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## HOW GIRLS' GROUPS CAN PROMOTE HEALTH PROMISING PRACTICES FOR COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

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Girls' groups provide an important space for girls to come together to address personal, social and political issues. Many girls' groups directly or indirectly promote health and well-being and can have an important role in addressing healthy living issues such as smoking prevention, nutrition and obesity, physical inactivity and dating violence.

Research shows that girls' groups can be an effective model for health promotion with girls. In this information sheet, we describe some of the elements of community programs that can make a difference to the health and well being of girls.

**1 Incorporate skill-building activities.** Most community programs emphasize building a wide range of skills in girls. Skill-building has been shown to be successful in a range of health areas, including reducing smoking and other substance use, sexual violence prevention, and sexual health.

**2 Advocate for and promote the value of girls-only programs.** Many health issues for girls look different than for boys. In addition to differences in specific health concerns, strategies and solutions may require different approaches. Research shows that girls-only spaces can be effective in addressing certain health issues (e.g., increasing physical activity), create opportunities to address sensitive topics (e.g., sexual harassment or pressures), and can build trust, confidence, and skills which lead to increased health knowledge, self-advocacy, and improved health outcomes.

**3 Involve girls in program planning and delivery.** Programs that are "girl-driven" or provide opportunities for girls to participate in developing or implementing activities are more successful. Research shows that when girls helped to develop programs related to physical activity, sexual health, and smoking prevention that these programs were more effective and relevant and enhanced feelings of safety and being respected.



**4 Engage with parents, peers, schools, and communities.** Girls' health depends on relationships and broader social connections. Programs that build connections between girls and their families, that take place in or are supported by schools, and that engage the broader community can contribute to an environment in which girls can make healthier choices and feel supported by their community for their choices and actions.

**5 Promote healthy body image and self-esteem.** High self-esteem is associated with decreased substance use, better nutrition, higher levels of physical activity, and decreased risk for dating violence. Self-esteem in girls is particularly connected to body image: girls with better self-esteem often engage in other health promoting behaviours.

**6 Include multiple components and approaches in program activities.** Activities that include multiple approaches to an issue tend to be more effective. Health issues such as obesity often have multiple causes (e.g., lack of healthy food choices at school, unsafe neighborhood for physical activities); therefore, approaches that have multiple components can be more effective than focusing on one aspect of an issue.

**7 Cultivate “cultural safety.”** Paying attention to cultural identity can be key in the success of program activities for some groups of girls. The inclusion of health knowledge from different cultures, increased awareness of cultural diversity, and different perspectives on health and wellness are some of the ways programs can work to create cultural safety.

**8 Focus on strengths rather than weakness.** When it comes to health issues, it can be easy to focus on the negative rather than the positive. Promote mental health rather than focus on mental illness; help girls deal with dating violence by providing tools for creating healthy relationships rather than focus on dangers and risks; promote physical activity as a recreational activity (i.e., fun!) and to build self-confidence rather than a way to avoid obesity.

**9 Honour girls' stories and experiences.** Programs that incorporate activities to empower girls can lead to individual changes related to health. Programs that are “voice-centred” create opportunities for girls to express themselves, to participate in program delivery, and to engage in leadership roles.

This information sheet was developed by members of the research team for a project called *Girls' Perspectives on Girls' Groups and Healthy Living* which received financial support from the Women's Health Contribution Program of Health Canada.

To learn more about the project, visit <http://girlsactionfoundation.ca> and <http://www.bcccewh.bc.ca>.

