

EVIDENCE SUPPORTING OUTCOMES FOR GIRLS' GROUPS EVALUATION



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

About Girls Action	05
Why We Created This Research Review	05
Using this Resource	05
Introduction	07
Outcome areas	08
I. Connectedness	08
II. Self-esteem and Self-confidence	09
III. Resilience	10
IV. Critical Thinking	11
V. Communication	12
Conclusion	13
References	14

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ABOUT GIRLS ACTION

Girls Action Foundation works to improve girls' and young women's access to resources and opportunities. Our initiatives create opportunities for them to discover their power and gain the confidence to take action in their communities. At Girls Action we are committed to building a movement of active, engaged individuals and organizations across Canada. Through this movement, we envision a new generation committed to creating a more just society for all.

Girls Action was founded in 1995 as a grassroots organization that delivered programming to girls and young women in the Ottawa area. As a result of growing needs and frequent requests for more programming Girls Action's reach has expanded. Local girls programs continue to be delivered in Montreal, in addition we have a national young women's leadership program and host a National Network of more than 300 organizations that offer girls' programs in communities across Canada.

WHY WE CREATED THIS RESEARCH REVIEW

Girls experience a number of challenges as they grow up in Canada, and youth programs specific to their issues and needs are important means to support girls to navigate the challenges and build their strengths. This research review was created to equip those who lead and develop girls' programs to better understand the impact and make the case for girl-specific programs.

This resource accompanies Girls Action Foundation's online evaluation platform that measures the impact of girls' programs. Both the evaluation platform and this research review are based on five key outcome areas—the areas in which girls often experience changes as a result of their participation in girls' programs:

- **connectedness,**
- **self-esteem and self-confidence,**
- **resilience,**
- **critical thinking,**
- **and communication.**

Through a three year project (2012-15), Girls Action Foundation engaged in a collaborative process with facilitators of eleven different girls' programs as well as a professional evaluation consultant and research partner to identify these five outcome areas and create tools to measure them. The hard work of our community partners helped to ground the initiative and ensure that the online evaluation platform can be easily integrated into existing programs and meet the needs of girls' programs.

This research review provides the evidence base to support the tools and online evaluation platform, summarizing research findings that relate to the five outcome areas. This resource explains why these outcomes are important – connectedness, self-esteem and self-confidence, resilience, critical thinking and communication – and the impacts on girls' well-being when these outcomes are strengthened.

USING THIS RESOURCE

Girls Action encourages groups using the online evaluation platform for measuring results of their girls' programs to also refer to this *Summary of Evidence*. This publication provides an evidence base on the five outcome areas of the evaluation.

The information found in this resource can also be used to strengthen:

- **your funding proposals**
- **information sheets about your project or program**

- **resources to raise awareness about girls' issues**
- **communications with schools, potential partners, and policy-makers**
- **girls program development.**

Please feel free to cite any quotations or statistics from this publication. Remember to always use proper bibliographic references to give credit to the authors of specific studies and to Girls Action Foundation. **Thank you!**

“The outcome areas presented in this summary of research findings, although each significant independently, are multi-faceted, complex and intersecting in nature. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge and appreciate that each girl participant’s experience is specific, context-dependent and unique.”





INTRODUCTION

Girls experience a number of challenges as they grow up, including a range of exposure to violence, declining self-confidence, and other issues related to mental and emotional wellbeing. Girls who experience marginalization, such as related to their race, sexuality, ethnicity, citizenship, socio-economic status, or disability, are often more affected.

Many community-level responses have been developed to support girls to build protective factors and reduce risk factors in their lives, often in the form of girl-focused groups in schools or community settings. Girl-specific programs can establish a safe environment where participants can discuss sensitive topics and gender-related issues. They provide access to resources and support, help girls connect with each other, offer mentoring and support leadership development. Participating in girl-specific programs can have a transformative impact, giving girls strategies to cope with challenges, take action and create change in their lives and in their communities.

There are a variety of models for effective girls' programs. The setting, the involvement of parents, caregivers, teachers, peer or adult leadership may be less important than the creation of a safe space for girls to learn and share.

Girls Action Foundation has identified five best practices in girl-specific programming:

1. **PARTICIPATORY:** involve girls in program design and facilitation
2. **EMPOWERMENT:** support girls to express themselves and take action
3. **ASSET-BASED:** build skills and focus on girls' strengths
4. **CULTURALLY RELEVANT:** respect for and integration of diversity
5. **COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT:** engage community members through mentorship and other means

These five best practices act as a pathway to achieve the five (5) major outcome areas for girl-specific programming: *connectedness, self-esteem and self-confidence, resilience, critical thinking and communication.*

Protective factors are conditions that enhance positive outcomes for girls and lessen the likelihood of negative consequences when they are exposed to risk (Jessor, Turbin & Costa, 1998). This paper will review protective factors that are associated with each outcome area in the online evaluation platform.

The outcome areas presented in this summary of research findings, although each significant independently, are multi-faceted, complex and intersecting in nature. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge and appreciate that each girl participant's experience is specific, context-dependent and unique. It is these differences and diversities that can produce the strengths and skills that girls need to become positive leaders and role models.





OUTCOME AREAS

I. CONNECTEDNESS

Connectedness can be understood as the development of positive and meaningful connections to one's culture, peers and community. A strong sense of connectedness is often associated with having a supportive social network. Social support has been described as a determinant of health that impacts the ability to achieve and maintain both physical and mental well-being (Berman & Jiwani, 2002; McCreary Centre Society, 2002). Girl-specific programs work to build and strengthen support networks.

Girls with supportive relationships, whether that be from their families, teachers, peers or cultural communities, are more likely to exhibit healthy self-perceptions. As a result, girls are less likely to engage in risky behaviours and when they do, the negative effects are mitigated (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2005; Public Health Agency of Canada 2011).

A strong sense of identity has been cited as a protective factor against alienation, marginalization and violence (Jiwani, 2006), particularly for Aboriginal, racialized and immigrant girls (Johnson et al. 2001). Evidence exists that both peer groups and family support contribute to a sense of belonging that is integral to the development of a positive and healthy identity (Berman & Jiwani, 2002).

Family cohesion and supportive relationships can act as protective factors by helping to build resilience, academic success and school connectedness, and potentially mitigating against stress and depression (McCreary Centre Society, 2002; Dumont, 1999; Henderson, 2004). Evidence shows, for example, that children who feel alienated from their parents are more at risk for alienation in other relationships (Normandeau et al, 2002). Spending time with family, such as sharing regular meals together, helps youth build trust and support, and eases communication with parents (Freeman et al. 2011).

Positive peer relationships can be a protective factor against low self-esteem, excessive worrying, sadness, or other types of emotional distress (Rose & Rudolph,

2006). Students who lack support from peers are more at risk to be involved, as perpetrators and as victims, in bullying, sexual harassment and racial discrimination (Totten, 2009). Peer victimization is also a risk factor for the development of poor self-conceptions, as well as internalizing and externalizing problems (Egan & Perry, 1998; Graham & Juvonen, 1998). Supportive peer relationships can provide girls with the reassurance that their problems can be resolved and that they are valued members of their social group (Rose & Rudolph, 2006).

Having positive role models, teachers and mentors has also been found to be a protective factor for the development of healthy self-perceptions and behaviours (Jiwani, 2006). Researchers have found that school-based supportive ties can serve to buffer against potentially hazardous conditions in the home and other non-school environments (Dubois, Felner, Brand, Adam & Evans, 1992; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994). As studies have shown, for example, the presence of an understanding teacher, or the availability of other school support systems (such as peer tutoring or counseling) may help to increase a student's coping skills (Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994).

A strong connection to one's culture can also be a protective factor, especially for girls who face multiple barriers. Racialized girls can experience exclusion not only from the dominant culture, but also in relation to norms within their ethno-cultural communities of origin (de Finney, 2010). For newcomer girls the feeling of not belonging to the dominant culture is a risk factor for heightened insecurity, fear for one's safety, and social isolation, which may have a significant impact on their mental health (Riley, 2011). Finding a sense of belonging in a group of peers and learning to articulate a more critical and systemic definition of racism are protective factors for girls to develop self-esteem and self-knowledge (de Finney, 2010). Girl-specific programs that allow a space for marginalized girls to share their experiences with peers can create relational bonds that enable girls to explore sometimes hidden or silenced aspects of their identities. As a result, these relationships allow girls to see their experiences as a source of agency and as a reality shared by peers (Desai & Subramanian, 2000).



II. SELF-ESTEEM AND CONFIDENCE

Self-esteem and confidence can be defined as a person's overall assessment of themselves based on her own perceptions and those of others, such as parents, teachers or peers. Adolescence is a time when girls begin to develop personal beliefs and standards and define themselves by these beliefs and standards (Harter, Waters, Whitesell, 1998). Self-esteem and confidence are critical for girls to stay true to themselves as they navigate adolescence, to reach their full potential, to be healthy and to be in healthy relationships (Orenstein, 2000).

A strong sense of self can be a protective factor for a girl's vitality, resilience and mental health. From pre-adolescence through their teens, Canadian girls show a decline in mental health and emotional well-being, with self-esteem going down as stress increases (Freeman et al. 2011). As studies have shown, for example, girls who lose a sense of themselves and their character report feeling rejected, marginalized, and invisible (Brown & Gilligan, 1993). However, girls who develop confidence and self-esteem from a young age are more likely to exhibit resilient behaviours and take pride in their achievements (Connor & Davidson, 2003). For instance, programs in which racialized girls can feel safe and can be in the company of peers and mentors with similar experiences were found to increase their self-awareness, self-esteem and ability to cope with daily challenges (Lee & de Finney, 2004; Lee, 2006).

Having a safe space to share one's personal opinions and values can act as a protective factor against the disempowering and demoralizing impact of physical, emotional, verbal and sexual violence (Berman & Jiwani, 2002; Heidemann & Ferguson 2009). For instance, in a study conducted by the BC Centre of Excellence for Women's Health, in collaboration with Girls Action Foundation girls reported that the opportunity to build friendships with other girls and share what they were going through was helpful in improving their self-esteem (BCCEWH, 2012).

Having a positive sense of self-worth can act as a protective factor for healthy body image, strong self-identity and values, and resistance to alcohol use (Amaro

et al., 2001). Many girls suffer from a distorted view of their bodies, which is one contributor to low self-esteem and can lead to eating disorders such as bulimia or anorexia (Westerberg-Jacobson, Edlund et al. 2010). However, by understanding and actively subverting media messages in girls group, particularly those that over-sexualize and target girls as naïve consumers, girls can protect themselves from potential harm (Lamb & Brown, 2007).

Many researchers caution against using a deficits-based conceptualization of girls that ignores and devalues individual experiences and strengths. Instead they argue that there is a need to focus on girls' abilities and skills (Heidemann & Ferguson, 2009). Peggy Ornstein, in her popular book, *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self Esteem, and the Confidence Gap*, describes how self-esteem is an important protective factor: "Girls with healthy self-esteem have an appropriate sense of their potential, their competence, and their innate value as individuals. They feel a sense of entitlement: license to take up space in the world, a right to be heard and to express the full spectrum of human emotions" (Ornstein, 2000). The sense of safety that girl-specific and asset oriented programs provide helps to build self-esteem and a sense of efficacy that is vital to the healthy development of girls.

"Having a SAFE SPACE to share one's personal OPINIONS and VALUES can act as a PROTECTIVE FACTOR against the disempowering and demoralizing impact of PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, VERBAL and SEXUAL VIOLENCE."



OUTCOME AREAS

III. RESILIENCE

Resilience refers to the capacity of individuals to face, overcome and even be transformed by adversity or risk. Resilient girls have a greater capacity to be engaged in their community or environment and take action. Canada's Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement defines "engagement" as the meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity that has a focus outside of themselves (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2005). Resilience and taking action are linked to agency, which enables girls to develop their own strategies for navigating adolescence and actively engaging in the construction of girlhood (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2006). With these skills girls have the capability to effectively manage hardships that come their way and become active agents of change.

Resilience is a protective factor that helps girls to **develop competence in the face of severe stress and hardship** (Hurtes & Allen, 2001; Dumont & Provost, 1999). Resilient adolescents are more likely to use coping strategies centered on problem solving, while adolescents with low self-esteem and low social-support tend to cope with stress by avoiding the problem (Dumont & Provost, 1999). School experiences that involve supportive peers, positive teacher influences, and opportunities for success (academic or not) appear to be positively related to adolescent resilience (Olsson, Craig et al., 2003).

Girls who **take action can make well-informed decisions**, which is a fundamental element for healthy adolescent development (Resnick, 2000). Engaging in meaningful, engaging and educational programming can act as a protective factor against drug and alcohol consumption and associating with peers who engage in criminal behaviour. For instance, evidence has shown that participation in activities such as, music, politics, the arts or community work may help girls to increase their self-esteem. (Kidder, K. & Rogers, D, 2004) Programming in which participants have a role in the planning and decision making makes engagement in these kinds of activities more empowering (Canadian Institute for Health Information 2005).

Despite the many challenges girls face every day, it is important to view girls as active agents, capable of contributing to the production of knowledge and the development of solutions (Heidemann & Ferguson, 2009). Affirming, non-punitive social structures and supportive communities appear to play an important role in promoting resilience in young people (Olsson, Craig et al., 2003). For instance, the 2008 B.C. Adolescent Health Survey found that youth engagement in meaningful activities is an important protective factor for youth suicide (McCreary Centre Society, 2009). Furthermore, the Canadian Institute for Health Information notes that participation in extra-curricular activities and community youth organizations is associated with better self-reported health, higher perceived self-esteem and feelings of control (Canadian Institute for Health Information 2005).

“RESILIENT adolescents are more likely to use COPING STRATEGIES centered on PROBLEM SOLVING, while adolescents with low self-esteem and low social-support tend to COPE WITH STRESS by AVOIDING the PROBLEM.”



IV. CRITICAL THINKING

Critical thinking is the ability to question social norms, widely accepted attitudes and pressure to think and act in specific ways from peers, media, and family. Social norms often influence girls to think of themselves as less autonomous, less powerful and less valuable than their male counterparts. Girls need to be able to reflect critically upon processes which determine their position in the social world so that they can take control over the decisions that they are expected to make about their future (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2006).

Critical thinking is a protective factor that enables girls to **challenge patriarchal values** associated with women's subordination to men (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2006). These patriarchal values remain consistent in relation to gender roles and stereotypes. For instance, one-third of Canadian teen boys believe a woman's most important role is to cook and care for her family, half of teens think men should be responsible for earning income and providing for the family, and 17% still believe a man should have the final word on decisions (Plan Canada, 2011). Without an ability to challenge these problematic attitudes through critical thinking, girls may easily slip into the roles others expect them to fill. However, with the use of critical thinking skills girls can challenge these norms and formulate their own belief system.

Critical thinking skills may act as a protective factor by helping girls to **challenge discriminatory attitudes**. Girls who are marginalized face even greater challenges to reach their full potential. Research shows, for example, that girls who are marginalized may internalize feelings of being 'less than' (Berman & Jiwani, 2002), through relational systems of oppression, such as sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, and colonization (Henderson & Jackson, 2004). However, girl-specific programming can help girls to combat prejudices, embrace their identities and be proud of who they are.

Critical thinking is a protective factor that helps girls to make **unpopular or difficult decisions**. Evidence shows that girls, who use these skills to challenge dominant social norms and formulate their own value system, have a better chance at a healthy adolescent development

(Resnick, 2000). For instance, critical thinking helps girls to understand media messages and serves as a protective factor from the negative impacts of those messages, especially the ones coming from marketers (Lamb & Brown 2007; Zurbruggen et al, 2007).

Girls' programs operating in **small group formats** can be particularly helpful in fostering critical thinking skills (Williams & Ferber, 2008), as they can allow for a greater degree of confidentiality and trust. Small gender-specific groups can allow girls to feel safe enough to talk about issues they wouldn't necessarily talk about with boys, to try out new activities without a fear of failure, and alleviate pressures to look or act a certain way (Girl Scout Research Institute, 2003). For instance, giving girls the facts and the space to ask questions about sexual health empowers them to make informed choices about their bodies (Lang, 2009; Duquet & Quéniart, 2009). Rather than telling them how they should behave, girls need empowerment and education to help them make healthy decisions on their own (Begoray & Banister, 2007; Flicker & Guta, 2008).





OUTCOME AREAS

V. COMMUNICATION

Communication is the ability to express thoughts and feelings in a way that others hear and understand. When girls resist the pressure to conform to the expectations of others and when they express their own thoughts and feelings, they find their voice. Carol Gilligan, a preeminent psychologist who has worked extensively with girls, links the ability to communicate with a sense of self and an ability to sustain healthy relationships. She explains, "A girl's voice is a barometer of her relationships, and loss of voice, a symptom of trauma, signals a loss of relationship" (Gilligan, 1995). Girl-specific programming aims to re-claim girls silenced voices.

The encouragement of **healthy and honest communication** can counteract the silencing of girls. As girls begin to feel pressured to define themselves in terms of societal values and expectations, many of them lose their ability to speak honestly (Gilligan, & Machoian, 2002). Even well-meaning adults and peers often attempt to silence outspoken girls as they reach adolescence (van Daalen Smith, 2006). As they learn to put others' needs ahead of their own, they regulate their sexuality, their relationships, their desires and their judgments in terms of what is expected from them, rather than in terms of what is important to them (Gilligan, 1995). Girls who do not conform to cultural "norms", such as lesbian and bisexual girls and those from minority races or religions, face even more complex challenges to express themselves (Chamberland & Lebreton 2010; Freeman et al. 2011).

Expressiveness and communication skills can act as a protective factor against depression, self-harm and low self-esteem among girls (van Daalen-Smith, 2006).

As girls lose their voice, they can experience a loss of psychological vitality and courage (Gilligan, 1995). In effect, girls may become shut up within themselves, feeling stranded in a confusing isolation, often filled with self-condemnation (Gilligan, 1995). Such profound alienation can have a negative impact on psychological health, as well as physical health (Henderson & Jackson, 2004).

Communicating about experiences and feelings can help girls to stay in touch with their sense self, to feel strong and supported. However, as girls try to adapt to societal expectations, they are often denied the right to express negative emotions. Those who do express anger are often met with dismissal or judgement rather than affirmation (van Daalen-Smith, 2006). Therefore, it is vital that girls are provided with safe spaces to share their feelings and everyday realities. For instance, blogging has been cited as one strategy that girls are using to find their voice. Teenage girls are more likely than male bloggers to share intimate details about themselves, including feelings of vulnerability and affection (Bortree, 2005).

Evidence shows that preadolescent girls have a remarkable ability to speak about their thoughts and feelings, to read the human world around them, and to distinguish authentic from false relationships (Gilligan & Machoian, 2002). Given the proper space and tools to communicate their knowledge and feelings, girls have the potential to find confidence in who they are. For instance, a study by the BC Centre of Excellence for Women's Health found that enhancing communication skills was most often mentioned as a key contribution of the girls' groups by facilitators: skills such as active and respectful listening, speaking of feelings and opinions, expressing empathy, critical thinking and building rapport (BCCEWH, 2012).



CONCLUSION

The research and evidence examined shows that girl-specific programming can have overwhelmingly positive outcomes for girls in various ways:

1. CONNECTEDNESS

A sense of connectedness and strong social support networks, such as girl-only spaces, can allow for the nurturing of a positive and healthy sense of identity.

2. SELF-ESTEEM AND CONFIDENCE

The encouragement of a girl's strengths and unique qualities can help foster self-esteem and self-confidence, reducing the potential negative impact of stress, mental illness and violence in girls' lives.

3. RESILIENCE

Participation in meaningful, engaging and educational programming can give girls the ability to cope with challenges ahead, make well-informed decisions and become active agents of change.

4. CRITICAL THINKING

When girls are provided with the proper educational tools and the space to question the world around them, they have the potential to analyse and dissuade negative and disempowering messages.

5. COMMUNICATION

When girls are given a space to talk openly about their everyday realities they have the capacity to communicate their feelings and knowledge honestly to facilitators, peers and mentors, building their self-confidence and self-efficacy.

Despite numerous challenges, with the proper support and opportunities, girls and young women have the potential for well-being and full participation in society. Girl-specific programs and spaces that are asset-based, participatory, and inclusive of diverse cultures and contexts have the ability to empower girls to become agents of change in their own lives and communities. With these skills, girls have a better chance at facing challenges that may come their way, such as violence, or mental health challenges, allowing them to lead the healthy and fulfilled lives they deserve.

“GIRL SPECIFIC
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