LISSA CHRISTOPHER discovers the importance of PE for girls.

I have two sporting talents: shrieking while running away from any ball headed in my direction, and doing handstands in pools.

My weaknesses are many and include anything involving speed, ball skills or competitive spirit.

At school, humiliating sporting experiences far outweighed those involving plain old mastery and I dropped physical education classes as soon as possible.

I’ve since concluded, however, that I would have gained far more benefit in the long term from encouragement to improve my basic sports skills and to find a sport I could love (which didn’t happen) than being taught mathematics beyond long division and fractions (which did).

Had I been as bad at maths as I was at PE, I would have been placed in a class with others of similar ability and taught according to that ability.

With PE, however, everyone was in together and, for the most part, only those with pre-existing talent flourished.

I understand that school curriculums are already bloated but, surely, in an increasingly sedentary world in which the many benefits of movement are widely known, it’s vital to ensure all children – the talented and the awkward – acquire good basic physical skills.

Many don’t, particularly girls who aren’t naturally athletic.

In Australia, girls’ and women’s sports participation is flat-lining, according to the Australian Sports Commission and lack of skill is among the main reasons women cite for non-participation. The way PE is taught is part of the problem.

Dr Lauren Puglisi, from the Interdisciplinary Educational Research Institute at the University of Wollongong, says non-sporty girls often miss out on the support they need to develop basic skills at the start of their education and the deficit compounds as they move through the system.

Part of the problem, she says, is a lack of specialist teachers at primary school level and that students are not placed in PE classes according to their skill levels.

In public primary schools, you don’t have specialist PE teachers, ” she says. “Sometimes, the ones who are teaching sport will tell you ‘I hate sport at school’ and they hate teaching it, too.

I think having specialist PE teachers in primary schools is a must.

‘Girls then get to high school without developing sports skills and aren’t confident enough to participate against boys or girls who do have them, so they drop off even further.”

Improvements can, however, still be made in the teens and beyond.

This year, Puglisi and colleagues will release a Department of Education and Training-funded research paper about an intervention aimed at sedentary high school girls in NSW.

The project, which involved 24 public high schools, looked at a number of strategies that improved girls’ sports participation and uncovered some of the things they didn’t like.

The more successful schools, Puglisi says, encourage students to form girls-in-sport committees, provide physical activities that are female-oriented, such as Zumba, cheerleading and pilates, and have teachers who participate.

Among the reasons the teens gave for disliking sport were the way it messed up their appearance, fear of embarrassing themselves in front of their peers and that teachers didn’t know the rules and/or didn’t participate.

The commission states that sports uniforms are another issue, with research showing 50 per cent of girls feel uncomfortable about them, finding them too short, unfashionable or uncomfortable, for example.

“A small change in the uniform to keep in step with sporty trends or comfort could make the difference,” it states.