

## **HEADLINE: GIRL POWER**

BEYOND OUR LIMITS - INSPIRING SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH FOOTBALL : Sacred Sports Foundation (SSF) in Saint Lucia, is a FIFA-Football for Hope, supported NGO . Girls are part of an initiative spread across the Island. A core aspect of the programme is creating a safe space through development and training in appropriate child safeguarding for coaches and mentors. It also encourages self-discipline and appropriate behaviour by the girls, many of which are keen players.

Prevailing research on sports ability to positively affect school girls life's is clear. Better attendance, better grades, better discipline in school, better attitudes to others, stronger leadership and development skills are typically apparent.

"So why then do many of our teachers, coaches and mentors use sports as the stick rather than the carrot" asks Nova Alexander-Executive Director of SSF. "I would be a rich woman if I had a dollar for every time I have heard an adult threaten to stop a girl (or boy) from participating in sports because they have misbehaved or done something they did not approve of".

The threat of withdrawing the sport is a common yet misguided approach to discipline. Sport helps the girls understand the value of working together, working for a common goal. Winning, Losing. Team work. "Many of our programmes go further, actively seeking to assist and strengthen important communication skills and other areas of the girls life's that they welcome assistance with".

Sport is in fact part of the solution, helping the girls come to terms with many of the challenges they will face as they become women. That doesn't mean that the girls don't slip back into old habits occasionally, or misbehave. Changing behaviours takes time, patience and perseverance. But sport can provide a safe impactful environment for change. For many of those that gravitate to sport, the academic environment often poses a challenge, which playing games can assist with.

In our thirst to create the perfect girl, we draw on the traditional style of employing a teacher centred approach to learning, where the authority figure can arbitrarily wield power to suit their own needs not those of the child. Thus, threats and strength of will, often persevere with negative effects on the girls themselves. As we shift to a more self-directed learning or student centred approach there is a naturally difficult transition, where old views touch up against more progressive thinking.

No one is saying its an easy balance, if you've spent any time in the company of teenagers the challenges can be great indeed. But the need to better equip our young ladies for the often harsh world that awaits is paramount and a more modern approach has much to commend it.

Here are three tips we try to emphasise when working with a coach or mentor:

1. Reinforce the behaviour you want
2. Ignore the behaviour you don't want
3. When you can't ignore the behaviour you don't want, intervene in a 'least-attention' manner.

That means unfortunately, we don't give positive praise half as much as we should. Stick to positive reinforcement. Our kids are so used to negative comments that they often switch off immediately when authority figures speak. Instead, when kids learn that you give attention for appropriate behaviour, they will often compete to please the coach or mentor.

Secondly, it's the hardest thing to do but often the most effective. Thank those who do tasks well and ignore those that don't. Move on to the next task as the offending player doesn't exist – the "extinction" approach some people call it.

And finally, when you absolutely can't ignore bad behaviour and you have to intervene, you can increase your odds of success by doing so in the 'least-attention manner'. Take a child who continues talking while you are trying to give directions to the team. You can call the child to one side and calmly and quietly speak to them: "I need you to stand over here until you can obey the roles that we all agreed on – that is, to not talk while I'm talking. Just stand here for a bit and as soon as you are ready to follow the rules, come on back and join us." You may need to repeat this if the child rejoins the team and continues to disrupt your discussion team but it's an approach that has proved far more effective than threats and intimidation, which remain common practice.