

# WHAT SWAYS WOMEN TO PLAY SPORT?

USING INFLUENCERS TO UNLOCK  
OPPORTUNITIES THAT  
POSITIVELY IMPACT WOMEN'S  
SPORT BEHAVIOURS



**WOMEN**  
**N**  
**SPORT**

# FOREWORD



**Women in Sport strives to be a solutions focused charity.** Thanks to 30 years of research, we have clearly defined the barriers that contribute to the 1.9m<sup>1</sup> gender gap that currently exists between the numbers of men and women playing sport at least once a week.

When looking for solutions to overcome these barriers, one concept is quoted time and again: “there aren’t enough female role models”. Different people mean different things when they talk about ‘role models’ and the visibility, or otherwise, of them. At Women in Sport, we wanted to understand more.

We wanted to understand who these ‘role models’ we hear so much about really are – and whether or not they do influence, or sway, women to play sport and be more active. Are role models the key to unlocking women’s participation in sport, or are there other factors that have greater impact, and if so, what are they?

Our research findings presented here are clear – role models ARE important, and they are everywhere, but they are not the only factor that sways women to play sport.

We have developed a behaviour change model called the ‘Model of Influence’, which consists of six ‘sway factors’. This new model, never seen before in sport, can be used to provide a framework to encourage more women to give sport a go. This is a solution focused tool that can be put into practice to transform sport for the benefit of every woman and girl in the UK.

For me it was my cousin Claire’s influence, coupled with a love of being by the sea, that led me to ask a couple of friends to join me for a weekend of surfing for beginners – and I’ve never looked back.

I love the roar of the ocean, being at one with nature and testing my strength and power as I battle through the waves, spin my board around, paddle hard and (hopefully) catch a rolling wave which I can play on all the way back to shore – only to have to turn round and battle my way back out to sea to catch another.

I’ll let you read the report to work out which sway factors in our Model of Influence are described in my story – and then you can work out your own. This understanding can help you get to grips with what it might be like for other women, and in turn help you engage with more women and support us in transforming sport.

**Ruth Holdaway**  
Chief Executive,  
Women in Sport

# INTRODUCTION

## WE KNOW THAT THERE IS STILL MUCH TO BE DONE TO INCREASE LEVELS OF SPORTING PARTICIPATION AMONG WOMEN AND GIRLS

**In England, there are currently 1.9 million fewer women than men playing sport once a week<sup>1</sup>.**

The motivations behind female sporting participation are extensive and varied and what sways and influences one woman at one time does not necessarily effect another.

At Women in Sport, we know that women and girls want to play a part in sport and be more active.

We observed there was little research available assessing the potential impact *influencers and role models* can have on female sporting participation specifically.

We wanted to explore and better understand this area with the aim of using innovative research to enhance understanding and drive further and sustained sporting participation.

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<sup>1</sup>Source: Active People Survey 8, Sport England

# OBJECTIVES

## WE COMMISSIONED THE BEHAVIOURAL ARCHITECTS TO CONDUCT A RESEARCH STUDY

The Behavioural Architects, experts in understanding of human behaviour and influence, with specialist knowledge in applying the theories and insights from the behavioural sciences, conducted a research study looking at the impact influencers and role models have on female sporting participation.

The overall aims of the study were:

- To understand how role models and other influencers can be used most effectively to increase participation in sport and physical activity amongst women and girls; and
- To produce research that enables actionable conclusions to be drawn in terms of opportunities for the sport sector over the short, medium and long term.

This report details the findings of the research study and how, through the use of behavioural science theory, influencers can be leveraged to help drive a rise in female sporting participation.

# METHODOLOGY

## OVERVIEW OF THE APPROACH

### HYPOTHESIS WORKSHOP

Review of literature around influencers and **putting existing insights through a behavioural economic lens.**

Collaboratively **building hypotheses with Women in Sport team** - to be explored further in primary research.

### BEHAVIOURAL DETECTIVES (7 DAYS)

**24 x active women** recruited to complete missions via an **online blog/forum** and **paper scrapbook.**

**In-context hypothesis testing.**

Women primed to identify and the map **influencers along their sports 'behavioural journey'.**

### INFLUENCERS DEEP-DIVE INTERVIEWS (1.5 HOURS)

**8 x in-home filmed paired depths** with selected behavioural detectives and a close friend/family member (including **school-aged daughters**).

**Further deconstructing influencers on her sports participation journey** with help of close friend/relative.

**Deepening understanding** around how different influencers impact participation.

### INFLUENCER INTERVIEWS (45 MINUTES)

**6 x influencer teledepths** identified from participation journeys.

Deepening insight into **best practice** for positively influencing women around sport.

The research took place between November and December 2014.

The research approach was multi-stage and incorporated the development of some initial hypotheses (later to become the framework for research discussions).

24 women were recruited as 'behavioural detectives' and identified and mapped the various influencers along their sporting journey.

Eight in-depth interviews, involving women and their friends, family members and partners and six interviews with influencers 'identified' along women's participation journeys, were conducted.

This ensured a range of complimentary perspectives around the impact of role models and other influences on behaviour changes.

The research sample comprised of girls and women aged from 11 to 57 years-old, with different sporting interests and at different life-stages.

The methodology was carefully constructed to provide robust insights and a deep level of understanding,

## WHO DO WE MEAN BY INFLUENCERS?

# INFLUENCE

(noun)

THE CAPACITY OR POWER OF PERSONS OR THINGS TO BE A COMPELLING FORCE ON, OR PRODUCE EFFECTS ON, THE ACTIONS, BEHAVIOUR, OPINIONS, ETC OF OTHERS.

(verb)

TO AFFECT OR CHANGE HOW SOMEONE OR SOMETHING DEVELOPS, BEHAVES, OR THINKS; TO SWAY.

**“I HAVE BEEN SURPRISED BY HOW MUCH MY SPORTS JOURNEY HAS BEEN INFLUENCED BY OTHERS. I HAVE ALWAYS SEEN MYSELF AS A SELF-MOTIVATOR. HOWEVER, DOING THESE TASKS, I NOTICED THAT THERE WAS USUALLY AN EXTERNAL NUDGE THAT LED ME IN A DIRECTION ALL THE TIME.”**

- 27 YEAR-OLD FEMALE RUNNER

At the beginning of the research it was anticipated that *role models* would have a significant impact on female sporting participation, and the research brief was to discover more about this impact.

However, as the research journey progressed, it became apparent that other influencing factors had more impact than *role models* alone and so the research went deeper into these wider factors to gain a greater understanding of what sways and influences women to play sport and be physically active.

**INFLUENCERS CAN BE ANYONE WHO IMPACTS WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION BEHAVIOURS.**  
They can do this in multi-faceted ways:

**POSITIVELY AND NEGATIVELY**

**DELIBERATELY AND UNKNOWINGLY**

**DIRECTLY AND INDIRECTLY**

**CONSCIOUSLY AND SUBCONSCIOUSLY**

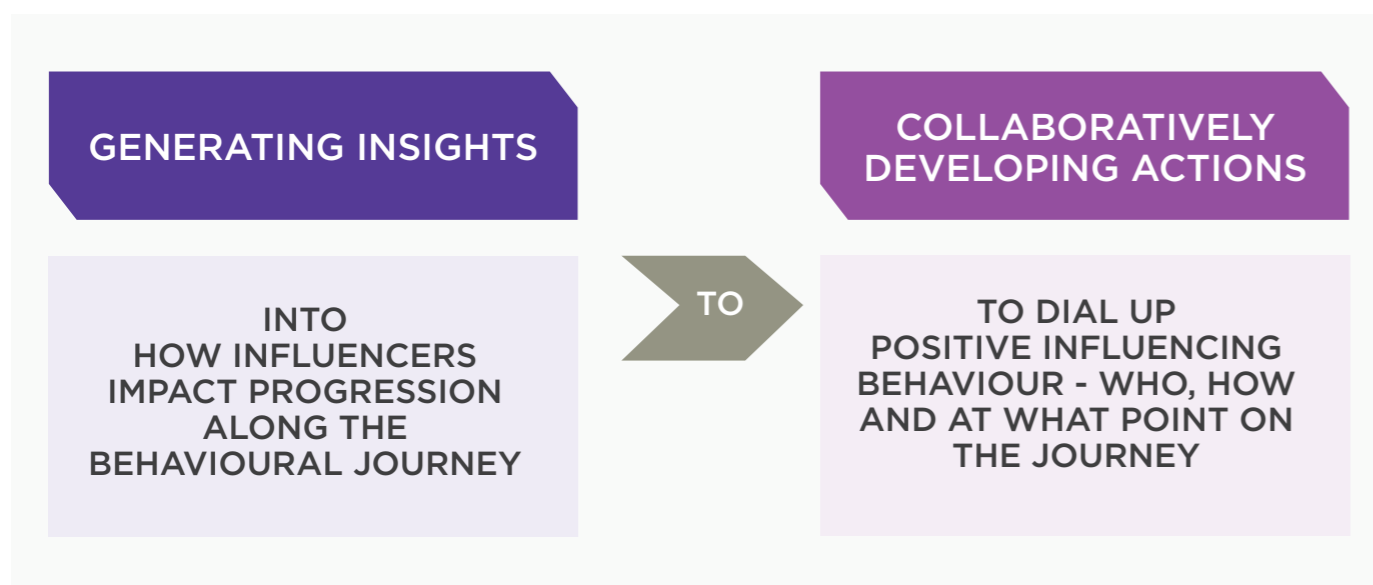
## “INFLUENCERS ARE DEFINED AS THOSE WHO ARE ABLE TO CHANGE THE BEHAVIOUR OR THINKING OF SOMEONE”.

The research informs us that effective influencers are also seen to have intimate relationships and can tangibly influence participation levels directly (in person) and on a regular basis, as opposed to role models who can be seen as more distant and inaccessible.

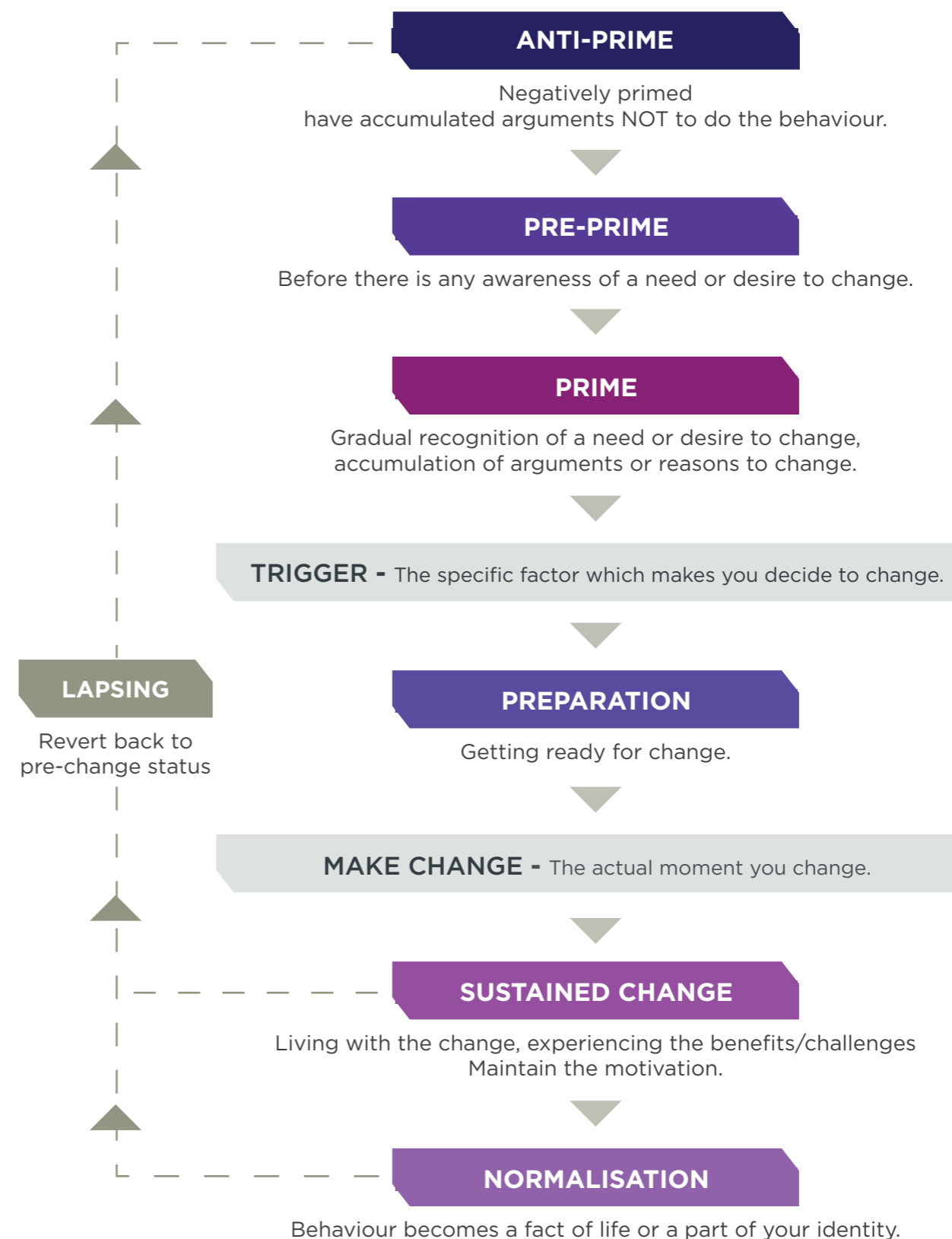
The research findings highlight the fact that *anyone* can be an influencer, i.e. someone who impacts someone else’s sporting participation behaviour, at various points of the behaviour change journey.

### INFLUENCER OPPORTUNITIES

What are the key influencer opportunities at different points along the behaviour change journey?

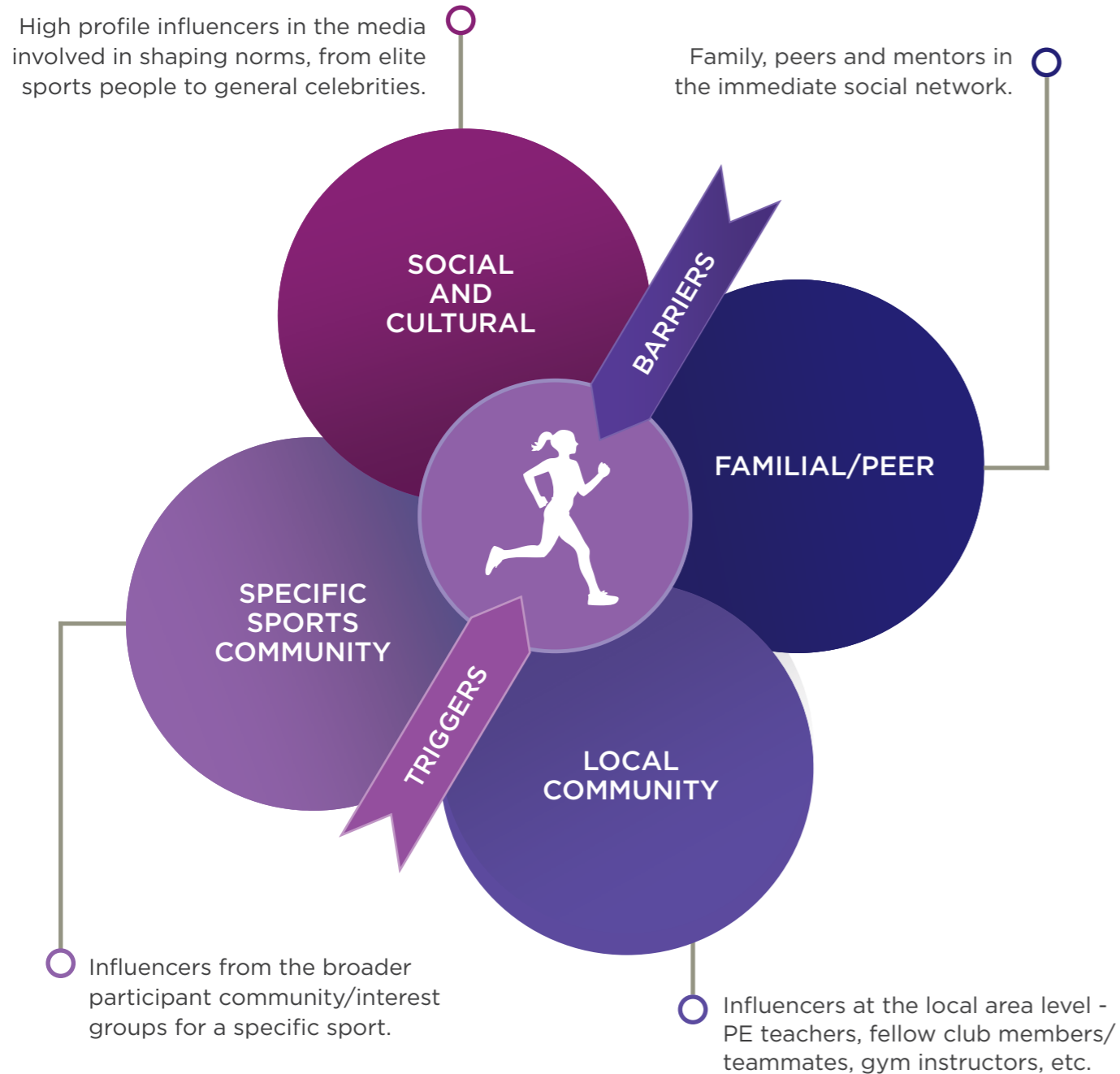


Referencing influencer opportunities along the behaviour change journey.



Influencers are situated within and across different layers of context in women's lives and can impact behaviour in different ways.

The roles that families/peers, local communities, specific sports communities and culture/society generally play varies at different times in a woman's life and can include both triggers and barriers to her sporting participation.



**“IT TOOK ME A BIT BY SURPRISE WHEN I SAW ISABEL REFERRED SO MUCH TO ME AS AN INFLUENCER ON HER SPORTS JOURNEY. I’VE NEVER THOUGHT OF MYSELF AS THAT... BUT I DO LOVE TO SEE THE HAPPINESS FLOWING OUT FROM HER AFTER SHE DOES EXERCISE.”**

- PARTNER OF POWER WALKER

## THE UNCONSCIOUS INFLUENCER

Our research, as well as defining different ways of influencing, or ‘sway’ factors, also looked at the experience of those people who are influencers themselves.

One key finding is that many **PEOPLE DO NOT REALISE HOW MUCH THEY CAN SWAY OR INFLUENCE OTHERS TO TAKE PART IN SPORT.**


Being an influencer is also not always a conscious decision - the research demonstrates that **ALTHOUGH A PERSON MAY NOT ALWAYS CHOOSE TO BE AN INFLUENCER, THEY MIGHT BE ONE ANYWAY.**





## BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE CONCEPTS

The research findings identified seven specific behavioural science concepts which can help make sense of how different influencers impact women's sporting participation behaviour (applied examples of these concepts in action are outlined in the case study section of this report).

-  **BEHAVIOURAL PRIMING** Imagery, words, actions and other stimuli that subconsciously impact her participation
-  **SIMILARITY ATTRACTIVENESS** We are attracted to those who we perceive as similar to us
-  **MENTAL CHUNKING** Breaking down the steps towards a goal
-  **FRAMING** The way women's participation in sport is presented
-  **SOCIAL NORMS** We tend to adopt the same opinions and follow the behaviours of the majority
-  **FEEDBACK** Feedback heightens our sense of progress
-  **COMMITMENT BIAS** We are more likely to start behaviours when a social/public commitment is made

Women's motivations for taking part in sport participation can change over time, affected by life stage and context.

'Influencers' have a key role to play in providing both the internal and external

motivations underpinning her type and level of sporting participation.

These internal and external influences, or sway factors, might sway her towards, or away, from playing sport.

## OUTLINING INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL BEHAVIOURS

Women's motivations for sporting participation broadly fall into two categories:

### REWARDS/MOTIVATION

#### EXTERNAL

Behaviour is driven by **EXTERNAL FORCES**

- **Recognition** from coach
- **respect** from teammates
- **NOT** wanting to disappoint a parent.

Over-emphasis on external rewards can lead to lapsing, **including if social sources are moved.**

#### INTERNAL

**STRONG INTERNAL DRIVE** is a primary motivator, with less need for social recognition.

- Feeling more **energised** after an activity
- enjoying a **sense of mastery**
- **boost from improved fitness.**

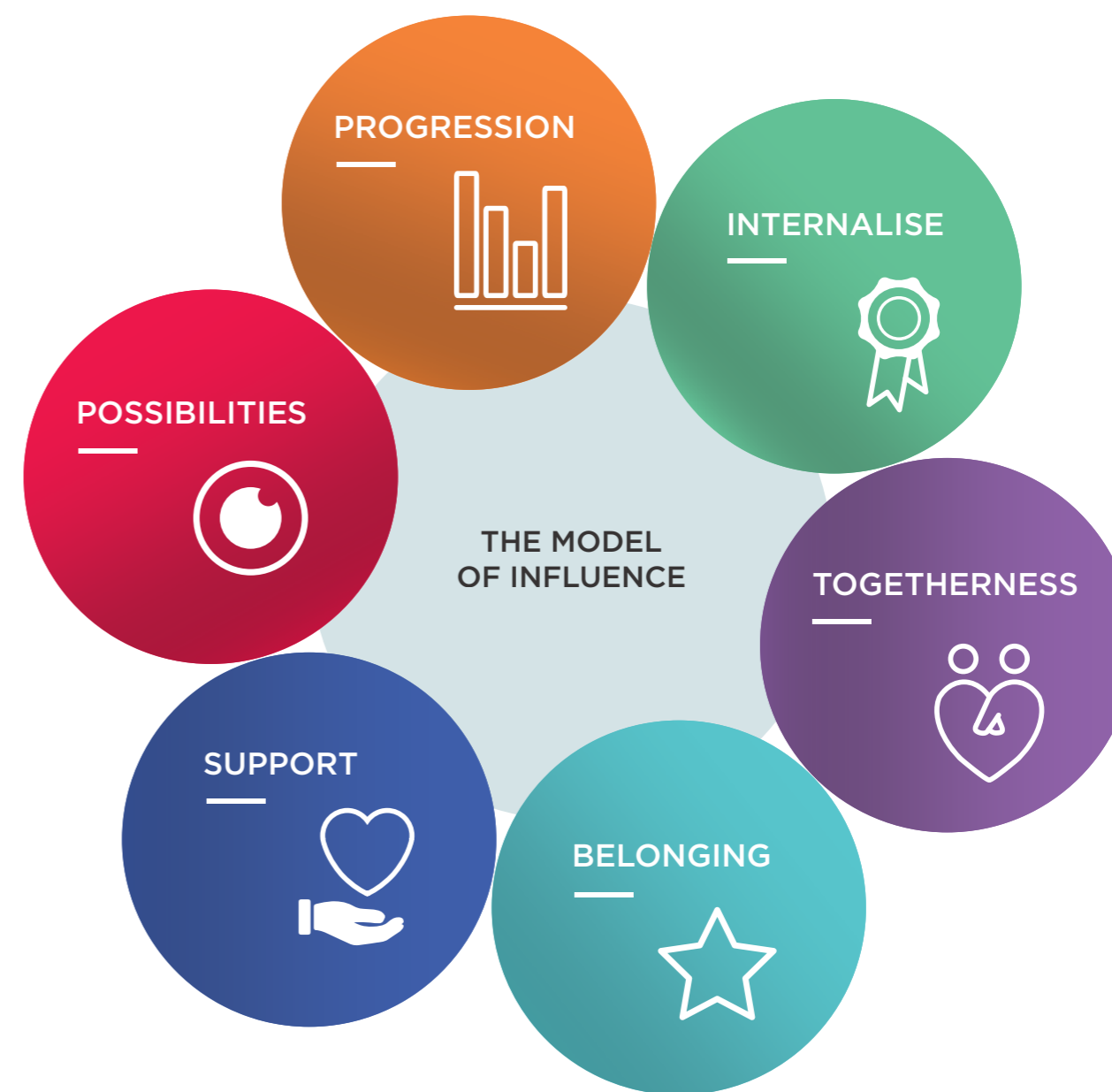
- Internal rewards/motivators help **prevent lapsing**, especially through life transitions.

**INFLUENCERS HAVE A KEY ROLE IN PROVIDING EXTERNAL MOTIVATIONS AND HELPING TO REINFORCE/BUILD-UP INTERNAL MOTIVATIONS**

The results of our research have led to the development of a behavioural model outlining '**SIX KEY SPHERES OF INFLUENCE**', or sway factors that affect women's sporting behaviour.

This **NEW MODEL, 'THE MODEL OF INFLUENCE'** not seen before in women's sport, can be used to provide a framework to encourage further female sporting participation.

## THE SIX KEY SPHERES OF INFLUENCE





## WHAT DO THE SPHERES OF INFLUENCE – OR ‘SWAY FACTORS’ IN THE MODEL OF INFLUENCE MEAN?



### POSSIBILITIES

OPENING HER EYES TO WHAT SHE CAN DO

#### INFLUENCE

Inspiring her with **‘real’** and relatable influencers

Imagery and stories of women ‘like me’ to **prime her participation**

#### ACTIONS

Stories framed around personal success

Include early stages of women’s participation journeys



### TOGETHERNESS

TOGETHER SHE IS STRONGER

#### INFLUENCE

A friend’s invitation makes sport possible  
= safety in numbers

Reward of socialising and bonding becomes an external motivator

#### ACTIONS

Breakdown barriers

Taking part with someone else

sharing intentions increases commitment



## SUPPORT

ENSURING SHE HAS BEHIND THE SCENES SUPPORT

### INFLUENCE

Practical and emotional support from the people in her everyday life is crucial to kick start and sustain participation.



### ACTIONS

Family are often the gatekeeper  
Encouraging and endorsing  
Sharing her goals



## BELONGING

MAKING HER FEEL INCLUDED AND VALUED

### INFLUENCE

Ensuring that participation in sport is enjoyable and an experience she wants to keep repeating.



### ACTIONS

Personalised contact  
Respect and recognition  
Opportunities for feedback  
Lines of communication



## PROGRESSION

GIVING HER A SENSE OF DIRECTION

### INFLUENCE

Skilled feedback and structured guidance from someone with more expertise than her helps sustain participation along the journey.



### ACTIONS

Improvement suggestions  
Praise  
Setting realistic goals  
Ongoing and personalised



## INTERNALISE

HELPING HER REFLECT ON HER ACHIEVEMENTS

### INFLUENCE

Bringing out the internal rewards of taking part in sport.



### ACTIONS

Focus shift to feeling good  
Heighten her awareness of personal progress  
Internalising her own sport behavioural journey



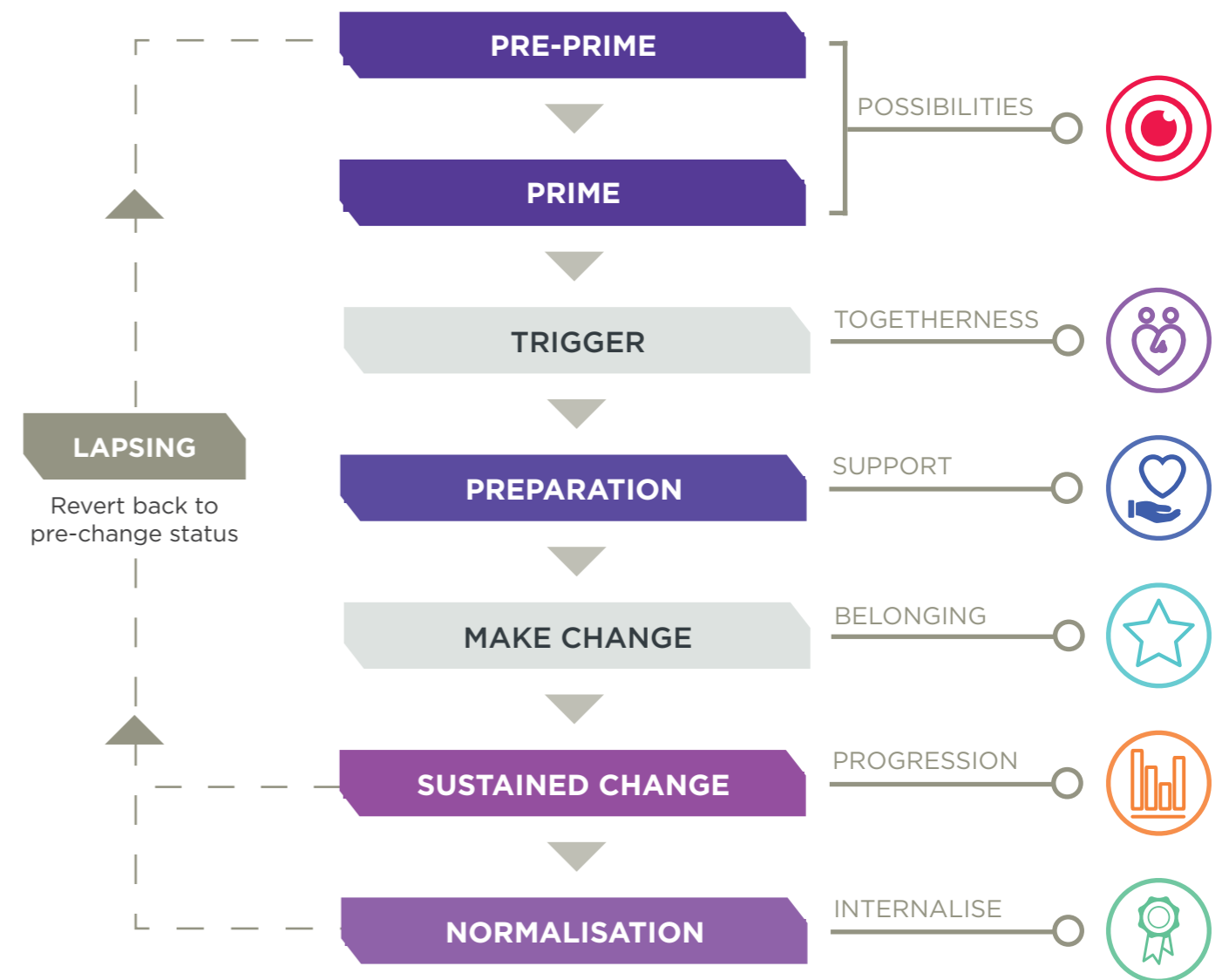
**WOMEN IN SPORT** What sways women to play sport?

The research shows that the spheres in the Model of Influence have different degrees of impact along a woman's journey of sporting participation.

Crucially though, all of the sway factors must be recognised, and actions arising from each integrated and integrated, to create sustainable behaviour change.

Providers applying the Wheel of Influence model will support creation of sporting offers and events that appeal to women at a range of stages along the behavioural journey. As well as marketing their sport to women in a compelling way.

**SPHERES OF INFLUENCE INTEGRATED GRAPHIC SHOWING JOURNEY AFFECTED BY 'SWAY FACTORS'**



# CASE STUDIES

THE MODEL OF INFLUENCE IN ACTION

“IN THE SUMMER WE HAVE TO DO A 1.5K AND I HATE IT AND WANT TO QUIT, BUT THINKING ABOUT THAT WOMAN WHO CLIMBED MOUNT EVEREST, WHO DIDN'T QUIT, MAKES YOU WANT TO FINISH!”

- SCHOOLGIRL, 12

The following case studies highlight where the Model of Influence works and demonstrates how the spheres of influence or sway factors within it can be used to increase participation.

## A TWELVE YEAR OLD SCHOOLGIRL'S SPORTING JOURNEY

### MUM

Introduced her to sports at a young age. e.g. **practicing how** to shoot a basketball by playing 'horse' on her mum's shoulders. Her mum has **encouraged** her to **try lots of different sports**.

### FRIENDSHIP GROUP

Her group of friends also play sport, support one another with school work and have fun outside of school.

### OLDER GIRLS AT SCHOOL

She looks up to the sixth form girls who help out with training.

### LEARNING

She learns about a range of **inspirational women** during **school assemblies** and **relates their stories back to her own**. e.g. Watching a top athlete take off on her other foot' in the high jump after injury makes her feel that with **determination** she can do better in lessons where she struggles.



## INFLUENCERS ALONG A SCHOOLGIRL'S BASKETBALL JOURNEY: PRIMARY TO SECONDARY SCHOOL

### PRIME

#### MUM

Learnt to shoot from playing 'horse' with **her mum** when she was little.



### TRIGGER

#### PE TEACHER/ CLASSMATES

Basketball was part of school PE lessons from year 3. In year 5, **everyone** tried out for the school squad.



### MAKE CHANGE

#### PE TEACHER

**Got into** the squad in her favourite position - felt good to **be valued by PE teacher and other girls on the team.**



### SUSTAINED CHANGE

#### FAMILY

**Mum** endorsed her passion for basketball, buying her a basketball hoop in the garden at home.

**Mum** attends every match cheering her on.



#### SCHOOL/ELITE ATHLETES

**Inspirational sports women's stories from school assemblies** remain in her memory. Inspiring her to practice.



#### PE TEACHER

**Teacher** gave lots of positive **feedback and praise** in training - confidence grew, felt she was progressing.



The following is an example of how the model can work for schools, but the model can also work in many other environments:

## SCHOOL: IDEAS TO IMPACT BEHAVIOUR

### POSSIBILITIES

**Assemblies** about **stories of inspirational sportswomen**. Especially early stages, small triumphs and resilience.

**Greater visibility** of girls 'like her' participating in schools, community and the media - e.g. different shapes/sizes.

**Older girls helping with training** and taster sessions for **new sports**.

School **guiding and facilitating** opportunities for girls to **participate in local community sports opportunities**.

**Teachers** stimulate conversations that challenge the idea of sporty vs. non-sporty people and skewed media representations of women and their bodies.

### TOGETHERNESS

More 'just for fun' sessions for older **year groups** - build in socialising/making friends.

Building in '**socialising time**' into training sessions.

**PE teachers** encourage girls who are on the school squad to bring friends to training who aren't.

**Parent-child and family based** activities, especially at entry level.

**Informal** 'Commitment Contracts' between friends and team mates.

### BELONGING

**Round-robin feedback after sessions**, for the girls to share what they are proud of/have appreciated from others in the team.

**Awards and recognition** - gold stars need to stop after primary!

**Framing** the value that a variety of girls will keep the focus off skills/ability - e.g. appointing a social secretary.

### SUPPORT

**Buddy system** for older girls to share experience and support younger girls.

**Encourage girls to share their stories** with one another - to normalise talking about being active with peers.

**Nudge friends to support** girls playing in fixtures (and prime them to participate).

**Get parents on board** with regular communication - e.g. social media site celebrating all types of success, update on new opportunities.

**Share girl's stories** about vital role family/parents play supporting practically and emotionally - e.g. for continued encouragement/praise at home as she gets older.

### PROGRESSION

**PE teacher/coach personalising** feedback, praise and tips.

**Setting mini-goals** each month/session to help girls feel a sense of progression.

### INTERNALISE

**Framing participation** around 'feel good' benefits and positive impact on confidence/studies - e.g. recharge brain.

**PE teachers/coaches guiding reflection** on small personal achievements/how they are feeling after session, e.g. energised etc.



# KEY FINDINGS

## THIS RESEARCH DETERMINES THE KEY AREAS WHERE INFLUENCERS SWAY SPORTING PARTICIPATION AMONGST WOMEN

Women's participation is influenced in a multitude of ways: positively and negatively, directly and indirectly, externally and internally and intentionally and unknowingly.

By only focusing on 'role models' rather than 'influencers', there is the potential to obscure a wide range of influencing behaviours that can sway effect decisions and which can be activated to achieve greater impact.

1

### INFLUENCERS CAN INCLUDE ANYONE AND EVERYONE.

The research clearly highlights that it is not just those who are 'sporty' who influence others to participate in sport.

**In addition, people do not always realise how much they can influence others.** Being an influencer is not always a conscious decision - the research demonstrates that **although a person may not always choose to be an influencer, they might be one anyway.**

2

### INFLUENCERS IMPACT PARTICIPATION BEHAVIOUR

In different ways and in different contexts (e.g. familial/peer, in the local community, in the sports-specific community and in a wider social/cultural way).

**To achieve optimal impact, a multi-pronged approach is required** - the actions of different types of influencer should complement one another across the various contextual layers.

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3

**THE NEW MODEL OF INFLUENCE, DEVELOPED THROUGH THIS RESEARCH, CAN BE LEVERAGED TO IMPACT ON PARTICIPATION BEHAVIOUR.**

The 'sway factors' are complimentary and work best in combination with each other; each factor becomes more transformative at a different point along the behaviour change journey and then continues to impact participation positively.

**There is an opportunity to leverage the different sway factors to impact behaviours at specific points along the behavioural journey AND in combination to maximise sustained behavioural change.**

The Model of Influence is therefore a powerful tool for sports providers to use to engage more women.

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4

**WOMEN'S INFLUENCERS CHANGE OVER TIME AND IN LINE WITH THEIR EVOLVING NEEDS.**

Women are diverse and their influencers are strongly affected by the needs associated with particular points along their sports participation behavioural journey and their specific life stage.

The research highlights that **there is a need to identify where and when women are becoming disengaged with sport and where influencers can positively impact behaviour for women at different stages.**

# WOMEN IN SPORT

WOMEN IN SPORT'S NEW TRANSFORMING SPORT CONSULTANCY IS HERE TO HELP YOU MAKE SENSE OF THIS RESEARCH IN YOUR OWN ENVIRONMENT.

If you are interested in learning more about how you can leverage the Model of Influence to engage women and girls, please contact:

[transformingsport@womeninsport.org](mailto:transformingsport@womeninsport.org)

[WWW.WOMENINSPORT.ORG](http://WWW.WOMENINSPORT.ORG)