



## Rites of Passage for Girls

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### Introduction

Female adolescent rites of passage provide communities with a group process for initiating girls into womanhood. These rituals are rooted in ancient traditions and support girls' psychological and spiritual development. Western society has no such widely practiced rituals. Girls' circles are beginning to fill this void. As a rite of passage program, girls groups address the critical themes of female identity development, personal values, and healthy relationships so pertinent to girls' concerns. Trained facilitators can provide a program where girls share, explore, think critically, and develop confidence.

### Female Initiation and Western Culture

How does a young woman know she is no longer a girl? First menarche? A driver's license? A sexual encounter? First job? Prom? Body piercing? Graduation? A religious ceremony? Modern culture offers markers but no definitive ritual to honor girls' transformation into women. Western society's emphasis on individualism has broken down collective structures to guide youth into adulthood (Sullwold 1987). Without such structures, teens too often find themselves adrift in the "betwixt and between" time, without a clear path to discover their purpose in life. This void contributes to epidemic levels of substance abuse, risky sexual behaviors, relational aggression, depression, eating disorders, gang involvement, and suicidality adolescent girls. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011) Gender-specific groups can help girls navigate their changing identities and counter unhealthy trends. By connecting with a caring community, girls can avoid problems and develop capacities to reach their full potential.

Arnold Van Gennep coined the term "Rites of Passage," in 1906, identifying three stages to initiate adolescents into adulthood – separation, liminality, and reincorporation. (Van Gennep, 1906/2010) Yet when female-specific rites of passage are examined, Lincoln (1981) observes a distinctly different pattern, a set of three key aspects of initiation: *enclosure, magnification, and emergence*: "The initiand begins as a person on whom no one depends and through the course of initiation becomes one on whom the welfare of the entire cosmos hinges...for the fundamental power of creativity is renewed in her being." (Lincoln, 1981, p. 107). Virginia Rutter (2009) addresses women's needs to acknowledge and be acknowledged for the significance of their transitions, as

well as for girls: “Girls need ceremony, because the physical initiatory experiences that originate in their bodies require that a girl sacrifice her precious physiological state of being and therefore her previous psychological identity.” (Rutter, 1996, p. 174) Some ethnic-cultural groups have been practicing female initiations within the Western world, such as:

- Latin Americans celebrate the *Quinceañera*. (Quinceañera, 2002) Fifteen-year-old girls and their families prepare for months for a Roman Catholic Mass and a party. Special rituals such as wearing a formal dress, receiving shoes, displaying flowers, and eating certain foods signify the girl’s readiness for womanhood.
- The Navajo conduct an elaborate puberty ritual, the *Kinaalda*. The coming of age girl re-enacts Changing Woman, the Chief Deity of the Navajo people; in front of proud elders, the girl performs various rituals such as dressing beautifully, cooking a corn cake, running a race. (Lincoln, 1981, pp.17-33).
- Judaism’s Bat Mitzvah and Christianity’s Confirmation offer spiritual initiations involving family, a religious community, and friends to recognize the youth’s coming into maturity.

These culturally-relevant rites of passage anchor girls within ancestral, familial, and community traditions. Mary Lewis (1988) calls for a fundamental change in how adults nurture Black female teens. She encourages an approach that balances attention to girls’ solutions and strengths. Lewis advocates applying the *Nguzo Saba*, or the “Seven Principles of Blackness,” commonly associated with *Kwanzaa*, (that was created for all African-Americans by Dr. Maulana Keenga), to guide and empower girls through adolescence: *Umoga* (Unity), *Kujichagulia* (Self-Determination), *Ujima* (Collective Works and Responsibility), *Ujamaa* (Cooperative Economics), *Nia* (purpose), *Kuumba* (Creativity), and *Imani* (Faith).

Support for identity development is especially important for diverse girls with nontraditional sexual identities (LGBT). These youth have high rates of rejection from the adults they depend upon for guidance and belonging. Andrew Laue (2000) names essential aspects of an LGBT rites of passage program: acceptance by family; intergenerational participation; participation of key figures; acknowledgment of major themes – sexuality, identity, and individuation; and imprinting the values of the wider culture.

Mary Pipher (1994) worries that girls have no cultural compass, asking, “Under what conditions do most girls develop to their fullest?” (pp. 292-293) At adolescence, what motivates girls most is the desire to be loved. Unmet, that desire leaves girls and their development at risk. Girls’ relationships shape their identities (Miller, 1976), yet when these are harmful or inconsistent with their own sensibilities, girls disconnect from their authentic selves in order to stay connected. (Brown & Gilligan, 1992) The unfortunate label “mean girls” highlights *relational aggression*, in which girls use relationships to find or lose status. In circles, however, girls discover that *sisterhood* is a more sustaining and satisfying use of power. The circle provides a compass by nurturing girls’ hunger for needed emotional and spiritual support.

## Girls Circles as Rites of Passage

Girls' circles are typically support groups for pre-teen and adolescent girls, which encompass the key aspects of female initiation – *enclosure, magnification, and emergence*. Focusing on healthy relationships within and outside of the circle helps build safety so girls can develop positive connections with peers and adult women. With safety established, girls gain skills essential to womanhood, including communicating feelings and viewpoints, setting boundaries, and developing healthy coping skills. Facilitators invite girls to share their own views and experiences, and to reflect on their behaviors. By doing so, they promote girls' cognitive and spiritual development. Girls' groups are being offered increasingly in education, mental health, child services, juvenile justice, camps, faith-based and community sectors.



Fig. 1 Being in connection in girls' circle is the key to transformation and growth for adolescent girls. Photo courtesy of the author.



Circles should first and foremost be a safe emotional environment. Common structures include weekly meetings with six-eight girls of similar age and development, and one or two trained female adult facilitators. Girls can be invited or referred, depending on the program. Except in high transition settings, groups are best if closed to new members for a cycle of eight - twelve weeks, to promote safety and bonding. The groups develop guidelines that form the basis for safety, including listening, respect, non-judgment, inclusivity, confidentiality, honesty and acceptance. Facilitators use a measure of self-disclosure to help establish trust and authenticity in the group. Frequently teen girls express initial apprehension, saying they don't trust other girls. However, once they experience the safety and acceptance in circle, they *want* to be there.

During check-in, girls may pass a *talking piece* around the circle, traditionally practiced by Native Americans to signify a sacred respect for the speaker. They can share something meaningful, such as family concerns, a break up, grades, hurt feelings amongst friends, or a long-held dream, while the group gives their full attention. Discussions and creative activities promote further opportunities for girls to think critically about their behaviors.

Through the bonds that develop in circles, girls build capacity to risk authenticity. One teen happily said: "I've never before had adults or other girls treat me with respect like this." They become each other's strength while learning to believe in themselves. When one is angry, others listen with acceptance. If self-disparaging, others will speak of times they've treated themselves poorly and how and why they stopped. They become *more themselves, together*, as this story exemplifies:

It's 4:30 pm. Seven high school girls are sitting on pillows in a circle. We're in our sixth week of a semester-long girls circle. Today, we focus on "Being Real". After each one "checks in" about her high and low points for the week, one girl, J., asks to share more. She describes her distress over the past three days, since having gotten drunk and engaged in sexual acts with a boy she does not respect. She confides,

*"I don't know why I did it; I feel sick about it. I think I was hoping that he would like me, 'cuz he's cute, but he's creepy and could care less about me. Next time, I'm just NOT gonna drink like that because I totally lost my judgment. Thank you for being here everyone, I just really needed to get this out." Several group members respond with messages of support:*

*"Don't be too hard on yourself. We've all made mistakes."*

*"I'm sad that happened, J., and I hope you feel better soon. I know how it is to do something you don't really want to do. It took me time to where I can now listen to myself inside."*

*"J., you're one of the kindest and coolest people I've ever known. I just want you to remember that whenever you're feeling some doubt."*

One girl hugs J. Everyone inhales, and exhales. The girls move on to an activity. There's a visible shift in J.'s face; she's more relaxed now.

Girls can demonstrate *emergence* in unique ways: at a ceremony, peer-facilitating circles with an adult, re-defining their goals, assuming school leadership. Recently, a high school boy chose as his senior project to study the girls circle approach by interviewing a program director at a local organization. He explained that he became convinced of the value of the program when his girlfriend attended a girls circle, and subsequently changed her behavior positively toward him, her family and friends.

Having inner and outer congruence in mind, body, and spirit is a reflection of girls' growth. Setting interpersonal boundaries, for example, requires that a girl first listen to and value her inner voice, and then to verbalize and act upon her preferences. This ability reduces girls' stress, as does the feeling of not being alone, a critical condition for youth as they separate from parents and form identities. This connectedness enables girls to assume their roles as young women with sustaining psychological and spiritual values: self-respect, dignity, pride, and purpose. Two girls reflect on their growth: *"I thought I was the only one who felt like this, but Circle made me realize that I am not alone."* *"I am not so shy and I have learned how to stand up for myself. It made me feel more confident about myself."*

Girls' circles are an engaging rite of passage program for adolescent girls. Filling a cultural void, the circle is an experiential way for girls to develop healthy relationships, gain confidence, express themselves genuinely, and set meaningful life goals. Facilitators with an open mind and capacity for relationship support girls' successful transformation, psychologically and spiritually. The consistent format and gender-relevant content help to safely engage circle members. For girls reaching adolescence, a girls group provides a meaningful female initiation into womanhood.

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