through this values session. I asked the group;

'What do we need to do in order to be successful?'

We had about 110 words up on the board and by the end of the workshop, using a collaborative voting system, we narrowed it down to 4 core values which became our mantra - B.U.D.S;

Belief – in each other, in our program, in our game plan, in our system & in our coaches

United – play team footy

Disciplined – prepared for Saturday, don't go out the night before, preparing to train properly.

Selfless – put the team first!

[Click here](#) to hear from Michelle Cowan about the B.U.D.S culture in practice



Doug Lemov, in his latest book, *The Coach's Guide to Teaching*⁵ describes five characteristics seen in successful sporting environments ('successful' here is defined as that which maximises people's growth and development and fosters positive and supporting behaviours among all team members as opposed to win/loss record). These characteristics are described below, with Lemov's key tips and strategies for coaches to get the best out of their players and staff.

Positive team cultures are characterised by:

1 A culture of error, or 'psychological safety'

Psychological safety is the belief that you won't be punished when you make a mistake. 'Studies show that psychological safety allows for moderate risk taking, speaking your mind, creativity and sticking your neck out without fear of having it cut off'.⁶

QUICK TIPS

- » Remind players that mistakes are normal - "I don't expect you to get this the first time".
- » Praise smart risk taking - "that was a good time to take a chance, too bad it didn't work out".
- » Worry less about a few missed shots or passes and play more boldly!

2 Inclusion and belonging

Being included must make players feel important, happy and supported. When people feel like they belong, their behaviour changes - they become not only more productive but also more creative, more risk tolerant and more selfless. Protect against cliques which are sub-cultures.

QUICK TIPS

- » Implement a 'don't partner with the same player twice rule'.
- » Mix up groups and teams in training activities and games.
- » Foster open body language and eye contact among peers



3 Attentiveness

Attentiveness - focus, constant cues that say I am listening, that what you say and do matters - is the driver of people's belonging and engagement. It also helps players pay better attention and helps create capacity for learning.

QUICK TIPS

- » Teach them how to listen & explain why - "Grab a drink then come in close so you can see and hear me... be ready for questions... this will help us quickly assess the game and problem solve together...and to keep calm and focused".
- » Be seen looking around the group when instructing or addressing the team to show that you notice and care who's paying attention.
- » Use non-verbal cues to engage players who aren't listening - pause, eye contact, raise voice tone - to reinforce expectations.

4 Excellence

The pursuit of excellence, or, learning to seek the best versions of ourselves as individuals and members of a group, is another characteristic of a positive learning culture.

QUICK TIPS

- » Encourage positive self-talk and the process of mastering concepts and challenges through diligence and teamwork.
- » Focus on Improvement achieved communally - when teammates get better and improve faster, others tend to follow.
- » Create an environment of risk taking - of giving one's best and finding what each player is truly capable of.

5 Character and Candor

Lemov's fifth characteristic of a positive team culture is what he believes matters most about the work coaches do. "Character must always be at the soul of the cultures we build ... In the end, our work should first and foremost help our athletes thrive by helping them to become the best people they can be".

QUICK TIPS

A coach may teach and harness various types of virtues, the challenge is how to teach these both on (in training and in the game) and off the field:

- » Moral virtues - compassion, courage, honesty, humility and gratitude
- » Performance virtues - determination, perseverance, resilience and teamwork
- » Civic values - community, civility and citizenship

The following sections provide more practical tips to help build positive team cultures and learning environments for women and girl, specific to the football environment.

COACHING

WOMEN AND GIRLS

Nike recently released their 'Made to Play' resource⁷ that provides key strategies around coaching women and girls in general. Using this framework, the strategies have been broken down below with examples in the context of football;

1 Ensure the playing space & team culture work for girls

Coaches should make spaces as safe and welcoming as possible to all women and girls. This applies to physical spaces as well as coaching.

TRY THIS - "Simple tweaks can make a big difference"

Previously we have spoken about creating a positive team culture, so in terms of making the environment safe and welcoming, there are some simple things you can consider that are easy to implement and are cost effective.

Think about the following;

- » Have a buddy system for welcoming new players
- » Have the Women's players become role models for the young girls
- » Ensure you use kind and encourage language in your coaching that is appropriate to the level you are coaching
- » Make sure toilets are clean, have toilet paper and there is a sanitary bin available
- » If cubicles don't have doors, hang curtains
- » Make sure that men are not moving through the women's & girl's changerooms
- » If drink taps are located in an area that is out of sight and not well-lit, ensure they have someone with them and are not going alone

There are further things clubs can do in creating safe and welcoming facilities which can be found at [Toyota AFL Club Help](#).

2 Create connections

To make women and girls feel like they belong in sport, coaches can model good decision making, provide support when things are hard and share their own experiences.

TRY THIS - "Speed Dating"

In pairs, share a 1-minute story about yourself. For example; your favourite food, holiday, childhood memory. Rotate 3 times and do this across the course of the season so that everyone connects with something outside of football.

3 Let them compete

It's a myth that women and girls don't want to compete. Girls are most motivated by coaches who can create both meaningful relationships and challenge them to improve and compete.

TRY THIS - "Change It"

It is important for coaches to recognise when their players are and aren't being challenged. Good coaches work with players to set goals, to challenge them and to provide motivation.

Within training, find ways to challenge players by using the "Change It" philosophy. You can change things such as numbers (i.e. 3 v 1, 2 v 4), time constraints, space you are using, rules of the drill/game, etc.

Challenge players further by allowing self-direction. The coach who always tells players what to do, or gives instructions all the time, is more likely to lose their players' interest and engagement in the game.

4 Focus on progress, not the final outcome

Women and girls want feedback that is relevant to their development and not only based on the win-loss record.

TRY THIS - "Personal Goal Setting"

At the beginning of the season, have all your players set their own individual goals that they want to achieve throughout the season. For example, a player might like to learn a new position, or another may want to improve their overhead marking. Let your players own their own goals. Refer to goals throughout the season and regularly check in - if you know a player's goal was to improve overhead marking, celebrate that when they achieve it.

5 Encourage girls to be brave, not perfect

Coaches and caring adults can support girls by rewarding bravery, not perfection.

TRY THIS - "Positive Coaching Philosophy"

It's important that coaches establish a coaching philosophy appropriate to the team they are coaching. Focus on;

- » A coaching philosophy focused on continual development
- » A group where all players feel they improved their football skills and abilities
- » A group where all players are included and excited to be a part of
- » Encouragement of players to take risks and challenge themselves
- » A comfortable space where players know that failure is just a part of learning

PRINCIPLES OF PLAY

When coaching women and girls teams, you may have varying range of skills and abilities. It's important that coaches don't assume that players always know what you are talking about. Take the time to explain and clarify things with your players. Remember, it doesn't always have to be the coach explaining, ask questions of the playing group and allow more experienced players help others understand. Give the players confidence that they can ask questions if they don't understand.

The Principles of Play can help coaches provide players with an understanding of the three phases of the game and follows the premise of 'using the game to teach the game'. In its most simplistic form, football can be broken into three phases of play.

1. ATTACK

We've got the ball

2. DEFENCE

They've got the ball

3. CONTEST

Ball is in dispute



PRINCIPLES OF PLAY

GLOSSARY

The following glossary explains key terminology and how to explain it.

		What does this mean?	How to explain this concept
ATTACK	Penetration	Advancing the ball towards the goals	"Get the ball moving forward"
	Possession	Keeping control of the ball by either holding it up or making simple lateral passes until better options are available	"Play keeping's off until you see a chance to move the ball forward"
	Support	Provide support and safe passing options to the player with the ball	"Help the player with the ball find space or create a passing option by finding space yourself and calling for the ball"
	Movement	Moving to create space for both yourself and others	"Continuous movement to find space and get the ball"
DEFENCE	Delay	Positioning of the defender closest to the player with the ball to slow the attack by preventing the ball being moved forward	"Make it hard for the player with the ball to pass or move quickly"
	Pressure	Quickly closing down the player with the ball to minimize the time and space in which the ball can be controlled, with the aim of causing a poor decision	"Get close to the player with the ball to pressure and cause a turnover"
	Cover	Denying passing options to the player with the ball by covering attackers offering support	"If you're not closest to the player with the ball, your role is to cover the passing options"
	Depth Balance	Helping the defence remain compact by closing gaps as they arise (i.e., zone defence)	"Cover free space in front of the player with the ball by maintaining a similar distance between all defenders"
CONTEST	Gain Advantage	Anticipate and prepare for the contest through body positioning relative to the ball, teammates and the opposition	"Move your body so you have the best chance to win possession, support your teammates or defend the opposition"
	Outnumber	Identifying opportunities to outnumber a contest by positioning yourself to support teammates to win possession.	"Move over to the contest so you can support your teammates to win the ball"

PLAYER SAFETY

Players of all ages should engage in dynamic warm-up activities (i.e. progression of movement skills) such as jumping, landing, deceleration and changing direction. For younger age groups, coaches should incorporate these activities into games with a focus on fun and enjoyment.

The following fundamental football skills should be a focus of player education and training for Women and girls:

- » Tackling (tackling and being tackled);
- » Ground balls;
- » Aerial contests.

The [Prep-to-Play resources](#) have been formulated by experts in coaching and sports medicine, to further support coaches of Women and girls at all levels and which aim to improve football skills, athletic performance and reduce injuries. Use the videos and handouts to help plan your sessions and as an education tool for players.



Rational

- » As many girls and women are relatively new to football, they may have had limited training on the safe execution of tackling, ground balls and aerial contests (situations in which head, neck and upper limb injuries are more likely to occur). Most concussions in AFLW occur from tackling, being tackled, or collisions during contested ground or aerial balls.
- » Injury reduction programs can reduce the risk of serious knee, head and neck and upper limb (shoulder, wrist and finger) injuries. Similar activities in other sports have resulted in a reduction of lower limb injuries by approximately 50%.
- » Most serious knee injuries in Women and girls occur in non-contact situations such as during deceleration, change of direction or landing on one leg from an aerial contest.
- » Injury-reduction programs can improve physical function, durability and athleticism - which may enhance player and team performance.
- » These activities may reduce drop-out due to injury and improving physical competency for increased player enjoyment and retention.

THE SECRET SUPERPOWER. PERIOD.



IN COLLABORATION WITH

THE
FEMALE
ATHLETE
NETWORK
GEELONG



WHY SHOULD YOU KNOW MORE ABOUT YOUR PERIOD?

DID YOU KNOW THAT YOU CAN USE YOUR PERIOD AS A MONTHLY REPORT CARD FOR YOUR BODY?

It tells you so much about how your overall health is tracking. It is easily disrupted by stress, poor sleep, poor nutrition, alcohol intake and environmental factors. Equally, it can help you keep track of physiological changes such as your resting heart and respiration rates, sleep, and fatigue. All these factors influence your athletic performance, giving you important information to help you to perform at your best.

WHAT DOES A HEALTHY MENSTRUAL CYCLE LOOK LIKE?^{8,9}



OCCURS EVERY **~28 DAYS**
(ACCEPTED VARIABILITY IS 21-35 DAYS)



CLEAN START,
CLEAN FINISH



LOSS OF
30-80ML BLOOD



BLEED ON AVERAGE
IS 4-7 DAYS IN LENGTH



MILD CRAMPING ON DAYS 1 & 2
(IRRITATING BUT NEVER UNBEARABLE)



SLIGHTLY HEAVIER
DAYS 2&3



NO CLOTS



GOOD BLOOD (ARTERIAL)
RED COLOUR



NO PAIN. NONE.
NOT EVEN AT OVULATION

*THESE HEALTHY INDICATORS ARE WHEN NO HORMONAL CONTRACEPTION IS BEING USED.

HOW CAN A HEALTHY CYCLE BE GOOD FOR YOUR FOOTBALL PERFORMANCE?

Have you ever thought about tracking your period? This allows the high performance and medical teams to assist you even further by maximising your performance according to your cycle.

An unhealthy cycle may impact more than your reproductive system which can have follow on effects to physical and mental health including low mood, general anxiety, anger outbursts and performance anxiety, and gastrointestinal health.

A healthy cycle with hormones in balance allows you to train and perform with your physiology rather than against it.

Hormones are amazing! When working in harmony they enable you to be strong, fast, switched on and the opportunity to be your best.

THE SECRET SUPERPOWER. PERIOD.



IN COLLABORATION WITH

THE
FEMALE
ATHLETE
NETWORK
GEELONG



WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU THINK YOUR PERIOD IS UNHEALTHY?

Start the conversation with your medical staff or wellbeing coordinator - while they may not have the direct answers, they will know who they can refer you to within your local networks.

Talk to a credible health care professional that you trust, such as club doctor or a GP or pharmacist. Sometimes this may result in a referral to a gynaecologist, endocrinologist and/or Women's Health specialist physiotherapist, or Accredited Sports Dietitian.

WHO COULD YOU TALK TO?

TIPS FOR STARTING A CONVERSATION ABOUT YOUR CYCLE AND FOOTBALL PERFORMANCE

Pick your moment carefully to start the conversation, as training might not be the right environment - quite often there is a lot going on. Book a time so no one is rushed.

Remember: Be honest - it's ok to call out that this may be awkward! and use the correct language (for example Period, PMS). Avoid using slang, as normalising the conversation starts with you.

If going directly to a health care professional, it is useful to have tracking data/diary with symptoms recorded and available at the consultation.

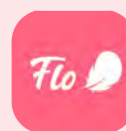


EDUCATION FOR COACHES

Coaches may learn more through the AIS Female Performance Health Initiative. The AIS has partnered with specialist medical practitioners, high performance athletes and high performance coaches to design a suite of online learning modules for athletes, parents, coaches and medical practitioners. The modules aim to increase knowledge about the menstrual cycle, menstrual abnormalities, puberty and hormonal contraception. <https://www.ais.gov.au/fphi/education>

HOW CAN YOU CAPITALISE ON YOUR SUPERPOWER?

HERE ARE SOME CYCLE TRACKING APPS TO EXPLORE



Got a smart watch? In App options such as Fitbit, Garmin or Oura ring can be useful also.

WANT TO FIND OUT MORE?

Check out the links below for further information:

If going directly to a health care professional, it is useful to have tracking data/diary with symptoms recorded and available at the consultation.

jeanhailes.org.au
ais.gov.au/fphi



Female athletes, contraception and bone health, Dr. Emily Kraus, Clinical Assistant Professor, Stanford Children's Orthopedic and Sports Medicine.



Menstrual cycle and sporting performance: experiences from the field Br J Sports Med April 2020.

SUPER POWER

RESOURCES

AFL Junior Coaching Curriculum

The [AFL Junior Coaching Curriculum](#) and its subsequent resources have been designed for coaches of players aged 7-12 years. The prescribed training sessions make it simple and easy for parent and volunteer junior coaches to deliver.

Coach.AFL

The [Coach.AFL](#) platform has a variety of resources available that will assist coaches develop. All registered coaches have access to these resources and learning modules as part of their membership.

Female Community Football Guidelines

The female football landscape across the country is developing rapidly and at varying stages of evolution. As such, the [AFL National Female Community Football Guidelines](#) have been developed to provide clarity and guidance to community leagues and community clubs in establishing best-practice frameworks for female football.

National Coaching Female Football Forum 2018

The [2018 Coaching Female Football Forum](#) provided coaches of young girls and women the opportunity to learn from leading coaches in the field and interact with their coaching peers.

Prep to Play

Ensure your players are best prepared for training and match-day with the '[Prep-To-Play](#)' resources.

Toyota AFL Club Help

[Toyota AFL Club Help](#) is a platform of templates and tools that are designed to assist volunteers to run their clubs.

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