



A sporting *chance*

After years spent teaching secondary PE, Lisa Brown was so convinced of the benefits of sport to students that she's embarked on a PhD into the contribution of school sport to the development of women leaders.

"There's science about the increase in neurotransmitters in the brain through the development of sports skills and physical activity, but there's also the development of soft skills like leadership skills, communication skills and teamwork skills that come with sport as well," says Brown, the principal at NSW school for girls Meriden.

"The data tells us that team sports are more valuable in producing leadership skills. When you think about the nature of a team, all of the personalities in that team and how they have to work together, it's so beneficial to developing leadership skills."

Start them young

With a recent University of Sydney study finding continued sport participation from ages four to 13 being linked to lower absenteeism, better attention and memory, higher NAPLAN and Year 12 scores, and increased likelihood of going to university, Brown says that starting

with compulsory sport in early high school years can help make a routine of it.

"By the time students get to Year 10 and sport is no longer compulsory, we find most girls continue to participate because they've formed those friendships and they understand how sport can help them maintain balance in their lives," she says.

"They've seen that they can juggle it in the earlier years and are more confident about continuing that participation in their senior years as well."

Most independent schools offer everything from team sports to gym sessions for students who want the mental and physical benefits of sport in a non-competitive setting.

"By participating in sports, students not only enhance their physical fitness but also develop essential academic skills such as teamwork, organisation and time management," says Tyren Monteburno, the director of sport at St Michael's Grammar in Melbourne.

"We firmly agree with the research that demonstrates that physical activity has a positive impact on memory, attention and lower absenteeism, all of which assist in improving academic outcomes."

Embracing discomfort

Michael Illott, director of senior campus at Melbourne's Xavier College, believes sport offers a safe environment for kids to indulge their natural risk-taking tendencies.

"Kids are risk-prone and [sport] can create a healthy risk environment," he explains. "If you live in Victoria and learn rugby, you have to learn to pass the ball in a completely different way, and the [risk is] looking silly so we educate our kids on taking safe risks."

In fact, Illott is as likely to encourage students to participate in a school musical as try a new sport that feels foreign. "The reality is that they are going to have to rock up to a workplace on their first day, so if [they've already put themselves out there] that educates them to be ready for those [difficult] moments," he says.

As academic pressure mounts through the senior school years, Brown says that sport can be a powerful antidote to stress.

"Many of our ex-students come back to talk to the students about their tips for success and every one of them will mention how important it is to keep a balance of activities," she says.

"We don't want students to see [sport] as a waste of their time. Breaking something up with a sports activity actually increases oxygen flow to the brain, meaning you're more productive when you do sit down to do your work. [We're] making sure that the students and their parents understand that message and hear it regularly."



From top: Meriden students Lexi Modena and Amanda Ambanavos; Lisa Brown believes participation in school sport is vital to the development of future women leaders.