

Evidence Brief

Engaging, Recruiting & Retaining Girls & Young Women as Participants in Youth Programs

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, and searched in online databases using the following key terms: "young women," "girls," "youth programs," "engagement," "recruitment," and "best practices."

Definitions of Key Terms

Our review of the literature identified gender-specific programming as an important tool for engaging girls and young women. The Canadian Women's Foundation (2005) defines a **gender-specific girls program** as "a single-sex program intentionally designed to respond to the specific needs and strengths of the girls it serves" (p. 55). It is important to remember that there is no single experience of being a girl, and gender-specific girls programs must take difference into consideration.

The creation of a **safe space** is critical to engaging girls and young women. For the purpose of this Evidence Brief, we borrow Steenbergen and Foisy's (2006) definition of a safe space as "a supportive environment in which participants are able to have their voices validated and heard free of discrimination" (p. 96).

Three Key Messages

1. Researchers focused on determining promising/best practices for engaging girls and young women in programs frequently argue **programs that focus on gender-specific issues have positive outcomes on the wellbeing of participants** (Steenbergen & Foisy, 2006; Girls Action Foundation, 2015; Girls Action Foundation, 2012; Togane & Skeete, 2017). Girls and young women face challenges that are unique to their gender, and opportunities to effectively respond to these needs may be missed in mixed-gender programs, where girls and young women may be less likely to voice their opinions. Gender-specific programs have been proven to enhance girls' and young women's empowerment and self-confidence, and to foster leadership qualities, as well as provide them with time and space to develop trusting relationships with other girls and young women (Steenbergen & Foisy, 2006; Togane & Skeete, 2017).

2. Professionals interested in engaging girls and young women in programs should be mindful of the **diverse social locations of participants**, and should focus on supporting girls and young women to **develop an understanding of the systemic causes** of the unique challenges they may be facing (Steenbergen & Foisy, 2006; Girls Action Foundation, 2015). Race, age, class, religion, and sexual orientation, among other markers of identity, will influence the experiences, challenges, and needs of girls and young women (Steenbergen & Foisy, 2006; Girls Action Foundation, 2015; Girls Action Foundation, 2012). Steenbergen and Foisy (2006) argue that “discussing disparities openly and honestly can be a valuable learning tool, and can lead to a broader understanding of how multiple and interlocking oppressions directly impact policies and practices that affect girls and young women” (p. 108).
3. Programs intended to serve girls and young women should take an **assets-based approach that focuses on strengths, positive development, and empowerment** (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2005; Togane & Skeete, 2017; Steenbergen & Foisy, 2006). Programs that take a deficit-based approach run the risk of reinforcing the stereotype that girls are victims and passive bystanders rather than active agents of positive social change (Heidemann & Ferguson, 2009). Many researchers argue that focusing on girls' and young women's strengths is much more effective for fostering empowerment and self-confidence (Heidemann & Ferguson, 2009; Girls Action Foundation, 2015; Togane & Skeete, 2017; Steenbergen & Foisy, 2006).

Summary of Evidence: Five Promising/Best Practices

From the literature we reviewed, we identified five promising/best practices to apply in working with girls and young women:

1. Use an intersectional lens.

In their 2012 report, Girls Action Foundation describes how gender interacts with race, age, sexual orientation, proficiency in English, and religion, among other identity markers, to shape the experiences of girls and young women. In order to engage girls and young women from various social locations, program facilitators should **acknowledge difference** and **respond to the needs of participants** by considering how other forms of oppression – such as racism, homophobia, ableism, and xenophobia – impact the lives of girls and young women (Steenbergen & Foisy, 2006; Girls Action Foundation, 2015; Girls Action Foundation, 2012; Girls Action Foundation, 2009).

2. Incorporate time for open discussion.

Structured conversations can be useful, but it is also important to **set aside time for girls and**

young women to set the tone of conversations. Steenbergen and Foisy (2006) found that allowing time for open discussion was an effective way to engage girls and young women, as it enabled them to set the tone of conversations and bring up important issues. Open discussion may sometimes change the direction of pre-planned activities, so program facilitators should **be prepared to be flexible with time** (Steenbergen & Foisy, 2006).

3. Incorporate skill-building components.

In their research project aimed at understanding lower participation rates of girls in their programs, Togane and Skeete (2017) discovered that girls and young women would be more willing to participate in programs that offered skill-building components to support their personal development.

4. Engage in participatory practices.

No one knows what girls and young women need better than they do. **Girls and young women can be a great asset for program design and facilitation.** Girls Action Foundation conducted a three-year project in which they collaborated with 11 girls' programs to determine best practices for supporting positive outcomes in five areas (connectedness, self-esteem and self-confidence, resilience, critical thinking, and communication). For each of the identified outcome areas, participatory practices in which girls and young women contribute to the planning and facilitation of programs were recommended; decision-making on issues that will directly impact their lives can help to **foster a sense of empowerment** (Girls Action Foundation, 2015).

5. Create safe spaces.

Much of the research we reviewed suggests that **the creation of a safe space** was an essential element for engaging girls and young women in programs (Steenbergen & Foisy, 2006; Girls Action Foundation, 2015; Togane & Skeete, 2017; Girls Action Foundation, 2012; Girls Action Foundation, 2009). One way that this can be achieved is to have girls-/women-only spaces, which can support girls and young women to openly and comfortably share their gender-related challenges with those who have similar experiences (Steenbergen & Foisy, 2006; Girls Action Foundation, 2015; Togane & Skeete, 2017). Girls and young women should know that they can share their opinions, experiences, and challenges without the fear of being judged or discriminated against – feelings that they have likely experienced in other areas of their lives. Steenbergen and Foisy (2006) describe that these gender-specific spaces can also serve as a safe haven for girls and young women who are experiencing violence.

References

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