

Executive Summary

A National Multi-Setting Study of Changes in Adolescent Girls' Sense of Connection, Self-Image, and Sense of Competence During a Girls' Circle

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Summary

The Girls' Circle is a support group for adolescent girls developed by Beth Hossfeld and Giovanna Taormina in 1994 as a unique program that addresses the needs of girls by focusing on increasing connections, building strengths, and developing resiliency. The present study evaluates the effectiveness of the Girls' Circle program for improving social support, body image, and self-efficacy. Sixty-three girls from nine support groups across the United States completed three questionnaires before and after a 10-week Girls' Circle program. Results showed a significant increase in social support, body image, and self-efficacy after completion of the program. Conclusions and recommendations for gender-specific programs are presented.

Introduction

Throughout the past decade, many organizations such as the National Council for Research on Women, the American Association of University Women, the Ms. Foundation, the United Way, and the Office of Crime and Delinquency have all pointed to the need for gender-specific, or female-responsive, girls' programs that allow girls to voice their experiences, develop positive connections, and gain skills to pursue meaningful goals in education, careers, and relationships. While many programs in youth-serving organizations aim to support girls, there are few studies to demonstrate the success of specific girls' programs.

As female psychological theorists have explained, girls need to connect with other girls, feel safe, express concerns and empathy, think for themselves, and have opportunities to make a difference in their own and others' lives. The essence of girls' and women's psychological well-being is shaped largely by their connections with others. As statistics on girls indicate, girls are particularly vulnerable socially and psychologically during the transitional years of early and middle adolescence, with little or no opportunity for safe and healthy connections. The Girls' Circle model has emerged as a promising best practice for both prevention and intervention programs seeking to address girls' social-emotional development.

Girls' Circle is a structured support group for girls from 9-18 years that integrates relational theory, resiliency practices, and skills training in a specific format designed to increase connection, strengths, and competence in girls. It is designed to foster self-awareness and self-confidence, help girls maintain authentic connection with peers and adult women in their community, counter trends toward self-doubt, and allow for genuine self-expression through verbal sharing and creative activity. This model has been used in a wide variety of settings with diverse populations and programs serving girls since 1994. Anecdotal and written feedback from participating girls and program facilitators consistently indicates that girls value Girls' Circles because they offer genuine relationships and the chance to view themselves, others, and their options with more optimism.

The present study provides quantitative data that show significant positive changes for girls in key areas of their development: their sense of belonging, their perception and acceptance of their own bodies, and their belief in their ability to accomplish meaningful actions and goals in their lives. While this is the first study of the Girls' Circle model, it is important because it provides evidence for the effectiveness of providing a female-responsive circle format that serves girls' developmental needs.

Method

Who Participated?

- Sixty-three girls from nine different programs in Alabama, California, Florida, New Hampshire, and Oregon
- Girls from urban areas (48%), suburban areas (25%), and rural areas (27%)
- Girls from 10 to 17 years of age (average age of 13)
- Girls in 5th through 11th grades
- Girls of a variety of racial-ethnic backgrounds: African American (18%), Caucasian (51%), Hispanic (21%), Asian (2%), Native American (3%), and other (5%)

What Questionnaires Were Used?

- The General Self-Efficacy Scale, a 10-item questionnaire, was used to assess the participants' self-efficacy level
- The Body Parts Satisfaction Scale-Revised, a 25-item questionnaire, was used to assess participants' level of body image satisfaction
- The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, a 12-item questionnaire, was used to evaluate the participants' perception of social support of friends and family

Important Notes:

- All facilitators were trained in or experienced with the Girls' Circle model
- All groups used the same 10-week Girls' Circle curriculum
- Group sessions were held between January and March of 2004
- Parental or Guardian consent was obtained for each participant

Positive Aspects of Method:

- Geographical diversity of settings
- Racial-ethnic diversity of participants
- Use of reliable and valid questionnaires

Methodological Limitations:

- Lack of control group
- Reading level was too high for some girls on some questionnaires
- Under-representation of Native American and Asian American girls
- Did not measure socio-economic levels
- Varied group size (ranged from 5 to 15 girls)

Key Findings

1. Girls showed a significant increase in self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the course of action required to manage prospective situations. Without self-efficacy, girls typically avoid taking the necessary risks to learn new skills in social, academic, recreational, and career development arenas. The Girls' Circle is a setting that provides safe spaces in which girls can take risks through a variety of social-emotional and skill-building activities. When girls feel accepted and appreciated for these risks, they are more likely to develop a pattern of positive risk-taking, and an expectation that "I can do it" or "I can try...whatever the outcome, I can learn something." While girls and women today have many more options for social, academic, athletic, and career activities than was true forty years ago, many girls and women still lack sufficient self-efficacy.

2. Girls showed a significant increase in perceived social support.

Group cohesion and the ability to develop and maintain supportive friendships are central to girls' development. Girls' Circles use group guidelines to create an environment that is empathic and compassionate, as well as non-judgmental. These guidelines apply to both the facilitator and the group participants. In addition to environments that uphold high expectations and offer meaningful participation, youth develop resilient traits when there is active caring and support in their communities. The findings of the present study suggest that support groups with these characteristics can be highly effective for prevention and intervention programs whose aim is to provide positive peer interactions and increased social support.

3. Girls showed a significant positive change in body image.

These findings support data from previous research that link body image and social support. These results support the idea that supportive peers can positively influence girls' self-

perceptions. The Girls' Circle is a place where girls are able to voice their views and experiences, listen to others' concerns, and address assumptions critically within a safe space of supportive peers and thus are better able to counter the negative, distorted pictures and images of acceptable female physical appearance. While there may be value in media literacy and critical thinking exercises applied in classroom and homework lessons, it is perhaps the power of genuine relationships within a circle context that facilitates girls' growth toward a belief system in which self-worth is based on the quality of connections more than appearance.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study provide support for the thesis that the Girls' Circle model can increase girls' social support, self-efficacy, and positive body image. These significant changes in girls' perceived body image, social support, and self-efficacy suggest that girls' self-perceptions and sense of competence increase in association with supportive connections to others. The Girls' Circle structure, format, and activities along with an approach that integrates relational theory and resiliency research seems to be effective on several levels, resulting in a more complex self-image. This self-image is most likely developed through the listening atmosphere created in circle settings.

Listening to girls is the key recommendation of researchers, and the number one strategy in girls' circles. Some girls have written feedback that stressed the importance of this listening atmosphere. One girl, who chose to participate in a girls' circle as an option while in a juvenile detention setting, said, "I liked how the group expressed themselves. It made me open up and be more involved the group, and talk about some of my problems. I received positive feedback that I will use." When the environment is conducive to listening, girls are in good positions to think more clearly about their lives.

Further areas of study for the Girls' Circle model include:

- What impact does the Girls' Circle model have on girls' resiliency?
- How are the outcomes from Girls' Circle groups different from other girls' programs?
- How does the Girls' Circle model reduce high-risk behaviors such as drug, alcohol, or tobacco use?

The Girls' Circle Association echoes the recommendations of other national organizations that urge programs to provide safe spaces for girls to express themselves and discover for themselves meaningful solutions to a myriad of challenges within a fabric of caring connections with peers and adults within their own communities.