



YOU GO, GIRLS!

Encourage girls to get into sports—the benefits will last them into womanhood **BY LISA HANNAM**

The benefits of girls playing

sports are only now becoming clear—and that proof has come thanks to something that happened in the United States almost 40 years ago.

Back in 1972, an amendment to the U.S. Civil Rights Act gave girls and women equal access to, and resources for, educational programs—particularly athletics—at government-funded high schools and rec centres. By 1978, female participation in sports had soared 600 percent.

With that first generation now grown up, research is being done on the Act's long-term effects. A new study from the University of Pennsylvania shows that the change in approach may have been responsible for roughly one fifth of the 50 percent increase in female college attendance and college graduation between 1980 and 2000.

"Sport has an influence on girls, changing their paths and their outcomes," says Betsey Stevenson, who is the lead researcher on the study.

Another study found that women affected by the policy are more likely

to keep active, have a lower body mass index and are less likely to be obese as adults. Robert Kaestner, the study's lead author, says that while the research doesn't show similar policies today would garner the same results, it does suggest it would be good for kids' long-term health if we promoted being active at elementary and middle schools.

Louise Humbert, a University of Saskatchewan researcher of kids' motivation for physical activity, agrees. "Many girls don't feel they have the skills to participate in physical activity. They need opportunities to learn the skills so they can feel like they belong in a sport setting."

"School is clearly an important place to make a difference," says Andrea Grantham, executive director of Physical & Health Education Canada, which runs the At My Best wellness program for kids in kindergarten to Grade 3. There are plans to expand it into upper grades in coming years.

To motivate a little girl you know, Humbert recommends supporting her in trying new things, and cheering her on.

BONUS

Find out how Canada is encouraging kids to stay active at **besthealthmag.ca/obesity**.