



girls circle national research project

jessica roa, m.s.
angela irvine, ph.d.
karina cervantez, b.a.

august 21, 2007

Introduction

For the last thirty years, researchers have focused on the ways that gender might shape differential academic and social outcomes for girls and boys.

Beginning in the 1970's and continuing into the 1990's, researchers focused on gender differences in academic achievement. The early education literature in this area initially found that girls exhibited higher verbal skills that led to higher grades and test scores in English. This same literature found that boys exhibited higher visual-spatial and computational skills that led to higher grades and test scores in mathematics. Further research found that, while these differences continued to be statistically significant, they diminished by 1990.¹ Nonetheless, interest in gender differences in academic achievement continues.

More recently, researchers have become interested in differential delinquency patterns. A particular interest in girls within the juvenile justice system began as arrest rates for girls rose 103% between 1981 and 1997 while the arrest rates for boys only rose 27%.² Detailed analysis of juvenile justice data found that girls were being arrested and detained for different reasons than boys. Boys are more likely to be arrested and detained for violent offenses. Girls, in contrast, are most often detained for technical violations, theft, or drug and alcohol related offenses. Girls in many jurisdictions are also more likely to be held in detention for prostitution. In addition, judges sometimes decide to hold girls in detention to protect them from domestic violence, which is not the case for adolescent boys.³

In addition, researchers began to uncover the reasons for these differential delinquency patterns. Girls involved in the juvenile justice system diverge from their male counterparts in how they handle stress and trauma. They internalize traumatic experiences that can manifest as depression, self-harming behavior, and substance abuse.

¹ Vogel, S.A. 1990. *Gender differences in intelligence, language, visual-motor skills, and academic achievement in students with learning disabilities: a review of the literature*. *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 23(1): 44-52; Hyde, J.S., Fennema, E., and S.J. Lamon. 1990. *Gender Differences in Mathematics Performance: A Meta-Analysis*. *Psychological Bulletin* 107 (2): 139-155.

² Acoca, L. and Dedel, K. 1998. *No Place to Hide: Understanding and Meeting the Needs of Girls in the California Juvenile Justice System*. San Francisco, CA: National Council on Crime and Delinquency.

³ Sherman, F. 2005. *Detention Reform and Girls: Challenges and Solutions*. Pathways publication published by the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative. Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation.

With different emotional and social patterns, girls benefit from gender-specific programming. This paper reports the findings from an evaluation of one gender-specific program, Girls Circle.

Girls Circle

Girls Circle Association (Girls Circle) was founded in 1996 to develop a support group curriculum to help young girls make healthy decisions. Girls Circle is a research-based model that encourages girls to be themselves within a structured support group. Girls Circle developed nine separate activity guides to be implemented within these support groups that represent unique 8-12 week programs organized around the themes of friendship; being a girl; body image; diversity; connections between the mind, body and spirit; expressing individuality; relationships with peers; identity; and paths to the future.

Girls Circle groups are held weekly in most cases and last approximately an hour and a half. The groups are led by women trained to implement the Girls Circle guidelines, which involve giving each girl a turn to speak without being interrupted, ensuring a safe and confidential space. The structure helps foster respect in the young girls for themselves and for each other. The group offers them an opportunity to express themselves using journaling, poetry writing, acting, role playing, drawing, working with clay, and/or dancing. The mission of Girls Circle is to instill self-confidence and improve girls' interpersonal relationships. The expectation is that these improved relationships will, in turn, improve girls' current lives as well as their futures.

Girls Circle has trained over 500 organizations nationally on their model of support groups. As a result, Girls Circle programs have been implemented with girls representing many socio-economic groups, geographical areas, ethnic identities, religions, and sexual orientations.

Research Design

Ceres Policy Research worked with Girls Circle to design a pre- and post- participation survey that would reflect a range of short- and long- term outcomes. The survey also measured the self-efficacy of the girls before and after the program and rated their satisfaction at the groups' closing. Ceres also incorporated a number of demographic questions as well as questions about detention history, history in the

child welfare system, and school engagement. All sections were designed to measure outcomes for all participants as well as different subgroups within the population. In this way, Ceres could explore whether some subgroups benefit more than others from participation in the groups.

278 surveys were gathered from 15 national sites in 19 cities that hosted Girls Circle groups. These cities include Mansfield and Magnolia in Arkansas; Cortez and Longmont in Colorado; La Grande, Umatilla, Hermiston, Pendleton, Milton, and Albany in Oregon; Santa Rosa, California; Phoenix, Arizona; Fallon, Nevada; Tampa, Florida; Columbia, South Carolina; St. Louis, Missouri; Manchester, New Hampshire; Rathdrum, Idaho; and Honolulu, Hawaii.

All participating groups followed the Girls Circle format. Each group used Girls Circle curricula. Study groups selected units from all nine activity guides according to the interests and needs of their respective groups. 29% of the circles were 8 weeks long, 24% of the circles were 10 weeks long, 18% of the circles were 12 weeks long, and 20% of the circles were 14 weeks or longer.

Each organization distributed and collected their own pre- and post-surveys. These organizations then entered the data into the database created by the evaluators and sent the completed databases back to the evaluators for analysis.

Data Analysis

Ceres Policy Research analyzed the surveys from the Girls Circle groups. We relied on 3 statistical tests. When we were interested in determining whether variables changed over time for the girls in the circles, we used a t-test. When we were interested in determining differences between subpopulations of girls, we used analysis of variance tests. If more than one variable appeared to be shaping an outcome, we ran regression analyses to sort out which variables were shaping the outcomes.

Findings from these tests were considered “statistically significant” if we were more than 95% sure that change occurred over time ($p \leq .05$), that the groups were different, or that particular variables shaped an outcome. We report only statistically significant results below.

Demographics of Girls

The girls were varied by race, age, sexuality, and languages spoken. They also varied in how many children they had, those that had been suspended and expelled, and those that had experience with home removal, in detention and in the foster youth system. Demographic details about respondents are provided below:

- 52% of the girls were white, 17% were African American, 16% were Latina, 4% were Native American, 3% were Asian, (7% were other).
- 29% of the girls fell between 10-13 years of age and 71% were 14 to 18 years old.
- The majority of the girls identified as heterosexual (81%), 9% were bisexual, 1% identified as lesbian/gay, and 1 (.4%) participant was transgender (3% were unsure).
- 16% of the girls were bilingual Spanish/English speakers, 7% were bilingual in English and another language, and 73% spoke English only (4% were other).
- 92% of the girls did not have children, while 6% had 1 child, 1 respondent had 2 (.4%) children, and 1 respondent had 3 (.4%) children.
- 50% of the girls had never been suspended from school, while 79% had never been expelled. 45% of the girls had one or more experience(s) with running away.
- Over half (67%) of the girls had not been removed from their home while 28% had experienced home removal.
- 26% of the girls had been in foster care or been placed in a group home and 42% had been held in juvenile detention or another secure facility.
- 73% of the girls reported that they attend school regularly and 61% reported that they complete homework regularly.
- Over half (57%) of the participants talk to parents or other family members about what is happening in their life.
- 60% of Girls Circle participants were involved in some form of community activity in the last year.

Outcomes

The Girls Circle survey has four outcomes sections: skills acquired after Girls Circle participation; a section to measure long-term effects of Girls Circle; a section to measure changes in self-efficacy; and a section to measure girls' overall satisfaction with Girls Circle.

Short-term Skills

T-tests were run to see if there was a change of skills for girls after participating in Girls Circle. That is, we wanted to determine whether there was a change between the pre-participation survey and the post-participation survey.

Table 1 (see below) reports the results of these tests. The first column reports the question number. The second column reports the survey question. The third column reports whether the t-test was significant. Significance levels are reported if the test was significant. We report “ns,” or “not significant,” if the test was not significant. We report “as,” or “approaching significant,” if the test was close to being significant (a significance level between .05 and .10).

Table 1. Skills Acquired after Girls Circle Participation

no.	survey question	significance level
B1	When I meet a new person, I find things that we have in common.	$p \leq .03$
B2	I try to see beyond girls' reputations.	as
B3	I use my words to express my feelings.	ns
B4	I tell adults what I need.	$p \leq .00$
B5	I feel good about my body.	ns
B6	I forgive myself when I make a mistake.	$p \leq .01$
B7	I pick close girlfriends and boyfriends who treat me the way I want to be treated.	$p \leq .03$
B8	I tell people how much they mean to me.	$p \leq .01$
B9	I treat girls who are NOT my friends with respect.	ns
B10	I am proud to be a girl/young woman.	ns
B11	When I make a decision, I think about all of my options.	ns
B12	When I'm mad at someone, I try to talk things out.	ns

Analysis of variance tests and regression analyses were also run to see if there were any subgroups within the participants that had different rates of improvement than others.

There were very few differences across subpopulations of girls. This indicates that most groups of girls are experiencing comparable benefits from participating in Girls Circle. We did find that girls held in juvenile

detention, residential treatment, or another secure facility are improving, but not as much as girls that have never had these experiences.

Long-term Effects

T-tests were run to see if girls achieved the anticipated long-term outcomes of Girls Circle participation. Table 2 (see below) reports the findings from these tests. The first column reports the question number. The second column reports the survey question. The third column reports whether the t-test was significant. Significance levels are reported if the test was significant. We report “ns,” or “not significant,” if the test was not significant. We report “as,” or “approaching significant,” if the test was close to being significant (a significance level between .05 and .10).

Table 2. Long-term Effects of Participation in Girls Circle

no.	survey question	significance level
C1	I like school.	$p \leq .05$
C2	I participate in a sport, activity, or hobby that I love.	ns
C3	I try to take care of my emotions and body.	ns
C4a	I make my own decisions about if or when to have sex.	ns
C4b	I make my own decisions about if or when to drink or use drugs.	ns
C5	I use protection if I have sex.	ns
C6	I eat healthy food.	$p \leq .01$
C7	I don't hurt my body when I'm upset.	$p \leq .02$
C8	I don't drink.	$p \leq .02$
C9	If I drink, I don't get drunk.	$p \leq .02$
C10	I build relationships with adults who help me with my goals.	ns

Analysis of variance and regression tests were run to determine which subgroups improved in relationship to each other and at what magnitude.

There were very few differences across subpopulations of girls. This indicates that most groups of girls are experiencing comparable benefits from participating in Girls Circle. We did find that LGBT youth like

school more after being in Girls Circle, but not as much as heterosexual youth.

Self-efficacy

A t-test was run to see if there were changes in participants' self-efficacy. Girls' self-efficacy did improve overall (see Table 3 below).

Table 3. Schwarzer Self-Efficacy Scale for Girls Circle Participants

Schwarzer Self-Efficacy Scale ⁴	Significance Level p≤.02
--	-----------------------------

Analysis of variance tests and regression analyses were run to determine if subgroups had different patterns of increased self-efficacy.

A number of subpopulations experienced differences in self-efficacy gains:

- LGBT girls experienced a larger increase in self-efficacy than heterosexual girls.
- Girls of color experienced gains in self-efficacy, but not as much as white girls.
- Girls with no children and those that were mothers experienced gains, while pregnant girls experienced a decrease in self-efficacy.
- Girls that have been suspended experienced a gain in self-efficacy, but not as much as girls that have never been suspended.
- Girls that have been held in detention, been placed in residential treatment or another secure facility experienced a gain in self-efficacy, but not as much as girls that have never been held institutionally.

Participant Satisfaction

In the final section of the survey, girls were asked to report on their experiences. They were provided a set of questions and asked to circle “1” if the statement is never true, “2” if the statement is sometimes true, “3” if the statement is usually true, and “4” if the statement is always true. Table 4 (see page 8) reports participants' responses. The first column reports the survey question number. The second column reports the survey question. The third column reports the average response.

⁴ Schwarzer, R., & Scholz, U. (2000). *Cross-Cultural Assessment of Coping Resources: The General Perceived Self-Efficacy Scale*. Paper presented at the First Asian Congress of Health Psychology: Health Psychology and Culture, Tokyo, Japan.

On average, girls gave their circles and facilitators high scores. Girls felt that all of the statements were somewhere between “usually true” and “always true.”

Table 4. Participant Satisfaction

no.	survey question	mean
E1	I could share what I was thinking in Girls Circle.	3.2
E2	I could ask Girls Circle leaders for help.	3.4
E3	Everyone supported me when I made decisions about my life in Girls Circle.	3.2
E4	Everyone respected me in Girls Circle.	3.4
E5	Girls Circle leaders focus on what I’m good at.	3.5
E6	Girls Circle is fun.	3.5
E7	No one shares others’ secrets in Girls Circle.	3.2

In addition, girls were asked a series of open-ended questions. We report the five most common answers to each of the questions below.

When asked, “What have you learned about yourself since starting Girls Circle?,”

- 17% of the girls reported that they learned respect for themselves and their bodies;
- 10% learned that they can be open and still be respected;
- 9% gained self-esteem, confidence, and independence;
- 5% reported that they learned nothing; and
- 3% said they learned self-awareness.

When asked, “What have you learned about the other girls in Girls Circle?,”

- 22% reported that they have a lot in common with them;
- 18% reported that they thought the other girls were sweet, friendly, and strong;
- 7% learned that they are all different and unique;
- 3% learned other girls have difficulties in life at times surpassing their own hardships; and
- 5% reported that they didn’t know.

When asked, “What have you learned about relationships from Girls Circle?”

- 5% of girls reported that they learned that they bring happiness to other people and that they are important from being in Girls Circle;
- 5% learned that they are difficult for other people to handle;
- 4% realized that they are the decision makers in the own lives;
- 4% learned about trust and honesty in relationships; and
- 3% said they learned nothing about relationships.

When asked, “Have you changed in any way from being a part of Girls Circle?”

- 21% of the participating girls report that they had changed in a good way after being a part of Girls Circle;
- 14% reported that they didn’t learn anything;
- 5% said that they became more open and talkative;
- 5% reported that they learned to be nice and respectful to others; and
- 4% reported that their attitude in general changed as a result of being in Girls Circle.

Finally, girls were asked seven questions that measure the quality of the circles and their facilitators. They were provided a set of questions and asked to circle “1” if the statement is never true, “2” if the statement is sometimes true, “3” if the statement is usually true, and “4” if the statement is always true. On average, girls rated each question between “usually true” and “always true.” This indicates that girls were very satisfied with the circles and their facilitators.

Conclusion

Girls Circle participants reported an increase in six skills developed over the short-term:

- Finding things they have in common with a new person.
- Trying to see beyond girls' reputations.
- Telling adults what they need.
- Feeling good about their body.
- Picking friends that treat them the way they want to be treated.
- Telling people how much they mean to them.

Participants also reported an improvement for four long-term outcomes:

- A decrease in self-harming behavior.
- A decrease in rates of alcohol use⁵.
- An increase in attachment to school.
- An increase in self-efficacy.

When looking at differences across subgroups, there were very few differences across subpopulations of girls. This indicates that most groups of girls benefit equally from participating in Girls Circle. Two subgroups had more than one statistically significant difference:

LGBT Girls

- LGBT girls experienced a larger gain in self-efficacy compared with heterosexual girls.
- LGBT girls like school more after being in Girls Circle, but not as much as heterosexual girls.

Girls Held in a Secure Facility

- Girls that have been held in a secure facility are experiencing gains in short-term skills, but not as much as girls that have never been held in a secure facility.
- Girls that have been held in a secure facility are experiencing gains in self-efficacy, but not as much as girls that have never been held in a secure facility.

Implications

There were very few differences found for girls who participated in Girls Circle suggesting that it is a promising model for girls in multiple locations (i.e. urban, suburban, rural), in multiple settings (i.e. juvenile justice, education, after-school care), for different lengths of time (i.e. 8-week, 10-week, 12-week, and 14 week cycles), and across different demographic sub-groups (i.e. ethnic/racial identity, sexual identity, age). Moreover, these findings suggest that the Girls Circle model is particularly flexible, as facilitators may choose from the full range of activity guides and obtain the same outcomes for girls participating in circles. Implications for foster youth, LGBT youth, girls who have been suspended and expelled, and girls who have been held in a secure facility are described in more detail below.

⁵ *There were two separate alcohol use questions that showed a decrease in use.*

Girls in Foster Care and in Group Home Settings

There were no differences found between girls who had experience with being a foster youth or living in a group home and those who hadn't. Girls who had been in foster care or lived in a group home showed the same gains in short-term skills, self-efficacy, and long-term skills when compared with girls who hadn't experienced foster care or group home settings. These outcomes suggest that Girls Circle is a very promising model for girls involved in foster care and group home settings.

LGBT Girls

There were very few differences between LGBT and heterosexual girls. LGBT girls had greater gains in self-efficacy than did heterosexual girls. LGBT girls also reported liking school more after being in Girls Circle, but not as much as heterosexual girls. This suggests that LGBT youth have the potential to gain in long-term life skills and to improve how they feel about themselves after participating in the circles. In order to understand the differences in rates of improvement between these girls, interviews should be conducted with Girls Circle participants. These outcomes suggest Girls Circle is a promising model for organizations providing direct services to girls who are LGBT identified.

Girls Expelled or Suspended

There were few differences between girls who had been suspended and expelled and those who hadn't. Girls that had been expelled did not show differences in short-term skills, long-term skills, or in self-efficacy. Girls that had been suspended did experience a gain in self-efficacy but not as much as girls who had never been suspended. In order to understand the differences in rates of increase in self-efficacy, interviews with Girls Circle participants are recommended. Interviews are also recommended to understand the reasons why no differences were found between girls who had been expelled and those who hadn't. Overall, these outcomes suggest that the Girls Circle is a promising model to use when working with girls who have been suspended and/or expelled.

Girls Held in a Secure Facility

There were also very few differences among girls who had been held in a secure facility such as juvenile detention and those who hadn't. Girls with experience being in a secure facility reported that they are gaining in short-term skills but not as much as girls who hadn't been detained in a secure facility. These girls are also gaining in self-efficacy but not as much as girls who hadn't been detained in a secure facility. These outcomes suggest that girls in detention have special needs regarding short-term skills and self-efficacy. Interviews with the Girls Circle participants are recommended to understand the differences. Overall,

the outcomes suggest that Girls Circle is a promising model to use with girls who have had experience in a secure facility.

Future Research Directions

The next phase of the Girls Circle evaluation project will take two different directions. Ceres Policy Research will be conducting qualitative interviews and/or focus groups with girls who are participating in circles to better understand the experiences of girls in juvenile justice settings. We will also expand our quantitative analysis of outcomes for girls in juvenile justice and school settings.

By collecting administrative data on recidivism, suspension, expulsion, and other disciplinary processes, we will explore the relationship between Girls Circle participation and girls' paths within disciplining institutions.