

Girls Circle: A Gender-Specific Support Group Program

Promoting Healthy Development

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Abstract

This paper reviews the unique needs, risks and strengths of girls and provides a rationale for gender specific programs and services to support their healthy development; acknowledges the paucity of rigorous evaluations and evidence on programs designed for girls in the juvenile justice system; describes the Girls Circle - a structured support group model which is the first gender-specific program to demonstrate evidence to reduce recidivism; and expresses support for the broad application of Girls Circle across all youth serving sectors. Court-involved girls share a gendered pathway of trauma and oftentimes crossover between foster care, mental health, substance abuse, and community services. In the education sector, too, girls experience widespread bullying and sexual harassment driven by rigid gender norms that negatively impact girls' school engagement. The Girls Circle program invites and leverages girls' strengths in seeking connections, promoting protective factors, and reducing risks associated with female adolescent experiences. The evidence of effectiveness of Girls Circle in the justice system lends further support for its application as a gender-responsive developmental program for girls across all youth service sectors both in prevention and intervention settings.

Keywords: adolescent girls, female youth, adolescence, development, gender, gender-specific, gender-responsive, gender norms, strengths, needs, risks, resiliency, assets, protective factors, recidivism, systems of care, school engagement, complex trauma, trauma, pathways, mental health, juvenile justice, child and foster services, education, school engagement, community programs, circles, healthy relationships, connection, restorative programs, programs for girls, effectiveness, evidence

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Introduction to Girls Circle

Girls Circle is a gender-specific support group model for girls, and for LGB & T youth who identify with female adolescence, 9 – 18 years. It acknowledges the strengths, needs and risks of pre-teen and adolescent girls and promotes resiliency through healthy relationships as the primary pathway to overall healthy development. Girls Circle responds to the call for gender responsive services and programs that recognize unique gendered differences in experiences that impact the health and development of girls and aligns with the guiding principles of female-responsive programming outlined by Bloom and Covington (2001). Girls Circle accesses girls' strengths to foster belonging and develop healthy relationships; it meets girls where they are at empowering them with shared decision making and strengthens their critical thinking skills; it elicits healthy coping behaviors and empowers girls with use of their voices, skills and resources to address social-emotional and interpersonal challenges, and it encourages them to reach toward their highest potential as authentic and connected youth, engaged students, and young leaders preparing for higher education or technical training and meaningful careers.

Identity formation is a major task of adolescence during which significant changes are occurring in young people's bio-psycho-social development, as well as in the social-cultural and peer environment in which gender norms, expectations and attitudes intensify. National statistics detail numerous risks for girls related to education, family health, economic security, poverty,

violence, and economic opportunity which are significantly greater for African American, Hispanic/Latina, Native American/Alaskan Native girls due to structural and systemic barriers (White House Council on Women and Girls, 2014). Girls Circle recognizes and responds to the cultural and gender-relevant conditions and aspects of female identity development and invites examination of rigid norms in order that girls may avoid internalizing distorted and harmful ideas about female identity, enjoy greater self-worth, have safer experiences and relationships, and gain support and resources to optimize development. Girls Circle is a program model for all girls including those in programs that aim to prevent, treat, or provide after care services in the sectors of education, public health, mental health, substance abuse, foster and dependency care and juvenile justice (Hossfeld & Taormina, 2007).

Gendered Risks for Adolescent Girls

Adolescent girls are at greater risk for depression¹ (SAMHSA, 2014) which is linked to substance abuse in adolescence (Shincke, Fang & Cole, 2008). Girls have higher rates of sexual abuse²(NCVC, 2012) also related to teen substance abuse (Smith & Saldana, 2013), and higher incidents of dating violence (CTDB, 2013), teen pregnancy (CDC, 2015) and long term effects of sexually transmitted diseases (STD's) (CDC, 2013). Girls are increasingly involved with the

¹ In 2013, the percentage of adolescence who had a MDE (Major Depressive Episode) was three times higher (16.2%) than for males (5.3%). SAMHSA (U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), (2014).

² While rates are difficult to obtain due to underreporting of sexual abuse crimes, David Finkelhor, Director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center, reports that approximately 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 20 boys report having experienced sexual abuse in the general population, rates that are estimated to be much lower than actual occurrences. Pre-teen and children to age 13 are most vulnerable to child sexual abuse. See: National Center for Victims of Crime Statistics (2012).

juvenile justice system, with arrest types that differ from boys - running away from home, alcohol and substance abuse related activities, property crimes and assaults (OJJDP, 2008). They now represent about 30 percent of the total juvenile justice population (OJJDP, 2008). Although the media mischaracterized girls as becoming more violent, the increased rates of arrests have been largely attributed to the unintended consequences of policies enacted over the past two decades to protect girls from domestic assaults or abuse (OJJDP, 2008).

Girls in the justice system report much higher rates of sexual abuse and sexual assault, primarily by people they know, and the prevalence of PTSD is greater for them (NCTSN, 2014). The traumas that lead girls into conflicts or fights at home and to seek safety away from home are also driving girls into the justice system, yet these same girls are often seen in other systems of care such as mental health and foster care before their involvement in the justice system (Sherman, 2012, p. 1601). Girls also make up the vast majority of child sexual exploitation victims (OJJDP, 2014)³ and they are arrested for prostitution at rates more than three times that of boys (Sherman, 2012, p. 1606) even as policies have begun to decriminalize prostitution for minors and to divert trafficked youth away from the justice system and toward services (OJJDP, 2014).

Amongst girls in systems of care, the intersections of gender, race/ethnicity, poverty, and diverse sexual and gender identities affect youth disproportionately. African American, Hispanic/Latina, and Native American/Alaska Native girls are less likely to graduate from high school than their white female peers, more likely to become pregnant as teens, and more negatively affected than white peers by school disciplinary measures that suspend students and

³ An OJJDP Literature Review, the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children(CSEC) / Sex Trafficking, states that in a 2011 report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, over 95 percent of sexually trafficked victims were female, and 54 percent were 17 years of age or younger.

lead them into the “school to prison pipeline” or “sexual abuse to prison pipeline” (WHCWG, 2014).

Data from the National Coalition for the Homeless indicate that LGBT youth become homeless at twice the rate of straight or gender conforming youth, leading to depression, suicide risks, and physical and sexual victimization (2009). LGBT youth are overrepresented and under-recognized in the juvenile justice system in which data suggests that LGB and gender non-conforming girls combined represent as much as 27 percent of the female youth population (Irvine, 2010, p. 688).

The U.S. Department of Education reports that girls made up 55% of those students in a large sample who were bullied or harassed on the basis of sex (2012). While both boys and girls report being targets or offenders of cyberbullying, 18.5 percent of girls reported being cyberbullied in the past 30 days compared to 11.8% of boys (CRC, 2014).

Girls across systems of care appear to share core experiential pathways of complex trauma, especially sexual abuse, in addition to family conflict, substance abuse, mental health problems, and difficulties in school. In addition to efforts to change social conditions and policies to prevent and reduce delinquency, gender-responsive services and programs targeting reduction of risk and building of protective factors have been developed and offered for girls in education, behavioral health, child services and juvenile justice.

In the juvenile justice system, there has been very little rigorous evaluation of effectiveness of gender-specific programs; a thorough review of 62 programs targeting delinquency for girls found no clear evidence of reductions in recidivism rates and substantial obstacles (i.e., financial and time resources, expert personnel, adequate numbers of youth needed for studies) preventing organizations serving girls from pursuing such evaluations (Zahn, Day,

Mihalic, & Tichavsky, 2009, p. 284). The findings from this study underscored the dilemma for organizations serving girls, since a majority of grants and funders require the designation and use of an “evidence-based program (EBP).” Scholars and advocates for system-involved girls have called for alternative forms of program assessment beyond the high or “out-of-reach” standards of EBP status, suggesting, for example, evidence-informed practice – utilizing knowledge and experience of practitioners from the field to apply proven principles and approaches *and* have more flexibility to respond to the needs and strengths of a given client or community (Sherman, 2012, p. 1625-27). The OJJDP responded to the lack of findings of evidence-based programs with training to equip service providers with evaluation tools and knowledge, and by funding evaluations of three gender-specific programs, one of which was Girls Circle.

Girls Circle Program Description

Origin and Theoretical Framework

Girls Circle is a research-based gender-specific circle program originally developed in 1995 and offered in prevention in California. Developers Beth Hossfeld and Giovanna Taormina of One Circle Foundation (previously Girls Circle Association) have offered facilitator training, consultation and manual-guided curricula since 1997. Girls Circle quickly emerged as a program aligned within the best practice principles of preventative, restorative, and trauma-informed approaches for adolescent females. It has been applied to support the developmental and gender-specific needs of justice-involved girls in diversion, detention, probation, residential, secure, and

after-care services and across all youth sectors including behavioral health, education, child services and community and settings, to increase protective factors and reduce risks for girls. Girls Circle fosters healthy development through establishing an atmosphere of respect, shared decision making, peer support and relational experiences, and support of cognitive-behavioral skills development through verbal, creative and experiential activities (Hossfeld & Taormina, 2007). The core premise of Girls Circle is that girls are relational: they seek out and respond to social connections. Within safe settings and relationships, girls develop healthy decision making skills, gain confidence, and demonstrate pro-social behaviors. Girls are motivated toward safe, healthy and legal behaviors when their relationships with adults are caring and respectful (Hossfeld & Taormina, 2007). This premise reflects the Relational-Cultural theory (RCT) that recognizes relationships as the central organizing feature in girls' development (Miller, 1976). A girl's healthy connections influence all other arenas of individual health -social- emotional, physical, spiritual, and cognitive. Similarly, her unsafe and unhealthy relationships have a negative influence on her overall health. To develop psychological health, girls need relationships in which they are able to use their true voices and be heard without risk of alienation (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). If they have been let down, hurt or abused by their primary caregivers, they seek to belong elsewhere with peers, older men, or gangs, and use their survival skills for physical and emotional security (Schaffner, 2006).

Neuroscience also identifies social connections as key to the adolescent girl's development. Brizendine (2006) asserts that the "stress response (in a girl's brain) is massively triggered by social rejection," and her "brain circuits respond to stress with nurturant activities and the creation of protective social networks." The wellbeing and "bonding" hormone oxytocin is released when girls talk, promoting a strong sense of belonging and comfort (Brizendine,

2006). Although the reasoning capacities of the frontal lobes are not fully developed until early adulthood, adolescent brain development heightens emotions, releases stress hormones, and increases the likelihood of impulsive behaviors (Henderson, Brien, & Eleson, 2006).

In response to stressors that weigh upon girls, Girls Circle is a strengths-based approach, providing a relational environment, incorporating resiliency principles (Benard, 2004), and Motivational Interviewing (MI) techniques (Miller, Rollnick, 2002), where girls can talk together, develop bonds, reduce stress, and support one another. RCT scholars Judith Jordan and Linda Hartling (2002) explain the catalytic role that relationships hold in girls and women's healthy development this way: people grow "through and toward relationship which occurs within and is influenced by a cultural context...[People] need to be in connection in order to change, open up, shift, transform, heal and grow."

The strengths-based perspective is a balanced approach to working with youth. It involves identifying and recognizing strengths and assets on both individual and group levels as well as risks and needs and continually building on strengths to reduce risks and increase protective factors. The approach is well recognized within the mental health and public health fields (Kobau, 2011), school counseling (Galassi, 2008), education ⁴(CTA Institute for Teaching, n.d.), the justice system (Clark, 2001), and is recognized as a best practice in social work and child services (Saleeby, 2002). In Girls Circle, facilitators demonstrate a strengths-based approach by noticing and telling girls what they are doing well, rather than focusing on where they may be falling short; invite girls to create circle agreements together which increases their ownership and accountability to them; look for strengths in some of the challenging behaviors

⁴ The California Teacher's Association Institute for Teaching (CTA-ITF) shapes all educational policies and teacher strategies and techniques through a strengths-based lens approach.

expressed and focus on the strengths. For example, if a circle participant appears disengaged and seems reluctant to participate, the facilitator might thank her for showing up, normalize the caution she may be feeling about being circle, and invite other circle members who may have more experience in the circle to reflect on how it was for them when they were not yet accustomed to the circle. In these ways, the behaviors of the girls are viewed respectfully and with an eye toward building connections.

As mentioned, girls' pathways into systems of care typically stem from problems - especially trauma and abuse - within their immediate families and relationships. The unsafe incidents, people and environments cause girls to seek safety through connecting with people and/or activities that may function as coping skills but pose other health and safety risks. Broad structural and social change efforts are needed to uproot biases and conditions that directly or indirectly result in child abuse, and simultaneously, services should provide victimized girls affected by these conditions with safer and more adaptive tools and skills to cope with these stressors in order to heal and emerge better supported and equipped to live healthier, safer, productive lives. Girls Circle addresses and promotes adaptive coping skills and self-care behaviors and prevents further risks in behaviors that can lead to addictions, STD's, sexual violence and other costly and enduring problems across the lifespan by offering consistent attention to building safer interpersonal connections, demonstrating respect, and applying the principles and practices of MI.

MI is a "directive and client-centered counseling style for eliciting behavior change by helping clients to explore and resolve ambivalence" (Rollnick & Miller, 2002). In Girls Circle, MI applies to girls regardless of risk factor. It involves asking open-ended questions to the whole group which create safe and comfortable environments to talk about risky behaviors, to explore

the ambivalent feelings about certain behaviors – such as drinking or getting high, dieting, sexual activity, dating older guys, etc. - and to elicit from the circle participants their own motivations to change. Questions and discussions are intentionally nonjudgmental, open-ended, affirming, reflective, and promote girls' self-efficacy toward change. When youth experience adults who are willing to listen to the upsides as well as the downsides of their risk behaviors without interruption, judgment or lecturing, they are less likely to defend a risky position and more likely to reflect on a behavior from a balanced perspective. As a result, they engage their minds more thoroughly on the subject and more often arrive at a safer and healthier stance.

This integrative approach, with the theoretical basis of RCT and the principles and practices of the Strengths-based approach and MI woven into the circle experience, result in a trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate program for girls. The circle process, gender-relevant topics and activities in the curricula, together with the Girls Circle facilitator's approach harness the group's capacities to connect with each other, share experiences, reduce emotional stress, strengthen emotional regulation and mood balance, critically think through their situations, reflect on their needs, experiences, and behaviors, and identify individually meaningful goals and actions. One adolescent girl who attended a Girls Circle in Sonoma County, CA, as a condition of her probation, told her circle peers and facilitator, "I was so upset before I got here today, 'cuz I had a horrible day and my mom and I were fighting as usual, and I thought 'I'm just gonna get this over with and then go get high, I don't even care'... but you know what? I don't feel that way anymore. I've never been treated with respect before, from people at school or from adults, the way you all treat me here. I'm going home tonight, I'm

gonna do my homework, and just be decent to my mom, and I'm not going out to get high. I don't feel like I need to do that anymore.”⁵

Structure

Girls Circle groups meet once or twice weekly for 90 to 120 minutes, or in shorter sessions adapted for school day programs, with 5 – 10 girls and one or two female adult facilitators. Commonly, groups are closed to new members for an eight to twelve session cycle, to promote safety and bonding. In high transition settings, such as homeless shelters, drop in programs, or detention or in-patient programs where group members enter and exit more rapidly and often without prior knowledge, circles are open and each session is facilitated as an independent unit so as to maintain emotional safety.

In all settings, a Girls Circle program requires a protected and safe physical space that is comfortable and away from disruptions. At the beginning of the program, Girls Circle participants co-contribute to creation of a set of group guidelines or agreements that describe how they want to interact and what they expect of each other, such as to: show respect, show up, maintain confidentiality, speak from own experiences. The facilitator adds to these the legal and ethical exceptions to confidentiality. Girls Circle uses a six-step format to promote safety, consistency, relationships, a range of expressive opportunities, skill building and empowerment, as follows:

⁵ Author's notes during Girls Circle session during observation for quality assurance purposes. Santa Rosa, CA, 2010.

Opening Ritual: A simple ritual selected by the group that marks the beginning of each session with a consistent practice to harness attention, establish a shared purpose, and signify the value of the relationships created in circle. Common rituals: reading a quote, singing a selected theme song, sharing a series of yoga postures, etc.

Theme Introduction: A brief introduction of the topic for the session with a short description of what type of activity will be offered. Topics are wide ranging and selected according to the interests and needs of the group such as: relationship skills, cultural identity, body image, gender myths, messages and stereotypes, role models, dealing with conflicts, healthy coping skills, female identity, relationship safety, binge drinking, and more.

Check-in: A central component of Girls Circle, check-in is a time for each person to be invited to hold a talking piece and to share anything they wish about their emotions, thoughts and experiences on this day and/or since the previous session. While each is sharing, all others are actively listening, without judgment or comment. Thus, the process not only helps girls recognize commonalities through sharing their stories, but also creates opportunity to learn to listen, take turns, show and expect respect within caring relationships. The Check-in step is based on traditional practices of Native American/First Nation tribes and indigenous people across cultures throughout the ages.

Activity: A verbal discussion and creative or experiential activity are provided on the topic of the day, providing girls with various ways to explore and express themselves and to critically think

about the situations they are dealing with and decisions they're making. Activities allow for self-awareness and expression, connection with others, stress relief, new learning, and skills practice. These may include role play and skits, group or individual art activities, creation of video messages, storytelling, poetry, self-care experiences such as relaxation and yoga exercises, or journaling.

Sharing of Activity: Following the artistic or experiential exercises, girls re-convene in circle and are once again invited to share and debrief the activities. This sharing heightens awareness of influences in their lives, expands their cognitive and emotional skills, and strengthens social bonds and personal responsibility. During the conclusion of this step, facilitators ask an "application question." They invite girls to share one action they will take during the coming week, as a result of their experiences on this topic and activity in this session. One by one, circle participants consider and then make a personal commitment to do something that is personally significant related to the topic. This is a strengths-based, MI-influenced step that elicits girls' self-identified intentions and actions toward safety, health and well being. In the following session, facilitators invite girls to share any observations and updates about the commitments they've stated.

Closing Ritual: Another simple ritual is selected and used at the closing of each session. This ritual acknowledges the time and authentic sharing that's happened, the support and caring that's been exchanged, the connections that have been strengthened all within an atmosphere of respect. The closing ritual assists the participants to have a sense of completion for the session, and to transition into the next phase of their day. Closing ritual examples include: sharing

gratitude messages, affirmation statements, ringing a bell, a group hug, a song, a moment of accomplishment, etc.⁶

Facilitator Training and Manual-Guided Curriculum

One Circle Foundation provides facilitator training, curriculum, consultation, and quality assurance to organizations nationwide, in Canada, and globally. Girls Circle Facilitator Training is a two-day experiential training that addresses the elements of the Girls Circle program including adolescent female development and the Girls Circle theoretical framework, structure, facilitation skills to offer gender-relevant group activities and discussions, trauma-informed and strengths-based concepts and methods, motivational interviewing approaches applied in a group context, and group dynamics. A facilitator manual incorporates the information for training participants and is available to the public. Refresher trainings are available, and an additional one-day training, Gender Transformative Strategies strengthens facilitator knowledge and skills to respond to LGBT and gender-nonconforming youth, and to promote inclusivity in gender-specific groups according to the youth's self-identification.

Fourteen fully developed "activity guides" or program binders ranging from 8 – 12 sessions per binder offer manual-guided sessions which are delivered in whole or may be mixed and matched according to the most pertinent topics of interest and needs of the group. Of these, one activity guide is translated and culturally adapted for Latinas, and another focuses on an adaptation of Girls Circle - called Mother-Daughter Circle for moms and daughters.

⁶ For a sample of a complete Girls Circle session, please see Appendix.

Each one contains gender-relevant themes, creative activities and guided discussions with plans that integrate the six step format and are designed within the strengths-based approach to build healthy relationships, develop greater self-awareness, reduce isolation, and promote exploration, expression, and skill building. Topics include: friendship; body image; female identity; gender myths and stereotypes; diversity and cultural heritage; safety, sexuality, and prevention of sexual violence; relationships with peers, cyber-safety and social media, relationships with family, dating partners, and authority figures; substance abuse and risk behaviors; setting goals; and self-care, mental health promotion, and more.

Evidence for Girls Circle

Girls Circle has demonstrated promising results for over a decade in pre-post survey design outcome studies across prevention and delinquency programs. Results have included significant increases in social support, perceived body image, and self-efficacy (Steese et al., 2006; Irvine, 2005), and additionally, increases in school attachment and to caring adults, and reductions in risks such as self-harm and alcohol use (Irvine, 2005; Irvine, Roa, & Cervantez, 2010).

The model was implemented in a three-year Title II grant-funded program through the Sonoma County Probation Department and community based organizations in Sonoma County, CA in 2007-2010. Named “Circles Across Sonoma,” the program was highly praised by facilitators, probation officers, girls and families. Over 900 girls completed the program with a strong completion success rate. Evaluation showed significant increases in girls’ communicating needs to adults, confidence, and positive body image, and highest program completion rates. To

date, Sonoma County Probation Department has continued to renew the implementation of Girls Circle since the commencement of the Title II Grant in 2007 (County of Sonoma, 2016).

Qualitative findings were predominantly very positive: nearly every girl interviewed said she would recommend the program to their friends, most reported building positive relationships with their facilitators, and girls experienced little conflict with one another or their facilitators.

“This general lack of conflict should be seen as an accomplishment..., since girls in the juvenile justice system often use conflict as a coping mechanism (Irvine, Roa, 2010). Some girls who identified as LGB and/or gender non-conforming did not feel as understood or welcomed by facilitators, a finding that indicated a heightened need for more targeted LGBT -responsive facilitator training to effectively implement Girls Circle to its fidelity as an inclusive, strengths-based approach.

In the State of Hawai’i, Project Kealahou (PK), a six-year federally funded program through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) aims to improve services and outcomes for the state’s most vulnerable and at-risk girls and includes Girls Circle as one of a menu of gender-responsive, trauma-informed services⁷. Although preliminary evaluation data does not link outcomes to specific programs within the menu set, individual outcomes after six months of PK programming indicated significant improvements in behavior, mood, family strain, strengths and competencies (Suarez, Jackson, Slavin, Michels & McGeehan, 2014, p.390).

The Girls Circle: An Evaluation of a Structured Support Group Program for Girls, Final Report breaks new ground in furthering the knowledge base on gender responsive services for

⁷ See more about Project Kealahou, the trauma-informed system of mental health care for Hawai’i’s diverse population of adolescent girls at: <http://projectkealahou.org/who-we-are/about-us/> For more information about the evaluation, see: http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4300548/pdf/hjmph7312_0387.pdf

girls (Gies et al., 2015). Funded by the OJJDP and conducted in the Juvenile Probation and Court Services Department in Cook County, Illinois by Development Services Group of Bethesda, MD, a random assignment control group study of the Girls Circle program found that recidivism rates after 12 months post-program completion were significantly lower for girls who had regularly attended Girls Circle sessions than for girls who received traditional probation services. When controlling for dosage, rates of probation violations and re-arrests were significantly lower for participants assigned to the Girls Circle program, suggesting more favorable recidivism outcomes with longer attendance in the program (Gies, et al, 2015). Girls Circle is the first known gender-specific program for girls to show evidence of reducing rates of recidivism for girls in the justice system. Further, within the Girls Circle treatment group, girls increased their use of condoms and expressed greater educational aspirations and confidence to achieve them.

Recognizing the dosage effect of the Girls Circle program on reducing recidivism, that is, treatment “as-received,” vs. “as assigned,” has merit. It can account for the realities, conditions, culture and policies that impact attendance for court-involved girls perhaps more so than assumed or anticipated in design. For example, while the study demonstrated significant reductions in recidivism compared to the control group, and additionally demonstrated improvements in health and education outcomes for participating youth within the Girls Circle program, about half the girls assigned to the Girls Circle study group either never attended a session or received less than 30% of the program. While staff carefully introduced the program to the assigned girls, it arrived without benefit of word on the street as to the value of the program by girls’ peers or community members. In the earliest stages of a Girls Circle, most girls who come into the juvenile system and/or have histories of trauma tell their facilitators that

they do not trust other girls, they get along better with boys, and that they are not interested in being a part of a girls group. Their feelings are based on experiences with other girls where relationships have been conflictual or harmed, usually over the attentions of a boy. It is plausible that assigned girls could have had even lower expectations about their assignment to the Girls Circle group vs. the traditional probation services as usual group, that could have factored into attendance. The Girls Circle study highlighted several attendance barriers, including: a) to reduce the numbers of youth in juvenile detention, the county does not violate youth for non-compliance of probation terms; b) some probation officers and girls were confused by the voluntary *study* participation vs. court-ordered *program* participation; c) centralized *or* neighborhood locations; d) means and cost of transportation; time and days of programming, i.e., an unexpected lengthening of the school day impeded timely attendance part way through one circle program; e) communication hurdles between program staff and girls and their families, such as frequent changes in cell phone numbers.

Further, Chicago shares a complex history of systemic and structural problems with other U.S. urban areas, problems that have likely influenced the community's relative indifference toward probation programming, or mistrust of authorities, which could have contributed to compliance problems. Assigned girls would not have necessarily anticipated receiving programs with a relational, trauma-informed lens, as these approaches are only recently gaining some traction within the justice system. When reflecting on these challenges over the course of the study, a department member described the assigned girls' level of attendance as consistent with the norms for the court-involved youth in the county, saying, "They just don't show up, they just don't; it requires taking time to build trust, and to become known to them, to

their families, to develop a relationship.”⁸ Through the course of the study, the county implemented a variety of tools and strategies – relationship building and outreach, transportation services, adjustment of time and place of delivery, and the delivery of messages with increasing clarity from staff to girls that ultimately improved attendance. Importantly, as these tools were implemented, girls attended more sessions, and recidivism rates dropped. The evaluators suggest that therapeutic programs such as Girls Circle necessitate a balanced response from the juvenile justice system to continue to avoid counterproductive and punitive measures for noncompliance, while also developing mechanisms such as graduated, deterrence-based sanctions, to positively influence treatment attendance in order that youth receive the benefits of therapeutic approaches (Gies et al, 2015, p.xiv). Given the myriad of systemic, socio-economic and cultural factors that affect participation rates in juvenile services, considering program effects based on dosage received, vs. as assigned, better accounts for the complex conditions that affect attendance – especially in the early stages of a new program implementation, and hence impact the outcomes for girls at risk of delinquency.

Conclusion

Girls Circle is a gender-specific support group that promotes resiliency and healthy development of pre-teen and adolescent girls regardless of risk. Based on Relational-Cultural theory, it applies strengths-based approaches, Motivational Interviewing, and cognitive-behavioral, experiential skill building activities. This integrated program strengthens girls’ relationships and self-worth, and counters harmful gender norms and attitudes which have

⁸ Author notes from phone discussion between One Circle Foundation and Cook County Juvenile Probation and Court Service Department Staff regarding Girls Circle program implementation, 2011.

contributed to gender-based harassment, sexual abuse and assault, and their subsequent impact on girls' physical, mental and behavioral health. Girls Circle supports respectful peer-to-peer and adult-peer connections, use of voice, healthy decision making, and leadership skills as girls pursue education and meaningful participation in their communities. Facilitator training and manual-guided curricula and consultation assist facilitators in programs across all systems of care and all youth sectors globally.

Implemented successfully for two decades, outcome studies have shown significant improvements for diverse populations of girls in areas of social support, school bonding, self-efficacy, body image, and avoiding harmful behaviors (Steese, et al., 2006; Irvine, 2005; Irvine, Roa, Cervantez, 2007; Irvine, Roa, 2010). A randomized control trial of Girls Circle in a probation setting in a major Midwest metropolitan area demonstrated effectiveness in reducing recidivism for girls – the first known gender-specific program to reduce delinquency (Gies, 2015). Within the experimental group, the program additionally demonstrated effectiveness in increasing girls' use of condoms - a key public health development – in addition to significant positive outcomes in educational aspirations, goals, and expectations. (Gies, 2015).

With years of field-informed practice and experience, and implementation across all systems of care - across all cultures/race/ethnicities with girls from diverse localities, faiths, and socioeconomic status - Girls Circle is a timely and needed program with evidence for widespread application in prevention and intervention efforts to meet the developmental needs and strengths of girls to grow through connection into strong leaders, healthy women, and productive, engaged citizens. As this student describes, the connections built in Girls Circle ripple out from the circle

and strengthen girls' lives. *“The best part of Girls Circle was the girls in the group supporting each other - not just during the circle, but during the school day too.”*⁹

⁹ *Participant of a Girls Circle, Salk Middle school student, Spokane, WA*

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Appendix

 “Honoring Our Diversity” Manual-Guided Curriculum - Session 3 – “Stereotype Busting”

Theme: Stereotype Busting

Girls identify the messages they receive from others about who they are, express their reactions to those messages, and then define for themselves who they are and what characteristics they consider real to them.

Activity: “Graffiti Wall” Posters, Journaling, “Wild Garden” Posters

*Optional: Video: “Bridging Racial Stereotypes” and Discussion

Materials: Two large mural paper sheets; wide bright markers, pastels, CD music with strong energy, CD player.

Journals, pens, pre-cut “wild flower” shapes (from handout), one for each girl, journals, pens

*Optional: TV/VCR, and Video: “*Bridging Racial Divisions*”
Order at: www.livewiremedia.com/pctlks.html

Purpose:

- To define stereotyping, especially related to culture
- To identify stereotyping words, images, and messages that girls encounter
- To recognize the intent and impact of stereotyping
- To identify and claim personal and collective attributes

▪ Facilitator Preparation:

Mount the 2 large mural sheets of poster paper on the wall in preparation for the “Graffiti Wall” activity and the “Wild Garden” poster activity. Label one “Graffiti Wall” and the other “Wild Garden.”

➔ Opening Ritual, Theme Intro, and Check-in

Journaling: Invite girls to write reflections on the following quotes in their journals.

Quote 1:

All people rich and poor
Those who do and do not know
Take the hand of one close by
Of those who know because they try
And watch the walls come tumbling down"

- *Siem from the album This Child*

Quote 2:

"Before I am black,
Before I am young,
Before I am short,
Before I am woman,
Before I am African,
I am human."

- *"Human" from the album Wild Seed - Wild Flower*

Activity 1: “Graffiti Wall”

1. Preface this activity by telling the group that the focus of the day is on stereotyping and breaking down stereotypes. Let them know that stereotyping is a common behavior that poses large assumptions about people or groups without making any note of individual differences, and is often based on inaccurate understanding of people’s behavior.
2. Ask girls to go to the “Graffiti Wall” and to stand several feet away from it, and think about all the ways they’ve heard people speak about or describe them, especially regarding their race, ethnicity, culture, language, and any other aspects of their culture. Then, ask girls to write down graffiti style, all names/descriptions, phrases, images, symbols, messages and stereotyped comments that they’ve heard.
Tell girls, *“Don’t hold back, say whatever you’ve seen or heard, especially objectionable, absurd, or insulting terms.”*
3. Have girls stand back and view the entire “Graffiti Wall,” and to take a few minutes to walk by it, reading all the comments, viewing symbols, etc. Invite girls to add any further words or images to each other’s graffiti.
4. While continuing to stand back and view the entire Graffiti Wall, ask the group:
 - ✓ What kinds of group reactions did you notice in response to the wall?
 - ✓ What items or words from the wall affect girls the most? How?
 - ✓ How could these comments and insults affect how you might think about yourself?
 - ✓ What are some ways to resist these messages and have pride in who you are?

Activity 2: “Wild Garden” Mural

1. Have the group cut out their wild flower images and place them onto the “Wild Garden” mural. Using markers, add words, phrases, symbols, images, etc. to this mural to describe their “true self” features, i.e. qualities, characteristics...*what other people do not see when stereotyping.*
2. Invite girls to view all the various flower images and mural.

Sharing of Activity:

1. Discuss the different observations, experiences, and entries shared. You can ask:

- ✓ What kinds of group reactions did you notice in response to the Wild Garden mural?
 - ✓ How did it feel to create your wildflower? What difference, if any, did you notice in terms of thoughts, feelings, or energy while doing this?
 - ✓ Did your feelings change when you created your wildflower? Why?
 - ✓ If your ideas changed about other people in this group when you saw their wildflowers, what was that like?
 - ✓ Let's go around the circle one by one, and share: What is *one thing* that you want to do *in the coming week* as a result of today's activities and discussion about stereotyping?
2. Finally, as a symbolic way of "Busting Stereotypes", invite girls to tear down the graffiti wall, tear it up, and throw it away!

*Optional/Alternative Activity

Watch "Bridging Racial Divisions" video. After viewing, refer to the discussion guide available with the video.

Ask:

- ✓ What is Michael Pritchard recommending the students do to break the cycle of ignorance and hatred?
- ✓ How are your experiences like or unlike those of the students in the movie?
- ✓ This movie portrays strong emotions in youth. Where can girls go to address the strong emotions they may have about prejudice and hostility they encounter?
- ✓ How can they manage those strong emotions?
- ✓ What is one thing you want to do in the next time you encounter ignorance or cruelty toward yourself or someone you care about?

➔ Closing Ritual

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