



15/02/2026

Submission to the ACT Government Inquiry into Barriers and Opportunities for Participation in Community.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry into barriers and opportunities for participation in community life in the Australian Capital Territory. Community sport is often held up as one of the most accessible and unifying forms of participation. Yet for many of our most vulnerable children, sport in the ACT remains financially, culturally, logistically and structurally inaccessible.

Financial and Structural Barriers to Participation

Across Australia, organised sport participation is strongly linked to household income. Data from the Australian Sports Commission indicates that children from low-income households are significantly less likely to participate in organised sport than their peers from higher-income families. In the ACT, where the cost of living is high, club registration fees, uniforms, equipment, and travel costs routinely exceed several hundred dollars per season.

For families from refugee and migrant backgrounds, particularly those recently arrived, these costs are prohibitive. Many are navigating insecure employment, housing pressures, and settlement expenses. Even where fee assistance schemes exist, they rarely cover the full cost of participation. Transport presents an additional barrier: training sessions and weekend games require reliable access to a vehicle and flexible work hours. For parents working multiple jobs or shift work, this is simply not possible.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in the ACT also experience disproportionate economic disadvantage. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, First Nations households are more likely to experience financial stress than non-Indigenous households. Without structural supports, the expectation that families can absorb sporting costs entrenches inequity. For refugee, migrant and Indigenous children, exclusion from sport is not merely about missing physical activity. It means missing out on social networks, language development, mentorship, and a sense of belonging in their community.





A Gendered Layer of Inaccessibility

Sport in the ACT is not only economically exclusionary; it is also gendered in ways that disadvantage girls.

National research from the Women in Sport shows that girls drop out of sport at approximately twice the rate of boys during adolescence. Puberty is a key inflection point. Studies consistently report that around half of girls cite menstruation, body image concerns, or discomfort related to puberty as contributing factors to leaving sport. Research commissioned by VicHealth found that 49% of girls reported missing sport or physical activity due to their period, and many felt embarrassed or unsupported discussing menstrual health with coaches. When coaches are unprepared to respond to period pain, fatigue, heavy bleeding, or the need for flexible training arrangements, girls disengage.

In many ACT sporting clubs, coaching accreditation focuses on tactics, child safety compliance, and risk management. There is little to no mandatory education on puberty, menstrual health, or how to adjust training loads for developing bodies. Girls experiencing severe cramps or heavy bleeding are often told to “push through” or risk losing their place in the team. Without access to period products at games and training, girls may simply stop attending.

This is not a marginal issue; it is systemic. If coaches were trained to understand menstrual cycles, normalise conversations about periods, provide flexibility in training expectations, and ensure access to products at clubs, participation rates would improve. The evidence is clear: when girls feel supported, respected, and understood, they are more likely to remain in sport.

Proposed Solutions

To address these barriers, I propose the following measures:

1. Mandatory Sports Puberty and Respectful Relationships Workshops

Implement sports puberty and respectful relationships workshops that must be attended by both players (age-appropriate) and their coaches annually.

These workshops should:

- Provide evidence-based education on puberty, menstrual cycles, and physical development.
- Normalise discussion of periods and body changes.
- Equip coaches with strategies for adjusting training intensity.
- Provide information on pain management and when to seek medical advice.

Embedding these workshops into seasonal requirements would signal that girls' sport is not an afterthought but a core component of safe participation.





2. A Comprehensive Coaches' Guide

The ACT Government should fund Educacion Diversa to develop and distribute a standardised Coaches' Guide focused on supporting children through developmental change. This guide should include:

- Menstrual health literacy.
- Respectful relationships.
- Consent.
- Managing your mental health and the mental health of your players
- Injury prevention during growth spurts.
- Trauma-informed coaching approaches (particularly relevant for refugee and Indigenous children).
- Practical strategies for inclusive team environments.

Completion of training modules linked to this guide should become a requirement for ACT club registration and coach accreditation.

3. Legislative Reform to Embed Subsidised Access

The ACT should consider amending the Associations Incorporation Act 1991 to require incorporated associations registered as sporting clubs to provide a minimum percentage of free and subsidised positions each season.

Embedding this requirement legislatively would shift access from charity to obligation. Clubs benefit from community infrastructure, grants and volunteer labour; in return, they should guarantee inclusion for children who would otherwise be excluded.

4. Opt-In Community Contribution Mechanism

Registration forms should include an optional contribution mechanism allowing families who can afford it to sponsor another child's participation. Importantly, legislation or regulation should require full transparency, with funds quarantined exclusively for subsidised registrations and transport support.

Transport assistance—whether through fuel vouchers, organised carpool systems, or funded community transport—would directly address one of the most persistent barriers faced by low-income and newly arrived families.





Sport, Mental Health and Community Connection

Participation in sport is strongly linked to improved mental health outcomes, reduced social isolation, and stronger community connection. For children from refugee backgrounds—many of whom arrive with experiences of displacement or trauma—sport offers routine, friendship, mentorship, and identity. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, culturally safe sporting environments can strengthen pride and connection.

Community sport provides far more than exercise. It builds belonging. It creates protective factors against anxiety, depression, and disengagement. It offers trusted adults outside the family unit and structured spaces where young people can thrive.

If the ACT is serious about equitable community participation, we must confront the reality that access to sport is currently stratified by income, culture, gender and geography. By embedding legislative obligations, mandating puberty and trauma-informed training, and creating practical financial pathways for inclusion, the ACT can ensure that every child—regardless of background—has the opportunity not just to play, but to belong.

Thank you for extending me the opportunity to provide my submission and I look forward to supporting the progress of this initiative to ensure we can make sport accessible for all children in the ACT. It's their right to play.

Feel free to reach out if you have any questions.

Kind regards



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