

Preliminary findings from the *Girls' Perspectives on Girls' Groups and Healthy Living* study

Girls empowerment groups and healthy living

Webcast March 9th 2012

co-sponsored by the British Columbia Centre of Excellence for Women's Health and the Girls Action Foundation

Agenda

You can type in questions and comments in the bottom right hand corner of your screen under the Q & A section

We will discuss questions and comments twice during the presentation and at the end

The recording of this webcast will be available on the BCCEWH website under the Events section, within 1 day

- Intro to Girls Action Foundation
- Overview of the research project
- Findings on best/promising practices

Questions

- Findings about girls group programming from the perspective of the facilitators

Questions

- Girls perspectives on girls empowerment groups
- Implications for our work with girls

Questions

The Research Project Team

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The Women's Health Contribution Program supports community-academic partnerships in the development and dissemination of policy research and information for women's health.

About the Girls Action Foundation



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About the Girls Action Foundation

WHO WE ARE

- **Girls Action Foundation** is a national charitable organization.
- We lead and seed girls' programs across Canada.
- We build girls' and young women's skills and confidence and inspire action to change the world.

About the Girls Action Foundation

WHAT WE DO

- **FOR GIRLS** -- We provide spaces for girls to gain confidence, build skills and speak out on the issues that are important and real to them.
- **FOR YOUNG WOMEN**--National leadership program provides long-term investment and support to young women who are change-makers in their communities.
- **NATIONAL NETWORK**—We provide assistance for communities to start new girls' programs: training, tools and coaching.
 - *200 girls' organizations & programs
 - *40 national, regional & research organizations

About the Girls Action Foundation

OUR REACH

- 60,000 girls and young women reached
- Over 135 community actions lead by girls and young women since 2005
- Funded 30 local programs; trained and coached 100 organizations to create programs for girls and young women.
- 90% of the girls we reach are racialized, immigrant, low-income, living in rural regions and in the North.

Overview of the Research



Research objectives

1. To **identify best practices in health promotion** with girls, which address healthy living issues such as prevention of tobacco uptake, obesity, physical inactivity and dating violence
2. To **describe the elements of girls' empowerment models**, and begin to articulate how they build on and extend effective practices in promoting healthy living, and offer a model for gender-specific health promotion.
3. To gather the **perspectives of girls on the benefits of girls' groups**, and how/if the groups help them achieve healthy living goals. To compare what the girls say they get from these groups, with known best practices about prevention of tobacco uptake, obesity, and violence against girls.

Methods

1. Search and synthesis of academic literature
2. Search for girls empowerment programming descriptions
3. Interviews and focus groups, online question
 - Focus groups with girls aged 13-15 in girls groups affiliated with Girls Action Foundation
 - Interviews with group facilitators
 - Interviews with girls aged 16-18, previously group members or currently mentors/peer-facilitators
 - Question to KickAction.ca blog as to what girls get from participating in an online all-girls' space

Girls and research

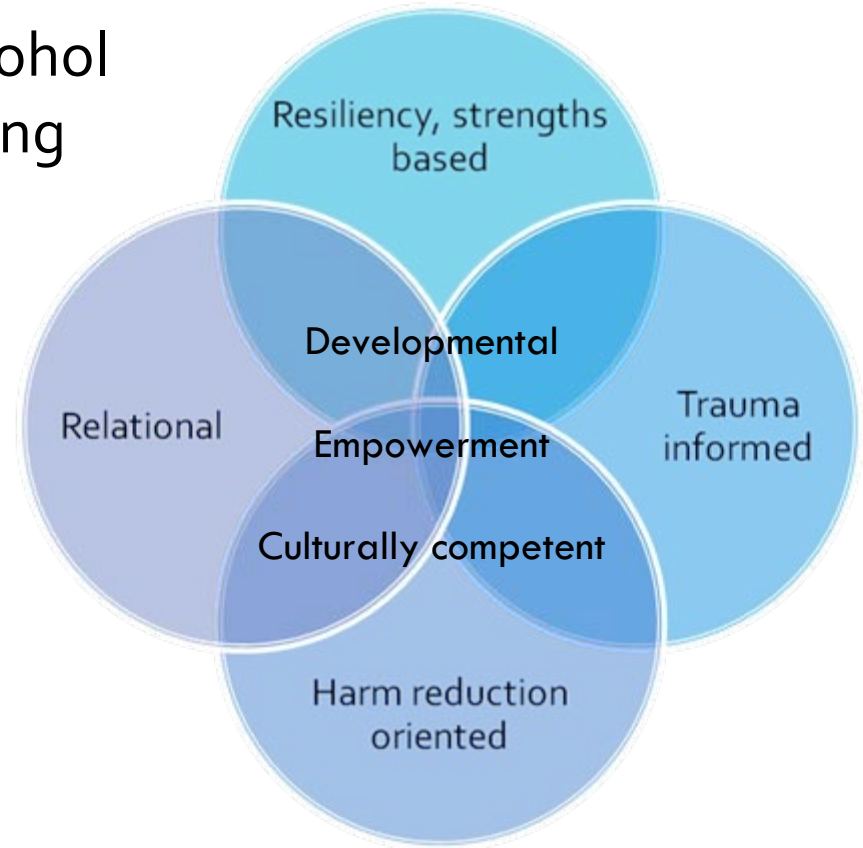


www.coalescing-vc.org

Background on health promotion and prevention work with girls

As part of our work on girls and alcohol at BCCEWH we have been examining frameworks related to health promotion and girls:

- Resiliency
- Relational
- Developmental
- Empowerment oriented
- Harm-reduction oriented
- Trauma-informed
- Culturally informed / safe



Findings – Best and promising practices



Search strategy for academic findings

Search Key Words:

GIRL or GIRLS + HEALTH PROMOTION

GIRL* or GIRLS + PREVENTION+

BODY IMAGE

EATING DISORDERS

EMPOWERMENT

TOBACCO

OBESITY

VIOLENCE

PEER

LITERATURE REVIEW

BEST PRACTICES

CLUBS

ORGANIZATIONS

GIRL or GIRLS + HEALTH +

ABORIGINAL

IMMIGRANT

RURAL

URBAN

Year Limit: 2000

+ CANADA search same as above, no year limit

Search strategy for academic findings

Databases

Academic Search Complete

(girls+health promotion, 2000+ = 1826)

Biography of Native North Americans

CINAHL

LGBT Life

Medline

PsycINFO

PsycARTICLES

Social Work Abstracts

Urban Studies Abstracts

Web of Science

Women's Studies International

Broad Keyword Search "GIRLS" in Journals

Global Health Promotion

Health Promotion Practice

Health Promotion International

American Journal of Health Promotion

Health Promotion

Journal of Community Health

Journal of Adolescent Health

Health Education Research

Preventive Medicine

Findings from the academic literature - 9 best practices

1. Culturally safe/sensitive
2. Participatory, girl-driven
3. Gender-specific, girl-centred, promoting development of a sense of self as a girl
4. Enhancing social connections, social capital, relational
5. Builds self esteem
6. Multi-component

The literature . . . on best practices

7. Strengths-based

8. Skill building

- Critical thinking
- Finding resources
- Media literacy

- Networking
- Civic engagement
- Leadership

9. Helpful topics

- Relationships
- Safety
- Diversity
- Body
- School

- Family
- Substance Use
- Mental health
- Fairness, equity

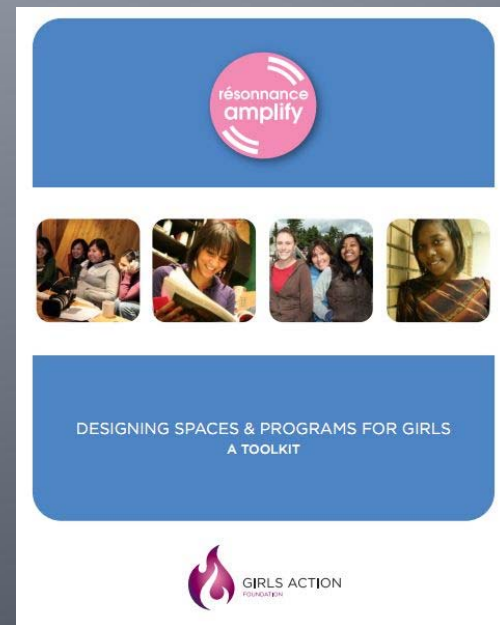
Example of an overview article - Principles for Successful Programming/ Interventions for Girls & Young Women

- ***Increasing support during life transitions*** - healthy adolescent transition to adulthood; transition into secondary school and post-secondary and/or work
- ***Fostering resiliency*** - strength-based skill-building approach; build on protective factors; coping strategies; how to obtain help; access resources; plan for the future
- ***Establishing healthy relationships*** - increase social support; improve relationships with peers; intimate relationships; relationships with parents; family and community; strengthening relationships among girls and between girls and women
- ***Understanding and integrating gender identity*** - gender socialization and gender role-development; establishing a healthy female body image; sexuality; building critical thinking skills and addressing gender stereotypes; addressing unique challenges girls' face; focuses on girls' development; improving and maintaining high-self-esteem; building positive gender and cultural identity
- ***Listening to girls*** - hearing, understanding and supporting girls and young women; creating safe space

Blake, S.M., Amaro, H., Schwartz, P., Flinchbaugh, L.J., (2001). *A review of substance abuse prevention interventions for adolescent girls*. The Journal of Early Adolescence, 21, 294-324.

Findings – Girls Empowerment Programming

Facilitator perspectives from interviews



Who we talked with

- 35 girls in 5 focus groups, (2 more groups in progress)
- 8 group facilitators from 7 different groups
- 7 older girls, mentors, or peer facilitators

Who we talked with

- Nova Scotia – urban
 - School-based group – girls identified as Caucasian and Hispanic/Caucasian
 - School-based group – girls identified as Caucasian
- Ontario – urban
 - Community-based group – girls identified as Somalian
 - Community-based group for newcomers – girls largely of South Asian descent
- Manitoba – urban
 - group focus on sexual exploitation – girls identified as Aboriginal
- British Columbia – rural
 - Community-based group – girls identified as Caucasian or of mixed race
 - School-based group to train older girls to mentor younger girls coming into high school – girls identified as Caucasian

What we asked group facilitators

- most important contribution that girls' groups make
- group topics, activities, actions that stand out as particularly helpful
- supportive of choices about things like smoking, drinking and having sex?
- navigating issues such as body image, bullying, and dating violence?

Group facilitators on . . . key contributions of girls groups

Group facilitators mentioned safe spaces to build relationships and learn skills as the major contribution of girls groups

When girls come to the group I've seen them develop, I've seen them feel safe. They learn about confidentiality and they learn that they're not alone in a lot of the issues that they face, and they learn they can make allies in adults.

Well especially for the newcomer girls it gives them a space and a time to have fun and to be with each other and to form bonds and relationships and camaraderie and I think the positive role modeling is a big aspect.

So I would say that's probably the biggest thing, is just having a space that they feel safe and get empowered and look at strengths and they could just kind of share what they need to.

Group facilitators on . . . key contributions of girls groups

Group facilitators mentioned safe spaces to build relationships and to learn skills as the major contribution of girls groups

. . . the program is about finding leadership in young women, so it's important to have that group because we're building leadership skills, we're building basically like a little community between the girls. We want to be able to build support, be able to know how to trust each other and how to keep things confidential and just be able to support girls as girls.

I think friendships, where they can develop friendships where often they are not able to do outside of the group because of social pressures.

I think it gives them a space that they, like a safe space for them to talk about issues relevant to them that they may not be able to voice say in like a health class or something like that, and you know, to reflect on like different sorts of inequalities that they see in their daily lives.

Group facilitators on . . . topics, activities, actions that stand out

Activities to build and improve girls' communication skills through active and respectful listening stood out to group facilitators as a way to enhance self-esteem and trust, particularly because girls want to discuss sensitive topics.

Check-in at the begin of every meeting. I think this is pretty common, but posing on the agenda three, two or three questions and then asking them if they have a topic, and hearing from everyone, and one thing I find really valuable is during check-ins asking the group to be mindful that this is my check-in. It's not cross-talk, it's not time for you to say "Oh, I know what that's like," or you could think it, but you know, we, we hold the space, it's ours and it's interrupted and we're putting it into the group and when we check out it's the same way and that's very valuable not being interrupted, demonstrating respect and encouraging active listening.

Group facilitators on . . . topics, activities, actions that stand out

Activities to build and improve girls' communication skills . . .

Topics though, I would say some of the topics that stand out from the groups I've been a part of are sex; I introduce reproductive health and let them know it's one of my favourite topics, and primarily menstruation, and they kind of roll their eyes and they don't want to know about it. But coming from [named AIDS group] I would do both female and male condom demonstrations, so I'm quick that I want to talk about those things. And once we get through our list, you know I'll ask them if they're interested. And when they do [want to discuss it], they're very receptive to it and they come back to the next group going "You know, I was talking to my sister, mother, aunt about that and you know what I found out?" And so they may feel awkward to talk about it but usually it generates its own kind of momentum and that's really lovely to see.

Group facilitators on . . . topics, activities, actions that stand out

Activities to build and improve girls' communication skills . . .

I think self-esteem is a big topic, and body image. Like they all kind of relate, like every week we try and do something different. Some weeks the same topic might be for like three sessions or something, but I think body image and self-esteem are really important because there's so much pressure from society for girls to look a certain way or act a certain way because they're labelled female.

. . . this group enjoys kind of dramatic, like doing theatre activities as well; like we did kind of role plays on how to deal with, you know relationship conflicts. Like these can be like friend relationships or like intimate relationships, and I think they find that really helpful too, because they're a really energetic group, so they had some pretty funny examples, but also like kind of staying with the topic too, yeah.

Group facilitators on . . . support for healthy living

Helping girls to make healthy choices was not viewed as a topic in a vacuum but rather as a result of having a safe space to try new things, and to build and explore relationships with themselves and others.

You know we try very hard to recruit instructors who reflect the, the population, you know the girls' population or the girls' demographics, so empowering them through knowledge and empowering them through physical literacy and you know, we find that if girls have bad experiences with sport or gym at an early age they tend to write off physical activity.

And so smoking, it's very rarely a topic. However when we're in the group we don't glorify partying or you know, unsafe sex. There's no war stories allowed, and those are part of our guidelines. The girls will catch other girls saying "Yeah, we're not going to talk about that right now," when one girl's like "I went to this party and it was so like . . ."

Group facilitators on . . . support for healthy living

Helping girls to make healthy choices . . .

You don't necessarily focus on a particular thing, like today we're going to talk about alcohol or today we're going to talk about smoking, but it's one, the pressure is that they might feel elsewhere are not reinforced, and they can explore those topics if they want to freely with you in the group.

At first, those are not conversations we can start off with, addressing them, but we address them in the conversation. We address them as like it's something that's, it's part of everybody's life and we try to not have, because in the home there has been a negative conversation to it, but we take that out. So what we did was we would take song lyrics and make them listen to them and tell them how that relates to them. Like "Listen to the words you guys are singing and what kind of message are you sending out." . . . and do you want to send that kind of message out? Are you comfortable with these lyrics?" That's how we would address that one.

Group facilitators on . . . navigating issues such as dating violence

Group facilitators thought giving girls knowledge and tools helps them to explore alternative perspectives and behaviours that assist them in navigating issues of body image, bullying, and dating violence.

We're always talking about power in girls group, and why would someone bully? And when we get to the core of bullying, and they're sitting with girls that they don't know or maybe know of from the other school, all of a sudden we're able to suspend judgement and go "Wow, [named person] is really listening to me and she's really being respectful. I'm not going to listen to so-and-so who said this about her and I'm not going to Facebook, you know, bully her anymore."

We had the video from Dove and, again, just discussing pressures of needing to or feeling like you have to look a certain way and how media does that and their feelings around that.

Like we, we did an activity about the myth of sexual assault and you know, they brought up like friends having things going on in their lives and like I think it's important for them to talk about those things.

Group facilitators on . . . navigating issues such as dating violence

Group facilitators thought giving girls knowledge and tools . . .

Well, and I, and I think . . . yeah, I think if there's a variety of options too, right, then it's like "Okay, well maybe I'll try this this time and see if it works," or instead of, if that's kind of the way that they have been dealing with something for a long time, and they don't have other kind of tools, it's kind of just building, you know, filling up their tool box . . .

Our program is a mentorship program, so having that role of older girls mentoring younger girls enables us to go through training and then all sorts of different activities that bring many age females together, which is also a really empowering tool because the older girls want to set an example and be amazing people, and so they shake off some of their maybe more shameful parts, and are just very empowered, strong women to role model the younger ones, and they don't want to be seen as bullies or judgmental, so they really let go of some of that stuff, so that's really cool.

Summary of perspectives of the group facilitators

Group facilitators responses map to best practices

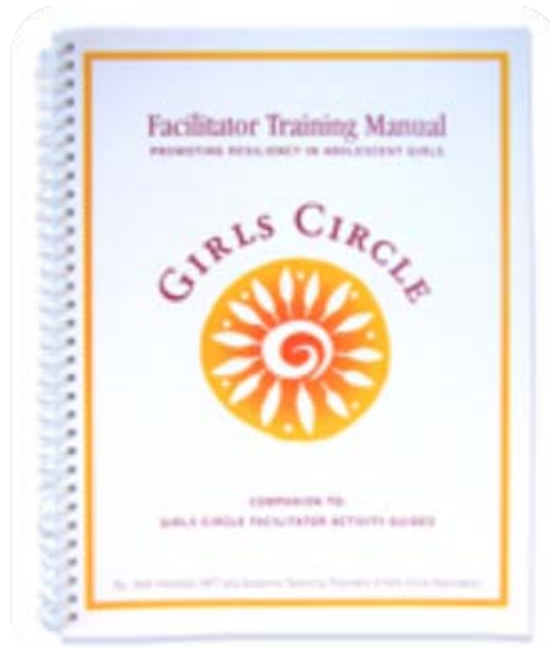
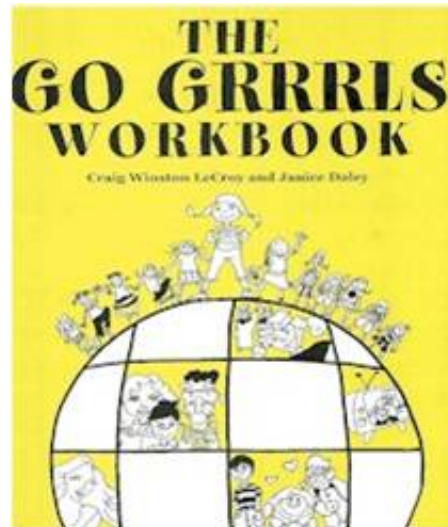
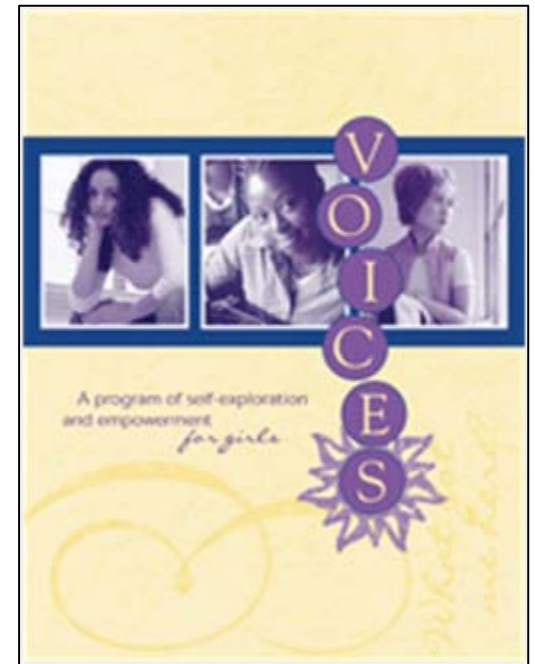
1. Culturally safe/sensitive
2. Participatory, girl-driven
3. Gender-specific, girl-centred, promoting development of a sense of self as a girl
4. Enhancing social connections, social capital, relational
5. Builds self esteem
6. Multi-component
7. Strengths-based
8. Skill building

Program examples we found

- Girls Talk Program
- Girls Circle
- Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport and Physical Activity
- Go Grrrls
- it's a girl thang!
- Girl Scouts
- Full of Ourselves
- **Girls Action Foundation**



DESIGNING SPACES & PROGRAMS FOR GIRLS
A TOOLKIT



Girls Action Foundation approach

Girls Action Foundation goals

- Build critical thinking skills
- Build communications skills, self-awareness and self-esteem
- Encourage girls to say what they want to change in their community and support them to take action
- Amplify girls' abilities to turn their experiences and skills into community action and leadership
- Connect girls to mentors and role models.

Commonalities

- Gender-specific and girl-centered
- Enhance self-esteem – stress confidentiality and cultural sensitivity
- Build relationship
- Build skills
- Use a variety of activities
- Encourage taking action
- Built around a framework of principles or outcomes

Findings – Girls perspectives

From focus groups with girls



What we asked girls in focus groups

- what made you decide to come this group?
- kinds of topics you discussed, activities or actions have you done as a group?
- what would make the group even better?
- help you with choices about things like smoking, drinking and having sex?
- any discussion or activity or learning in the group about healthy and unhealthy relationships? body image?

Girls on . . . self esteem

Girls felt that the opportunity to build friendships with other girls, and share what they are going through, was helpful in improving their self-esteem.

It helps us to feel that we're not alone too. Like if I have an issue and like someone else might have an issue and we talk about it and we feel more like, okay, you don't feel that bad and you're able to be open about it and feel confident about yourself.

. . . from the girls group we felt confident about ourselves, so we didn't feel like, you know, there was a need to . . . fit in. There was no need to, you know, do things to make, you know, make yourself feel confident, like you know, to have sex or . . .to smoke with people just to fit in

I love it because you could just be yourself; it's amazing.

. . . regarding the self-esteem and body image thing, like before I wouldn't wear certain clothes because I felt they made me look fat, and I didn't look like the girls in the magazines and I didn't look all pretty like that. And now I can, I feel like I can wear whatever I want, especially to group, and it's like, ahh . .

Girls on . . . cultural safety

Several girls mentioned the need for girls groups to be culturally relevant, or to include facilitators who are aware of specific cultural differences and issues.

Joining a girl group does have something to do with – of like it being all females, because it gives you that sense of like sisterhood, which a lot of Somali girls are lacking.

I'm going to add that the importance of girls group is going to be like the cultural specific, the understanding. Like you can go to any girls group at the [named agency], but if they don't understand the cultural background you come from, it's going to be hard to get your information.

We always have to look at things from the cultural perspective, the religious perspective and then from your own family and your language, and then where do you stand? So it's like every time you're in a girl group somebody has to be aware of that, because you can give me advice but if it violates the culture, what happens?

Girls on . . . all girls groups

Girls felt that the girls-only format of groups enabled them to freely share what they are experiencing as girls, create bonds with other girls, and experience a sense of empowerment with being a girl

Like with girls it's just like we just chill and we can talk about like almost anything you know, and you just feel more comfortable.

It was people that I already grew up and I already knew, and no boys, so I was more comfortable in coming in a t-shirt and just being okay.

It's basically that sisterhood or that like the feeling of belonging to something other than your family

Girls on . . . all girls groups

Girls felt that the girls-only format of groups enabled . . .

They, like just made, like this group just makes me feel more like powerful for being a girl

Where I used to live there used to be a lot of, I guess girls were kind of put down more, and when I came here and I found out that there was a girls group it kind of made me feel more important as a girl because I know how girls used to be discriminated against and we used to not be able to do anything, and now it kind of feels good.

Girls on safe space

Many girls reported that they valued the experience of having a safe and confidential space to share their experiences with other girls.

I think it's great that were like, everyone is seen making their own way and yet we're – all have same opinions and different opinions at the same time.

Because like I've been dealing with a whole bunch of stuff and it's like, it's kind of like nice to talk to people about it and you know you can trust them, the confidentiality, and I like having like that trust, that's why.

It's very helpful and you can like pretty much just talk about whatever the heck you want to and without being judged, and just, you can, don't have to be afraid of anything like leaving here . . .

And the main feeling I like about this is just definitely the confidentiality and a feeling of like we're not just a bunch of different girls coming together to just talk about problems, but we're, it's almost like becoming like a family in a way.

Girls on . . . skills learned

Girls reported learning about new tools or resources available to them, as well as problem solving skills, through their participation in the girls groups. Some girls said they felt more independent because of the skills they had learned in the groups.

I go to the library now. I get my books from there, I get, I do research and all that.

Like knowing that there's all sort of problems and knowing different ways to figure it out, like being able to fix it besides like just trying to figure it out on your own.

I just know what to do now. I can, I'm kind of independent. I know what I have to think about so I can go anywhere basically. I was, I couldn't do that; at the beginning of this program I didn't know how to take the bus.

I think girls groups are important because it helps us, it helps girls open their minds to different opportunities out there for them, whether it's career-wise, whether it's you know, you know, it helps them build their personalities, it helps them learn relationship problems, issues, how to help them in I would say in almost every aspect of their life, so.

Girls on . . . resistance

Girls talked about their lives within the context of the “bigger picture” and were keenly aware of media messages.

It's always time for things to get better, you know, if you messed it up in the beginning. You can't be like "Oh," you know, "my life is over, I can't do anything about it." There is still time, there is always time. So don't ever think that you're running out of it, because you got plenty, so that's it.

I was thinking about this the other day and I was wondering what would happen if we, like just for like maybe 24 hours, 48 hours, swapped everyone on TV and every like, in all of the media sources, same names, same such, but change their appearances a bit to be, you know, like bigger or not so air-brushed and have a, have like weird moles and like every once in a while they get a rash and, you know . . . like just have like them be human for 24 hours and see what happens to the world.

I was just Googling stuff because I didn't have any inspiration. I'm like, oh, I'll Google beauty, see what comes up. I was shocked because all of them were, like all of the pictures that came up on Google were of very thin, blonde, Caucasian women . . . And I think that's ridiculous, because my definition of beauty is significantly different than what I found on Google, so . . .

KickAction--All-girls' online space

“What do you get out of participating in an online space like KickAction?”
Post your thoughts here as a posting, a video clip, picture, poem, story or whichever way you prefer.



Girls on . . . on-line spaces

How on-line spaces for girls can be helpful:)

It is a unique way to have on-line spaces specifically for girls. Without fear and confusion we can share our worries and problems. This is a great opportunity for those individual girls out there who are shy and are unable to speak what they want to due to their lack of confidence. We get to know the solutions of problems and learn lessons from others. We get to express our views and ideas to the world and it helps us function better in our everyday lives, thus on-line spaces specifically for girls can play a huge role :)

I am able to share my

I am able to share my thoughts in a space that is friendly, understanding, and confidential. I know I will be respected and not judged. I can learn from other girls going through similar problems as myself and I feel that I am not alone. I also get tools and tips for improving my life and helping others. Thank you Kickaction!

Summary



Some stand out comments:

- This group made me feel like I was normal.
- This group helped me become who I am.
- This group helped me to see the better things in life.
- This group helped me accept the skin I'm in.
- Without these groups, girls get lost.

Frameworks for working with girls

Move from
“fix a girl” to
“*prepare a
girl*” (Watkins)



The literature on . . . 9 best practices

1. Culturally safe/sensitive
2. Participatory, girl-driven
3. Gender-specific, girl-centred, promoting development of a sense of self as a girl
4. Enhancing social connections, social capital, relational
5. Builds self esteem
6. Multi-component

The literature . . . on best practices

7. Strengths-based

8. Skill building

- Critical thinking
- Finding resources
- Media literacy

- Networking
- Civic engagement
- Leadership

9. Helpful topics

- Relationships
- Safety
- Diversity
- Body
- School

- Family
- Substance Use
- Mental health
- Fairness, equity

Using an empowerment framework

- Provide fun activities to increase girls' awareness of, and ability to address issues that impact their lives and communities
- Build critical thinking skills
- Build communications skills, self-awareness and self-esteem
- Encourage girls to say what they want to change in their community, and support them to take action
- Amplify girls' abilities to turn their experiences and skills into community action and leadership
- Connect girls to mentors and role models

Girls Action Foundation. (2009). *Amplify toolkit: Designing spaces and programs for girls*. Montreal, PQ.

Using a trauma-informed / gender responsive approach

- Celebrating strengths
- Safety
- Female mentors and role models
- Developing and supporting leadership skills
- Empowering girls to be forces for social change
- Media literacy
- Physical, sexual and mental health information
- Cultural connections
- Solidarity between girls and women

Covington, S. (2004). *Voices: A program for self-discovery and empowerment for girls. Facilitator guide.* Carson City, NV; The Change Companies. Pg. 18.

Girls Action Foundation approach

- Build critical thinking skills
- Build communications skills, self-awareness and self-esteem
- Encourage girls to say what they want to change in their community and support them to take action
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Next steps

- Finish write-up of all the findings
- Prepare short info sheets highlighting key findings
- Share at regional meetings of Girls Action Foundation with facilitators and girls
- continue to expand our work with girls and to build the evidence for this work!
- link others working on gender and health promotion
<http://promotinghealthinwomen.ca/>

For more info

Girls Action Foundation

<http://girlsactionfoundation.ca/>



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British Columbia Centre of Excellence for Women's Health

www.coalescing-vc.org
www.bccewh.bc.ca
<http://promotinghealthinwomen.ca/>



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