

### Primary school sports day: battle of the sexes

adapted from an article by Anna Kessel

- 1 A primary school in Inverness has announced that girls and boys will not compete together on sports days. The news has prompted national debate.
- 2 First, a quick sense check — we are talking about the egg-and-spoon race here, for kids aged four and upwards. As I write, my daughter is out in the playground practising the three-legged race with her classmates as they get ready for their sports day this week. She's excited and determined to win a medal, like last year, and it won't have occurred to her for a millisecond that she shouldn't be racing alongside 50% of her classmates because they are boys.
- 3 As Dr Hilary Jones said, introducing the debate on *Good Morning Britain*, girls and boys are physically on an even level at primary age so there is no scientific reason to separate them. For the local councillor who defended the decision made in Inverness by saying that the Olympics didn't do mixed-gender competitions — 6. The Olympics include mixed-gender relays in swimming, athletics and triathlon, as well as mixed team events in archery, fencing and judo. In sports such as equestrianism and horse racing, men and women have long been competing directly against each other.
- 4 Back in Inverness one parent reportedly said that their son had been bullied as a result of being beaten by a girl. I'm sorry to hear of anyone being bullied, but isn't the crux of the problem here archaic ideas about girls being less physically able than boys? We should be teaching girls and boys to respect each other, not supporting regressive gender stereotypes.
- 5 Crucially we are a nation of inactive adults and increasingly inactive children, the consequences of which will play havoc with our physical and mental health. School sports day should be about fun. We want children to learn that moving their bodies, gaining physical literacy and competing is enjoyable. For too many kids that message is still not getting through, creating negative associations about sport and exercise that last a lifetime.
- 6 I do agree that sometimes having all-girl teams can be a good idea, even for young children. So I actively support Women in Football's #WhatIfcampaign



that helps set up a girls' football club. Few girls at my daughter's school have had the opportunity to play our national game. In contrast, their male peers have been developing their skills on the ball for years. In this instance, it's about evening up a historical inequality. I would not want to prolong a culture in which girls are less likely to play football than boys.

- 7 Certainly as physical changes start to impact on boys and girls it makes sense to have separate competitions. But for four-year-olds doing the egg-and-spoon race? Come off it. That's when we truly know the world's gone mad.

*theguardian.com, 2018*