



"I love it because you could just be yourself."
A Study of Girls' Perspectives on Girls' Groups and Healthy Living

Final Report – June 2012

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We are grateful for financial assistance for this project from the Women's Health
Contribution Program of Health Canada.

“I LOVE IT BECAUSE YOU COULD JUST BE YOURSELF”
A STUDY OF GIRLS’ PERSPECTIVES ON GIRLS’ GROUPS AND HEALTHY LIVING

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Abstract

Objectives: This report describes a one-year study entitled *Girls' Perspectives on Girls' Groups and Healthy Living*, designed to capture the perspectives of girls on what they get from girls' groups and to compare what they say with known promising practices in sex/gender specific health promotion, as identified by the literature. The objectives of the study were to:

1. Identify best practices in health promotion with girls, which address healthy living issues such as prevention of tobacco uptake, obesity, physical inactivity and dating violence
2. Describe the elements of girls' empowerment models and to gather the perspectives of girls on the benefits of these groups and how/if the groups help them achieve healthy living goals.
3. Begin to articulate how girls' groups build on and extend effective practices in promoting healthy living and how they might offer a model for gender-specific health promotion

Methods: We conducted a mix-methods study, which included: a scan of academic literature on promising practices in sex/gender specific health promotion programming; a scan of web-based grey literature on girls groups, and manuals on implementing girl-centred groups; seven focus groups with girls ages 13-15 who participate in girls' groups affiliated with the Girls Action Foundation; individual interviews with girls ages 16-18 who were former participants in a girls' group at a younger age and/or were peer facilitators or mentors with younger girls; individual interviews with facilitators of girls' groups; and, broad-based responses generated from an online discussion question posted on the KickAction.ca website, hosted by the Girls Action Foundation. Nine best practices themes were developed through a review of the literature. All focus group and interview data was transcribed and analyzed by the co-investigators using NVivo qualitative data software.

Findings: Nine promising practices in health promotion with girls were identified. These health promotion approaches are: (1) Skill building (e.g., skills such as conflict resolution, critical thinking) (2) Gender-specific (i.e., girl-focused/girls-only groups) (3) Participatory, girl-driven (4) Enhancing social connections (5) Build self-esteem (6) Multi-component/faceted (7) Culturally safe/appropriate (8) Strengths-based/asset-based (9) Empowerment-oriented/voice-centred. Analysis of focus group and interview data revealed a number of themes which were later compared and further analyzed in relation to the identified promising practices. Improvement in self-esteem was one of the most prevalent themes that emerged during focus groups with girls. Enhanced self-esteem was connected with improved decision-making and ability to resist social pressures to engage in risky health behaviours such as drinking and smoking. Girls in all focus groups discussed the benefits of participating in a girls-only space, including having a safe space to discuss issues that are normally avoided or regarded as taboo (i.e., sexuality, sex, substance use, suicide and eating disorders) and to obtain accurate information about these issues.

Discussion: Analysis of the focus groups with girls, mentors and facilitators reveals that the girls' groups align with the best practices identified in the literature. While the

content of individual groups varied based on local context, program model, and issues identified as important and relevant by girls, all of the programs reviewed included components on body image & self-esteem, gender-based violence prevention, healthy relationships, safer sex & sexuality, and physical activity. As well, girls' groups may indirectly impact health behaviours like the prevention of tobacco uptake and smoking reduction through improvements in self-esteem, increased ability to recognize and resist peer pressure, stronger critical thinking skills, and the development of stronger social connections.

Conclusion: Overall, girls' groups have built on and extended effective practices in promoting healthy living while simultaneously addressing the social and political issues that their members face. If girls' groups, such as those affiliated with the Girls Action Foundation, are supported in further expanding and refining their work through the utilization of health promotion best practices frameworks, it may be possible to measure healthy living outcomes as a product of these groups. In turn, health promotion agencies may benefit from more closely examining models of engagement used in these girls' groups as a possible strategy for extending the reach of other health promotion efforts.

Introduction

This report describes a one-year study entitled *Girls' Perspectives on Girls' Groups and Healthy Living*, designed to capture the perspectives of girls on what they get from girls' groups, and to compare what they say they get with known promising practices in sex/gender specific health promotion, as identified by the literature. The British Columbia Centre of Excellence for Women's Health partnered with the Girls Action Foundation, and researchers from the Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women's Health, the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence, York University and the University of Montreal on this study, which involved:

- identifying best practices in health promotion with girls, which address healthy living issues such as prevention of tobacco uptake, obesity, physical inactivity and dating violence;
- describing the elements of girls' empowerment group approaches and articulating how they provide a model for gender-specific health promotion; and,
- capturing what girls say they get from these groups

Several developments led us to this research topic. Firstly our research into trends in alcohol use by girls, indicated that internationally, and in Canada, drunkenness rates were rising for girls between the ages of 13 and 15. (Simons-Morton et al., 2009). As a research agency dedicated to improving policy and practice related to girls' and women's health, we were interested in how health promotion and prevention efforts could be applied to this girls' health issue. We were also aware of how drinking is linked to other key healthy living issues such as smoking, body weight concerns and dating violence. For example, one of the gender-specific influences on girls drinking is the influence of exposure to the entertainment media and alcohol and cigarette advertising - which shower girls and young women with unhealthy and unrealistic messages about smoking, drinking and weight loss (CASA, 2003). We saw the potential for contributing to increased understanding of how to best work upstream (on health promotion and prevention) in ways that influence girls'

decisions and actions about all these health concerns.

Given our mandate, we were also interested in the sex and gender specific influences on these girls' health concerns. For example, body image affects girls' health more than it affects boys' health (Duncan, Al-Nakeeb, Nevill, & Jones, 2006). Farhat et al. (2010) describes significant gender differences in the relationship of overweight/obesity with risk factors such as smoking and the experience of violence (Farhat, Iannotti, & Simons-Morton, 2010). In addition, attending to diversity is a key aspect of sex and gender based analysis. Our work on the gendered and cultural influences on Aboriginal girls' smoking (BCCEWH, 2009) had brought to our attention the very high smoking rates among Aboriginal girls in British Columbia (J. L. Johnson et al., 2004) and how much remains to be done to provide gender and culturally relevant smoking interventions.

From our work in the substance use field, we knew that girls empowerment groups have been shown to be effective in substance use prevention programs (Amaro, Blake, Schwartz, & Flinchbaugh, 2001; Covington, 2004) because they address these special risk factors for adolescent girls: body dissatisfaction; low self-esteem; rising cigarette and alcohol use; high rates of depression; influence of media and pop culture; and, experience of trauma and violence (Blake, Amaro, Schwartz, & Flinchbaugh, 2001; Craig Winston LeCroy & Mann, 2008). It is this linkage and interaction among common risk factors and vulnerability that were of interest in this project. And supporting girls as they navigate adolescence becomes an important strategy for health promotion.

We were fortunate to be able to partner with the Girls Action Foundation to study promising practices in health promotion with girls. The Girls Action Foundation is a national umbrella organization and virtual network for girls' empowerment initiatives in Canada. As described on its website, the organization leads and seeds girls' programs across Canada, builds girls' and young women's skills and confidence, and inspires collective action to change the world. Girls Action currently reaches over 60,000 girls and young women across Canada, in urban, remote and northern communities, through a network of over 200 partnering organizations. Leadership skills, media literacy, sexual health and violence prevention are fostered through all-girls spaces, resources, and encouragement for girls to be agents of change in their own social networks and communities.

Study Approach

We conducted a mix-methods study, which included: a scan of academic and grey literature, focus groups, individual interviews, and a question posted in an online workspace. Our hypothesis was that girls' empowerment groups – such as those offered by the affiliates of the Girls Action Foundation that incorporate principles and practices from asset-based, popular education, media literacy, and civic engagement approaches – contribute to the prevention of tobacco uptake, underage drinking, physical inactivity, injury from interpersonal violence and related health concerns among girls age 13-15, and promote girls' health.

Scan of academic literature

To identify promising practices in sex/gender specific health promotion programming, we conducted a search of programs and approaches for intervening with girls on a wide

variety of health issues and topics. The literature search included the following combinations of key word searches:

GIRL or GIRLS + HEALTH PROMOTION

GIRL* or GIRLS + PREVENTION+

BODY IMAGE
EATING DISORDERS
TOBACCO
OBESITY
VIOLENCE
PEER
LITERATURE REVIEW
BEST PRACTICES
EMPOWERMENT

GIRL or GIRLS + HEALTH +

ABORIGINAL
IMMIGRANT
RURAL
URBAN

The search was limited to studies and interventions published from the year 2000 to present. The review was international in scope, but included specific searches to identify studies from Canada. In addition to searching a variety of academic health promotion journals (Global Health Promotion, Health Promotion Practice, Health Promotion International, American Journal of Health Promotion, etc), we searched the following databases:

Academic Search Complete
Biography of Native North Americans
CINAHL
LGBT Life
Medline
PsycINFO
PsycARTICLES
Social Work Abstracts
Urban Studies Abstracts
Web of Science
Women's Studies International

This search returned 803 hits. These articles were scanned for relevance, and were excluded if they focused on factors associated with prevention or prevalence of a health/ risk behaviour rather than a program/ intervention, or if the intervention/ program did not produce significant results. Following this screening process, a total of 146 articles were deemed relevant and reviewed, including articles describing effective interventions for tobacco, violence prevention, obesity prevention and other health promotion programs for girls.

Following the retrieval and review of literature, a narrative summary was developed, briefly describing the key components and findings for each of the relevant interventions/ studies. One research team member then analyzed the draft summary report using qualitative analysis software, to identify common program elements across different types of programs or interventions for girls' health promotion. The development of these themes and synthesis of findings was conducted as an iterative process. After preliminary themes and sub-themes were identified, these were discussed during a meeting of three research team members, and then applied back to the collected data to determine if the themes were appropriate and sufficient to capture all key findings. These themes were then further refined through discussion among team members, with the final list of nine key themes forming the basis for the following report of best practices for health promotion interventions and programs for girls.

Scan of grey literature related to girls' group programming

We examined web-based grey literature on girls groups, and manuals on implementing girl-centred groups from the following programs: the *Girls Talk* program, *Girls Circle*, groups sponsored by the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women in Sport and Physical Activity (CAAWS), *It's a Girl Thang!*, *Go Grrrls*, the Girl Scouts, and *Full of Ourselves*, along with material produced by the Girls Action Foundation, our partner in this project. Several of these programs were formed to address an identified healthy living concern, such as increasing physical activity (CAAWS); harm reduction and trauma prevention (*It's a Girl Thang!*); preventing depression (*Girls Talk*); and preventing disordered eating (*Full of Ourselves*). Others take a broad approach to support girls' health and agency, through a focus on empowerment, social justice, and skill-building.

Focus groups with girls

Focus groups were chosen as the method for gathering the perspectives of girls. In other studies with girls undertaken by British Columbia Centre of Excellence for Women's Health, focus groups were found to be helpful in eliciting girls' reflections on their lives, given the scaffolding for building on others' answers. In this case, the focus group method mirrored the collective, dialogic, reflective and emancipatory approach endorsed by the Girls Action Foundation groups.

Recruitment - The Girls Action Foundation approached their affiliates by email about their interest in involvement in the study. Facilitators of groups who served girls 13-15 in five provinces indicated their interest in involvement in the study.

Eligibility - To participate in the focus groups, girls needed to be a current member of one of the Girls Action Foundation girls' groups selected for the study, be 13-15 years old, and speak English or French. Our target total number of participants was 72 through conducting 12 focus groups with participants of groups meeting in a rural community or urban centre in/near each of 6 sites (Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Vancouver and Victoria). In the end, those groups interested and eligible for enrolment included: 1 in Nova Scotia; 2 in Quebec; 1 in Manitoba; 2 in Ontario; and 1 in British Columbia.

Logistics - The focus groups took place at the regular meeting places of the girls' groups; conducted during their regular meeting hours, after the regular meeting, or on a separate day. They were scheduled for one hour. Participants were asked six questions during the focus group. Questions for the focus groups and interviews were created with the help of an Advisory Group of affiliated group facilitators interested in evaluation (See *Appendix 1-*

Research Questions). All focus groups were digitally recorded with the girls' permission. The girls were provided snacks and given an honorarium.

Seven focus groups were conducted across Canada. Key characteristics of each of the group is described below:

- Nova Scotia – urban
 - School-based group – girls identified as Caucasian and Hispanic/Caucasian
 - Community-based group – girls identified as Caucasian
- Ontario – urban
 - Community-based group – girls identified as Somalian
 - Community-based group for newcomers – girls largely of South Asian descent
- Manitoba – urban
 - group focus on sexual exploitation – girls identified as Aboriginal
- British Columbia – rural
 - Community-based group – girls identified as Caucasian or of mixed race
 - School-based group to train older girls to mentor younger girls coming into high school – girls identified as Caucasian
- Quebec – urban
 - School-based group – girls identified as Caucasian or of mixed race
 - School-based group – girls identified as Caucasian or of mixed race



Figure 1: A guide to research for girls was developed and included in the informed consent process

Individual interviews with older girls and group facilitators

To add to the understanding of benefits of girls' groups, we conducted individual in-person interviews with older girls.

Eligibility - To participate in the individual interviews, the girls met the following criteria: (1) be 16-18 years of age, (2) speak English or French, (3) attended girls groups

with the Girls Action Foundation when they were younger, and (4) remained involved with Girls Action Foundation affiliated groups, through participating in groups for older girls, or acting as volunteers with groups for girls aged 13-15.

Numbers - We aimed to conduct a total of 12 interviews with girls; 1 interview from each of the 12 girls group who we hoped to enroll in the study. In the end, we conducted a total of seven individual interviews with older girls, four of whom were peer facilitators or mentors with younger girls.

Logistics - In all cases, the interviews were held at the girls' group meeting site. There were six interview questions and all interviews were digitally recorded (See *Appendix 1- Research Questions*).

Group facilitators from each of the enrolled girls groups were invited to participate in 45-minute individual in-person interviews about their practices. All the group facilitators consented to participate, a total of 12, and their interviews were digitally recorded. In one case, a group facilitator conducted the interview over Skype.

Question posted in Online Girls Space

In addition to the focus groups and individual interviews, a question was posted on the KickAction.ca website, hosted by the Girls Action Foundation. Girls and young women who frequent the site had the opportunity to post on how they have benefited from being in an all-girls group or online girls space. The online question was featured prominently on the homepage and as part of a 'Blog Carnival'. The online aspect allowed for a much broader sample of participants than those involved in focus groups and interviews.

Analysis of focus group and interview data

The digital recordings of focus groups and interviews were transcribed into Word documents and downloaded into NVivo qualitative data software for analysis. The data was coded in relation to nine best practice themes informed by the literature. Copies of the preliminary analysis were shared on an invitational, password-protected, web-based workspace for co-investigators to add their comments and insights.

Results

Promising Practices

From the literature, we identified the following 9 promising practices in health promotion with girls - that approaches:

1. Facilitate skill building – of the skills such as critical thinking
2. Be gender-specific
3. Be participatory, girl-driven
4. Enhance social connections
5. Build self esteem
6. Be multi-component/faceted
7. Be culturally safe/appropriate
8. Be strengths-based/asset-based
9. Be empowerment-oriented/voice-centred

Key studies related to these best practices are highlighted here.

1) Skill-building

A number of studies reviewed describe programs that focus on skill-building, including those that address: tobacco uptake and use (Jarrett, Horn, & Zhang, 2009), substance use prevention for Native American youth (Schinke, Tepavac, & Cole, 2000), adolescent sexual health (Gavin, Catalano, David-Ferdon, Gloppen, & Markham, 2010; Sieving et al., 2011; Tortolero et al., 2010), sexual violence prevention (Noonan et al., 2009), and alcohol abuse prevention (Vogl et al., 2009). Skills commonly addressed include: developing healthy friendships and relationships, coping skills, peer pressure management, stress management, conflict resolution, communication skills, and decision making. For example, the *Smart Girls* program, which included experiential skill-building exercises, found that girls who participate in the intervention demonstrate improved problem solving and critical thinking, conflict resolution, anti-bullying, and refusal skills (Williams & Ferber, 2008). Amaro and co-authors (2001) also recommend the inclusion of life skills development (including negotiation, conflict resolution and self-assertion) in substance use interventions for youth.

Interestingly, in a study (S. Davis et al., 2004) with 14 tobacco control experts who rated components of prevention interventions for their effectiveness with female adolescents, one of the items rejected was life skills training, despite being supported in tobacco prevention programming literature. In follow-up interviews, the tobacco control experts argued that there was no evidence to support differential effectiveness of this approach for girls, or that the approach was too general and that interventions should focus specifically on smoking. This finding suggests that system-level change may be required to improve and support health promotion interventions for girls.

2) Gender specific (girl focused/ girl groups)

Several systematic reviews have found that girls-only groups are effective for improving physical activity (Camacho-Miñano, LaVoi, & Barr-Anderson, 2011; Pate et al., 2005; Seo & Sa, 2010). Girls only programming may provide a more supportive environment, with less criticism and scrutiny from boys, more opportunities for skill-building and relationship development, greater enjoyment and more attention from instructors (Camacho-Miñano, et al., 2011). However, one systematic review of interventions to promote physical activity found only one girls-only group with a positive effect (Sluijs, McMinn, & Griffin, 2007). Whether the program is girls-only or co-ed, principles that support girls' needs should be incorporated. Furthermore, the preferences of girls should be considered when designing health promotion interventions. For example, 81% of girls participating in the PriMa program for eating disorder and anorexia prevention reported that they prefer girls-only programming (Berger, Sowa, Bormann, Brix, & Strauss, 2008).

Research on violence prevention programming for youth suggests that because dating violence and sexual health are gendered, gender-based approaches to prevention and reduction are required (Ball, Kerig, & Rosenbluth, 2009; Begoray & Banister, 2007; Noonan, et al., 2009; E. Reed, Raj, Miller, & Silverman, 2010). For example, girls are more likely than

boys to report self-esteem issues and negative body image, and tend to be less assertive (Begoray & Banister, 2007). Approaches are required that are sensitive to gender roles and gender socialization, and incorporate empowerment and skill-building activities to improve girls' capacity for sexual health (Begoray & Banister, 2007). Holding girls- or boys- only groups provides emotional safety for participants and supports positive relationship development (Ball, et al., 2009).

Focus groups held with girls and boys to develop a violence prevention program found that participants understood adolescent dating through the lens of 'what boys do' and 'what girls do' in particular contexts and spaces, suggesting that gendered approaches are necessary (Noonan & Charles, 2009). However, the authors cite merits for both single-sex groups and mixed-sex groups. For example, they suggest that single-sex groups may reify gender divisions as "natural", imply that relationships are always heterosexual, and limit boys and girls from learning from one another. A survey of varied-format sexual violence interventions found that boys in mixed-gender groups had greater rates of recognition of sexual harassment and personal boundaries, when compared to boys in single-gender groups, but found no difference for girls in different groups (Clinton-Sherrod et al., 2009). These findings suggest that both-single and mixed-gender approaches are useful, but further research is required to investigate the conditions most appropriate for each program.

In programs that include sensitive topics and gender-related issues such as sexual harassment or pressures, research suggests that a small girls-only format provides a safe, trusting and non-judgemental space for girls to participate (Williams and Ferber 2008). For example, Valaitis and Sword (2005) describe a Canadian online support service for pregnant and parenting adolescents that included opportunities for a guys-only and girls-only, as well as co-ed online discussions. Participants reported benefits in being able to participate sometimes in gender-specific groups, particularly because they were able to freely discuss sensitive gender-specific issues, but also valued the opportunity for being able to share and compare their experiences in a mixed-gender setting.

3) Participatory/Girl-driven

Programs and approaches that are participatory and involve girls in the program design process appear to be more desirable and effective. For example, Beaulac and co-authors describe a physical activity intervention for girls incurred problems that they relate to a lack of involvement of girls in the program development (Beaulac, Olavarria, & Kristjansson, 2010). Banister and Bergoray (2006b) argue that sexual health interventions need to involve girls and the local community, value the voices of young girls, be based on local knowledge, and involve Aboriginal youth in development. Baillie and co-authors argue that culturally sensitive programs require collaborations with Aboriginal researchers, community members and girls in design and implementation (Baillie, Maas, Buchholz, & Mutch, 2008). They argue that traditional tobacco interventions lack relevance for Aboriginal girls, and that approaches are required that respect and integrate the perspectives of young Aboriginal girls and their communities.

McHugh and Kowalski describe a school-based participatory action research project on body image with Alberta First Nations high school girls (McHugh & Kowalski, 2011). The program was driven by girls, and focused on developing initiatives to promote healthy body

image. Components of this program included: a “Girl’s Club” where girls could group together to share experiences of body image in a safe and respectful setting; a girl-lead student wellness policy to provide more health eating and physical activity opportunities; “body talk” sessions focused on sharing experiences and encouraging self-expression; journaling of stories and experiences; and developing awareness of the project in the media and in youth facilitated conferences. The authors suggest that the success of the program stems from youth engagement, and the creation of a safe environment for girls to bond and share their experiences.

4) Enhancing social connections

Family connectedness

Some research suggests that programs that include family members are effective. These include strategies to encourage parents to provide support, or that involve parents in the intervention (e.g. physical activity, nutrition changes, etc). Studies that demonstrate a positive effect for parental involvement include: a systematic review of obesity prevention programs for youth (Seo & Sa, 2010), a systematic review of alcohol prevention programs for youth (Foxcroft & Tsertsvadze, 2011), a review of physical activity promotion programs (Trost & Loprinzi, 2008), and an evaluation of a physical activity program for moms and daughters (Ransdell, Dratt, Kennedy, O’Neill, & DeVoe, 2008), and a computer based intervention for mothers and daughters that focused on enhancing communication, improving self-esteem, setting rules, managing stress and resisting peer pressure, and encouraging mothers not to create unrealistic expectations for their daughters (Steven P. Schinke, Lin Fang, & Kristin C. Cole, 2009; S. P. Schinke, Lin Fang, & Kristin C. Cole, 2009). Neumark-Sztainer and co-authors recommend parents are included in: modeling of healthy behaviours, facilitating healthy choices for their children, concentrating on behaviours and health, and providing support for and communication with their children (D. Neumark-Sztainer, 2005).

Connection to school

A variety of studies found that school-based programs are effective for improving physical activity among girls (Barbeau et al., 2007; Camacho-Miñano, et al., 2011; Jamner, Spruijt-Metz, Bassin, & Cooper, 2004) and children (K. Davis, Zhang, & Hodson, 2011; K. E. Reed, Warburton, Macdonald, Naylor, & McKay, 2008; Sluijs, et al., 2007), increasing fruit and vegetable consumption among youth (Knai, Pomerleau, Lock, & McKee, 2006), and improving mental health (Wells, Barlow, & Stewart-Brown, 2003).

A long-term evaluation of *LEAP*, a girl-friendly program to support participation in physical activity in and out of school, found that improvements in physical activity were dependent on the school’s full implementation and maintenance of the physical activity components of the program (Pate et al., 2007). A best practices review on promoting physical activity in youth recommends schools as an ideal venue for physical activity interventions because of their ability to reach youth, the availability of trained personnel interested in improving youth’s health, the presence of an organizational structure and facilities to facilitate physical activity, and connection with community groups (Trost & Loprinzi, 2008).

Peer connections

Some studies reveal that small peer-based groups facilitate relationship building, safety, and opportunities for sharing and self-expression (Valaitis & Sword, 2005; Williams & Ferber, 2008). For example, an internet delivered group session to address disordered eating provided girls with peer support and encouragement and opportunities to create a shared identity (Heinicke, Paxton, McLean, & Wertheim, 2007). A review examining the influence of young people's social networks and diet/ bodyweight, also recommends the inclusion of social networks, such as peer-based counselling and motivational interviewing for girls to address body image and eating disorders (Fletcher, Bonell, & Sorhaindo, 2011). In an evaluation of an online support group for pregnant/ parenting teens, participants expressed a benefit from being able to engage and share with other peers who are in a similar situation, and the opportunity to build relationships and friendships during the program (Valaitis & Sword, 2005). This finding suggests that there is value in the relational aspect of group interventions that promote dialogue, beyond the transmission of health information.

Peer mentoring

Peer mentoring programs have been found to be effective for improving healthy eating and physical activity in African American girls (Black et al., 2010), physical activity and healthy eating in youth (Bogart et al., 2011), substance use prevention among youth (Tencati, Kole, Feighery, Winkleby, & Altman, 2002) and healthy body-image measures in youth (Stock et al., 2007). Findings from a review of physical activity interventions suggest that peer mentoring or modelling approaches, as well as interventions targeting peer groups are promising for influencing girls to be physically active (Camacho-Miñano, et al., 2011).

One example of an effective peer mentoring program is the *Smart Girl* program, a participatory mentorship program centred on providing a feminist space for girls and mentors to work together to build skills to promote mental health. The program involves interactive courses where slightly older peers ("near peers") facilitate small groups in a safe environment through a number of skill-building exercises and dialogues, including: critical thinking, self-confidence, communication skills and problem solving. Based on the finding that girls tend to prioritize relationships and social networks, *Smart-Girl* focuses on relationship building and friendships by creating a safe space for small-group bonding among participants and mentors. The authors suggest that these small groups foster improved social skills and encourage creative and critical thinking. (Williams & Ferber, 2008).

Community connection

A few studies included community involvement as an effective intervention component. Interventions that include community engagement have been found to be effective for increasing fruit and vegetable consumption (Knai, Pomerleau, Lock, & McKee, 2006), mental health promotion in youth (Wells, et al., 2003), and substance use prevention among youth (Tencati, et al., 2002). A review of 65 physical activity interventions for Aboriginal people in the U.S. and Canada included 37 youth interventions (Teufel-Shone, Fitzgerald, Teufel-Shone, & Gamber, 2009). Interventions in this review that incorporated community involvement and built on community strengths were identified as models for best practice.

5) Building self-esteem

Several authors discuss the relationship of low self-esteem as a risk factor for: substance use (Amaro, et al., 2001; Graves, Sentner, Workman, & Mackey, 2011), physical inactivity (Lubans et al., 2011), poor nutrition (Kelly & Melnyk, 2008), and being a victim of dating violence (Noonan & Charles, 2009). Body image in particular is connected to self-esteem among girls, and has been associated with other health promoting behaviours (D. Neumark-Sztainer, Goeden, Story, & Wall, 2004; D. Neumark-Sztainer, Paxton, Hannan, Haines, & Story, 2006). For example, Patricia van den Berg and Dianne Neumark-Sztainer (2007) found that those girls who were satisfied with their bodies gained less weight than those who were not. The authors suggest that cultivating healthy body image is key with adolescents and with overweight adolescents in particular.

Several studies recommend or report on the connection between improved self esteem and improved health among youth. Amaro (2001) argues that prevention interventions that focus on relationship building and developing healthy connections can be helpful in improving girls' self esteem, and that this will improve health promoting behaviours. A qualitative study with boys and girls who participated in *Expect Respect*, a school-based, multi-component violence-prevention program for at-risk youth, revealed that participating in small discussion groups was valued by girls as improving self-esteem and assertiveness skills (Ball, et al., 2009). A computer based program for preventing substance use by girls included lessons related to building self esteem. Girls who participated reported fewer risk factors and more protective factors (S. P. Schinke, et al., 2009). *Smart Girl* used small group interactions and peer led curriculum, and focused on skills development including self esteem. Discussions with participants and mentors revealed the program positively impacted self esteem (Williams & Ferber, 2008).

6) Multi-component/ faceted

Multi-component interventions found to be effective include a bone health program for girls that included: lessons, school policy changes and peer led journalism opportunities (Jones, Hoelscher, Kelder, Hergenroeder, & Sharma, 2008), a physical education, nutrition and parental outreach intervention to reduce obesity risk (D. R. Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010), an 8-component intervention for obesity prevention in girls (Lubans, et al., 2011), a healthy eating and physical activity intervention for girls (Rosenkranz, Behrens, & Dziewaltowski, 2010), a sexual health intervention including classroom lessons, journaling, parent involvement and interactive computer activities (Tortolero, et al., 2010), and a school and family based sexual risk reduction intervention (Sieving, et al., 2011)

Systematic reviews of obesity prevention interventions for adolescents have revealed that multi-component interventions that addressed three or more issues, such as physical activity, diet, counselling and reducing sedentary behaviour were more effective than those with fewer components (Clemmens & Hayman, 2004; Kelly & Melnyk, 2008; Seo & Sa, 2010). The authors argue that the causes of obesity are multi-factoral (including school, family and community factors) and therefore responses that are multi-factoral and address mental health, body image, and include parents and community may be more effective than single-component interventions.

In particular, computer based programs that provide individual feedback and motivational support may be a useful program component for youth.(Seo & Sa, 2010). Studies have found that youth often prefer online/ computer based program formats (Heinicke, et al., 2007; Vogl, et al., 2009) . In one study, girls reported using the internet for general health information than young men (65% vs. 48%) and for sexual health information (47% vs. 29%) (Ralph, Berglas, Schwartz, & Brindis, 2011). Similarly, an online interactive health magazine was more often accessed by (29.7%) than boys (20.6%) and girls were more likely to use every component of the site (Santor, Poulin, LeBlanc, & Kusumarkar, 2007). This finding suggests that including computer based components in interventions may be particularly valuable for girls-specific programming.

7) Culturally safe/ appropriate

A number of studies have discussed the importance of developing culturally appropriate interventions. A meta-analysis of the efficacy of interventions to treat obesity among children in the US found that culturally tailored interventions were more efficacious than interventions where cultural components were not included (Seo & Sa, 2010). *Project FLAVOR*, a smoking prevention program that incorporated culturally relevant lessons within role-playing exercises on smoking experimentation was significantly more effective for Hispanic students than a standard U.S. program, but it was not more effective for the Asian students (C. A. Johnson et al., 2005). The Smart Girl program, designed to facilitate girls' mental health promotion through participatory, skill-building lessons, integrated cultural awareness building activities into its curriculum, and was found to be improve girls' understanding and respect of group diversity (Williams & Ferber, 2008).

There is a body of literature describing culturally tailored interventions for Aboriginal youth, with all demonstrating positive health outcomes. These vary in design and target, from including cultural teachings from elders and storytelling within health education lessons for obesity prevention (Saksvig et al., 2005), including sharing circles, craft-making, storytelling and involving Aboriginal elders and community mentors in design and implementation of a sexual health mentorship program for girls (Banister & Begoray, 2006a, 2006b), and incorporating holistic concepts of health, storytelling and celebrating cultural traditions within a skill building program to prevent substance use in Native American youth (Schinke, et al., 2000).

8) Strengths based/ asset based

Some studies suggest that focusing on strengths, rather than weaknesses, is a promising approach. For example, Baillie and co-authors (Baillie, et al., 2008) argue that culturally safe programs require: a focus on strengths rather than weaknesses (which can lead hopelessness rather than positive health changes). Zubriggen (2009)also advocates for a positive youth development perspective to dating violence prevention, by focusing on strengths and competencies rather than risks and problems . Finally, a review of 16 school-based mental health promotion interventions found that approaches that focused on health promotion rather than illness prevention were more effective (Wells, et al., 2003).

9) Empowerment-oriented/Voice-centred

Several authors describe approaches that honour girls' voices and integrate empowerment principles. Banister and Bergoray describe a "voice-centred" sexual health mentoring curriculum for Aboriginal youth. To honour girls' stories and experiences, the mentoring activities included strategies designed to encourage trust and self-expression, such as: sharing circles, journaling, role playing activities and opportunities for group reflections (Banister & Begoray, 2006a, 2006b). Similarly, the *Girls Inc.* program is focused on empowering girls to value and assert their rights, and was founded on participatory action research methods (Chen, Weiss, & Nicholson, 2010). The authors suggest that empowerment is nurtured by providing a space where girls are free and safe to speak what is on their minds. Likewise, *Smart Girls* is an empowerment focused program, which encourages girls to discover solutions with support from facilitators (Williams & Ferber, 2008).

A systematic review of programs that aim to improve adolescent sexual and reproductive health through positive youth development strategies found that effective programs empowered youth by engaging them as leaders and meaningful opportunities for involvement as decision-makers (Gavin, et al., 2010). *New Moves* is an all-girls, school based program aimed at preventing weight related issues in young girls. The program included: self-empowerment lessons focused on improving body image, self-esteem, stress management, peer pressure, small group discussions and behavioural goal-setting. While the program did not result in changes in body fat or BMI, they did find improvements in sedentary behaviour, eating patterns, and body/ self-image (D. R. Neumark-Sztainer, et al., 2010).

Empowerment is a frequent goal of programs, but providers may impede this goal by misguiding group discussions (Bay-Cheng, Lewis, Stewart, & Malley, 2006). Bay-Cheng & co-authors' critical ethnographic study of an adolescent girls group examined the feminist concept of voice in *Reviving Ophelia*, a program aimed at creating a safe space, facilitated by college age mentors, to nurture girls' voice. This was based on the conception that voice is associated with more positive health, including better self esteem, body image and lower depression, yet is often discouraged in girls as they move through adolescence. To counteract this, the program included group sessions facilitated by college age mentors on: relationships, body image, harassment and goal setting. While the aim was to encourage girls to express themselves and develop voice, the authors note that girls' talk was at times stopped, ignored or shaped by facilitators. The authors suggest the need for more critical reflection when integrating empowerment practices.

Promising Practices: Review of Key Girls' Group Programs

All girls' space

All the programs reviewed base their programming on an understanding of the sex- and gender-specific developmental issues particular to girls. They describe the importance in providing "all-girl" spaces, and how the safety created in all-girls space is foundational to the achievement of other program goals. The *Girls Action Foundation* views all-girls spaces

as important in counteracting gender-based oppression (Girls Action Foundation, 2009). *It's A Girl Thang* groups focus on the development of girls' sense of self built into an all-girl relational context that “nurture[s] femaleness as a positive identity” (Bell-Gadsby, Clark, & Hunt, 2006). The *Go Grrrls* programming, grounded in gender-specific developmental tasks, views building peer relationships as paramount and as best achieved in the safety of all-girls spaces (Craig Winston LeCroy, 2004). In all-girls space, girls are free to talk about the issues that concern them and to build connection with other girls. Power issues that often silence girls in co-ed settings, are reduced. The benefits are best described by a quote from a *Girls Talk* project participant quoted here from the project report.

“There is an entire dynamic—energy created when young women come together and are creative; more importantly there are these things that ignite within the young women, within themselves when participating . . . the sense of contribution, accomplishment, feeling a part of something special, self-worth, self-esteem, acknowledgement, fun, acceptance, freedom . . .” (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2008)

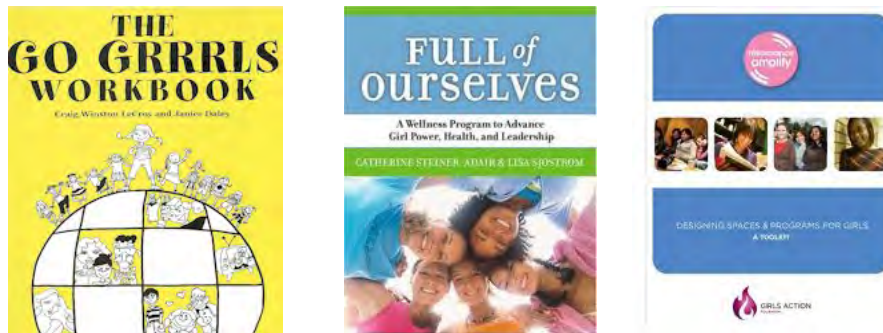


Figure 2: Examples of Girls' Group Programs

Skill building

Young women coming together in a safe place – emotionally and physically – is a foundation for skill development. Physical, emotional and intellectual skill-building activities are offered over the course of the group cycle, or within each group meeting. Activities within each group session may combine building communication skills, critical thinking, and leadership. Activities like blogging, writing, leading a meeting, making a video, learning a sport, teaching, examining media messages, or taking action in the community all build or enhance the skills of the girls in the group.

The Girl Scout/Guide model of earning proficiency badges as a way to build skills has evolved to include topics like financial literacy, and a “Leadership Journey” component fosters cooperative and hands-on learning and exploration within the community and the world (Girl Scouts of the United States of America, 2008). *Full of Ourselves*, a US-based structured program addressing disordered eating and body preoccupation has weekly sessions that include a topic discussion, a writing activity, a contract to take action during the upcoming week, and some kind physical movement, like yoga, games or an outdoor activity (Steiner-Adair & Sjöström, 2006). Girls learn about and develop skills in healthy living, media literacy, conflict resolution, and leadership. *Go Grrrls* group topics include: Challenging media messages; Rethinking self-statements; Identifying qualities of a friend; making and keeping friends; Problem-solving strategies; Assertiveness skills; Sex 101 and

refusal skills; Risky business: alcohol, drugs, and unwanted sex; Where to go for help; and Visions for a strong future” (C. W. LeCroy & Daley, 2001).

Skills to action

As girls learn skills, they are encouraged in existing girls programming, to take action in their lives. Actions fall on a continuum from personal actions, such as refocusing negative self-talk, to global action to change inequitable policies. For example, once girls have gone through the *Full of Ourselves* program, they can become mentors to younger girls in the Throw Your Weight Around program, and girls of both programs are encouraged to write letters of praise and protest and to intervene when they see others being putdown for their weight. Groups affiliated with *Girls Action Foundation* are encouraged to explore social action and social justice, and girls are equipped with the knowledge and the skills to use a Theory of Change model to make changes in their lives and in their community and to express themselves in the blog space Kickaction.ca

Enhancing self-esteem

Enhancing self-esteem permeates the design, programming, structure and approach of all the programs. It is the thread linking all components. The Girls Action Foundation uses a “critically asset-based” perspective that builds on the strengths of girls that acknowledges the barriers they face but underscores the capabilities girls have to make changes in their lives. Positive action breeds self-esteem which in turn is enhanced by having skills, learning new things, and having the safety of a gender-specific group where one can express oneself and build positive peer relationships.

Self-esteem is viewed as essential to feeling empowered and is increased by having a healthy body image, learning new skills, making connections with others, and self-expression. In 2003 the Girl Scout Research Institute conducted an extensive survey to girls aged 11-17 with an emphasis on those who were never or no longer Girl Scouts. Their findings were reported in “Ten Emerging Truths” (Girl Scouts of the United States of America, 2008). Truth Number 6 is “Girls Need to be Empowered: By Girls, For Girls”. Conversely, we found an empowerment organization, the Peace Corps, embrace all-girls spaces. Although the model of the Peace Corp is to support self-reliance and sustainability within a culture, sex and gender-based research is key to their program goals (Peace Corps, 2005). Their publication, “Beyond the Classroom: Empowering Girls” is a compilation of culturally safe empowerment activities for girls that have worked in a places around the world and are designed to help girls make positive change in their lives (Peace Corps, 2000).

Cultural safety

Making a girls’ group culturally safe was mentioned by most groups as a necessary component to enhancing self-esteem. Girls Circle hosts a 12-week group “Honoring Our Diversity” and seeks to apply a cultural lens in all of their theme-based groups using the acronym REF – Respect, Empathy, and Fairness – to define their values (Steese et al., 2006). CAAWS urges schools and recreation centres to allow for choice in safe clothing during participation and to provide all-girl programs and spaces, which is the only way some girls can participate within their cultural context. The Girls Action Foundation is exemplary in

promoting and providing cultural safety in their programs. They have published three separate and extensive research reviews regarding the issues facing 1) girls and young women, 2) immigrant girls and young women, and 3) Northern girls and young women. Along with these research reviews, “The Bridge Guide” and “Northern Reflections” provide insights, strategies, resources and best practices developed by immigrant and Northern girls, young women themselves along with members of their communities.

Publications like the Girls Action Foundation’s “The Bridge Guide” and “Northern Reflections” are examples of participatory models, where girls are given “voice” – empowerment – to help design the programs. A participatory model was also used to create “Hear Me, Understand Me, Support Me”, a guide to depression in young women. From that project the Girls Talk Program was developed, a depression prevention program designed for girls 13-16 (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2008).

Frameworks

Group activities are defined by each organization through frameworks of principles and goals. Girls Circle has four goals that support self-awareness, authentic relationships, self-expression and counter “trends of self-doubt” (Hossfeld, LeCroy, & Mann, 2008). Full of Ourselves states that its program goals are to give girls power, leadership and **health. Go Grrls uses a developmental task framework that seeks to help girls negotiate** body image, gender identification, relationships, life decisions, sexuality, access to resources, and planning for the future (Craig Winston LeCroy & Mann, 2008).

Girls Action Foundation defines 5 principles that distinguish its approach for girls empowerment groups: 1) popular education; 2) integrated feminist analysis; 3) social action; 4) critically asset-based; and, 5) organic formation (Girls Action Foundation, 2010). These principles inform the organization of the groups as well as the development of workshops and events and the facilitation of the overall programming. They support girls to become empowered, and well-equipped to deal with the challenges in their lives.

- Popular education is a cornerstone of the Girls Action Foundation framework, both for its girls programming and its organizational operations. Rather than delivering top-down learning modules popular education validates the individual experience within a group and, through empowerment and critical reflection moves toward collective action. Within GAF, girls are deemed experts in their own lives and put in charge of their own education on the issues, concerns or values that are important to them.
- Using integrated feminist analysis, the role of gender, socio-economic status and ethnicity in maintaining or eliminating oppression is explored in groups.
- Girls are acknowledged for their assets and capabilities and supported in their moves toward action and in advocating and acting for themselves. They develop skills in assertiveness and accessing the resources they need.
- Girls are encouraged to take the kind of action in their lives that makes sense to them – both individually and collectively.
- Girls decide together on the group agreements in order to create a safe place for themselves and are encouraged to give feedback that then informs program changes or approaches. Programs develop “organically” based on the input of those they support. This creates a cycle of enhanced skills, self-esteem, and empowerment, and both the girls and the programs naturally evolve.

Perspectives of Girls

Self-esteem

Improvement in self-esteem was one of the most prevalent themes that emerged during focus groups with girls. Girls felt that the opportunity to build friendships with other girls, and share what they are going through, was helpful in improving their self-esteem.

It helps us to feel that we're not alone too. Like if I have an issue and like someone else might have an issue and like we talk about it and we feel more like, okay, like you don't feel that bad and you're able to be open about it and feel confident about yourself.

The opportunity to meet with other girls dealing with similar issues was noted to improve self-confidence. One girl, who had recently moved to Canada, felt the group had increased her confidence and ability to speak out, but felt that specific sessions on building confidence and finding your voice would be helpful, particularly for new immigrants.

Girls also reported that the group increased their self-respect and self-acceptance, helped them overcome shyness, and gave them the confidence to resist peer-pressure.

I love it because you could just be yourself; it's amazing.

But I think it did help like make our choices like about those things [alcohol, drugs, tobacco, sex], because from the girls group we felt confident about ourselves, so we didn't feel like, you know, there was a need to like, you know fit in. There was no need to, you know, do things to make, you know, make yourself feel confident, like you know, to have sex or . . . to smoke with people just to fit in. Like you don't have that urge, because you know, you're already confident about yourself. Like this group helped you to be, you know, it just helped you to be confident about ourselves, so I think it did help in that aspect.

As stated in the quote above, enhanced self-esteem was connected with improved decision-making and ability to resist social pressures to engage in risky health behaviours such as drinking and smoking. Although Girls Groups typically did not focus on specific health risks or topics, during focus groups girls revealed how improvements in self-esteem contributed to overall health improvements.

One of the key topics connected to self-esteem that girls did mention discussing in groups was body image. Several girls indicated that their body image and self-esteem improved from participating in the girls groups.

Like before I wouldn't wear like, because regarding the self-esteem and body image thing, like before I wouldn't wear certain clothes because I felt they made me look fat, and I didn't look like the girls in the magazines and I didn't look all pretty like that. And now I can, I feel like I can wear whatever I want, especially to [named group], and it's like, ahh .

[No] one can tear us down. Like if someone says "Oh, you're ugly," you don't have to believe them.

The body image issue most often cited by girls was the pressure to be thin. However, the culturally specific practice of "shadism" and skin bleaching was discussed as a body image issue by Somali girls. Some girls mentioned learning about media portrayal of girls and women and the pressure to be thin during groups, and felt this was a valuable discussion point. Also of interest, the girls requested future workshops on make-up use, skin problems, and piercings.

Cultural safety

Some girls revealed that participating in the girls group helped them to find their voice as a new immigrant to Canada. Native language programming was viewed as important for discussing problems. Some girls spoke about the unique pressures that specific ethno-cultural groups of girls encounter, including family rules and pressures. The following participants, who both come from a group for Somali girls in Toronto, suggested that the culturally relevant programming provided made the group unique and offered a chance for girls to experience a sense of sisterhood with their peers.

I'm going to add that the importance of girls group is going to be like the cultural specific, the understanding. Like you can go to any girls group at the YWCA, but if they don't understand the cultural background you come from, it's going to be hard to get your information.

Joining a girl group does have something to do with – of like it being all females, because it gives you that sense of like sisterhood, which a lot of [named ethnic group] girls are lacking.

While some girls seemed satisfied with the cultural content of the Girls Groups, other girls also noted that they would like to see more culturally-specific content or topics included in group activities and discussions. Several girls mentioned the need for girls groups to be either culturally relevant, or to include facilitators who are aware of specific cultural differences and issues. The following participants provided some specific suggestions related to cultural content:

Elders. It'd be nice to have elders here.

And we can also do like multicultural stuff. We can learn about new cultures because this is Canada, it's a multicultural country, so I think everyone should know about like different culture and have a little sense of, you know, where a person belongs from and stuff like that.

Gender-specific groups

Girls in all focus groups discussed the benefits of participating in a girls-only space. Girls felt that the girls-only format of groups enabled them to create bonds with other girls, and experience a sense of empowerment with being a girl.

[This] group just makes me feel more like powerful for being a girl

Where I used to live there used to be a lot of, I guess girls were kind of put down more, and when I came here and I found out that there was a girls group it kind of made me feel more important as a girl because I know how girls used to be discriminated against and we used to not be able to do anything, and now it kind of feels good.

Girls also mentioned that they felt more comfortable and less judgement from participating in girls-only, rather than co-ed groups. Participants noted how they could freely share what they are experiencing as girls, suggesting that the groups provided a space for them to relax, develop their voice, and feel comfortable with the way they look.

Like with girls it's just like we just chill and we can talk about like almost anything you know, and you just feel more comfortable.

It was people that I already grew up and I already knew, and no boys, so I was more comfortable in coming in a t-shirt and just being okay.

Participants suggested that the groups were often structured on whatever it was the girls wanted to talk about or what was going on for them in that moment. For example, in one group they would begin the group by taking turns sharing what was going on for them, whether it was a positive event (termed a “butterfly”) or something difficult (a “bee-sting”).

These findings suggest that creating girls-only spaces is invaluable to developing a safe and relaxed space for girls to build relationships, voice issues and concerns (including those that may be gender-specific), and feel empowered. Offering gender-specific groups creates opportunities for girls-positive experiences that girls may not be as likely to encounter in a co-ed environment.

Social support and family

Girls reported that groups provided a space to talk about issues that they were not able to discuss with their families. Some girls reported conflict with their mothers or other family members, and found the Girls Group provided a space where they could access support and share their experiences and concerns.

For me the best part was just having a place that I could talk to people about, because for me my mum wasn't the person I could be able to run to.

Girls felt that family issues and relationships were important session topics. Some participants indicated that family relationships and concerns were a topic covered during some group sessions, and some even described family relationship building activities that were built into girls groups, such as mother-daughter activities. Some girls reported that their participation in the girls-group had helped improve their relationship with their mothers.

I: Is there anything that's helped that you've learned about in this group that's helped empower you in terms of controlling your relationships, like feeling like you're in control?

P: My relationship with my mum

Girls groups provided a space to work through and in some cases improve family issues, and also an opportunity to expand the social support network of girls, by offering access to a group of peers and facilitators to talk with openly about what is going on in their lives.

Friendship and relationship building

Many girls said that the greatest benefit of the groups was the opportunity to build new friendships, and being able to share their experiences with other girls. Several girls who were new to Canada or to the area reported that participating in the girls group helped their transition to a new place. For example, the following two participants shared how the Girls Groups helped them create friendships in a new place:

So I started with [named group] a while back and the first retreat, like the first time I've ever been away from home by myself was with [named group]. They brought me along to the retreat and I met a whole bunch of people that I probably wouldn't have met with. I was able to talk to people that the same struggles as me, which made me feel like I was normal, because before I thought I was really weird.

I joined because my counsellor recommended it when I was really, really young, when I first moved here and I was like 11, which is young to me. And it really helped with me, like transitioning like, and making friends in the area, because when I moved here like nobody wanted to be my friend. So yeah, just kind of like it helped a lot and it helped me like just like socialize and get to know people, and that's why I return.

Girls talked often about the camaraderie that they experienced with other girls in the group. Girls also felt it was valuable to hear different perspectives, and came to appreciate these differences. For example, some participants mentioned that the groups are a safe place to share differences in opinion. The following participant suggested that everyone is valued for their uniqueness:

Everyone is special in their different ways.

These comments suggest that these girls felt open to being themselves in the group, and learning from one another. Some girls talked about how they valued opportunities for sharing their skills with other girls during the groups.

The best thing was that you get to make new friends and participate in activities that you never learned about or knew about it.

In some groups, the girls spoke about learning new skills, such as one session where they taught each other different types of dances. Some girls thought it would be valuable to have more sessions where girls share and teach their expertise on a certain subject, such as crafting, sports, cooking or other skills.

Trust and safety

Many girls reported that they valued the experience of having a safe and confidential space

to share their experiences with other girls. Girls indicated that they felt free to express themselves in the girls-groups because of the trust they had developed with other participants. The opportunity to share personal experiences with other girls also deepened the quality of their relationships with other girls.

And the main feeling I like about this is just definitely the confidentiality and a feeling of like we're not just a bunch of different girls coming together to just talk about problems, but we're, it's almost like becoming like a family in a way.

Some girls mentioned how the groups allowed girls to share their experiences and opinions in a safe and non-judgemental space. For example, the following participant talked about how she valued the opportunity to share her struggles and know that what she was sharing would remain confidential:

Because like I've been dealing with a whole bunch of stuff and it's like, it's kind of like nice to talk to people about it and you know you can trust them, the confidentiality, and I like having like that trust, that's why.

Many girls talked about how groups provided a safe space to discuss issues that are normally avoided or regarded as taboo, and provided an opportunity for girls to gather reliable information. For example, popular topics girls felt were valuable to discuss or were interested in discussing more included sexuality, sex, substance use, suicide and eating disorders.

Some girls also shared that they were having family problems or didn't enjoy being at home, so enjoyed having a safe space where they could go:

I don't really like going home, so I'm always out, but when I come here, it's like somewhere safe to be.

Overall, the experiences and opinions shared by the girls suggest that the girls felt very comfortable with the other girls and facilitators, and were comfortable with opening up and talking about what is going on for them in the groups.

Stress relief

Some girls said the group was a place where they felt happy or at ease, despite other stresses in their family or personal lives.

It's a place where you can be happy.

Yeah, like Wednesday is the day I look forward to because it's like the whole week kind of sucks . . .

For some participants, the Girls Groups provided a refuge from worries and stressors they may be experiencing outside of the groups. Girls suggested that participating in the group allowed them to decompress and relieve stress by talking with others about what they're currently dealing with. Some girls, such as the following participant, suggested the inclusion of more programming on coping with stress.

[It would be helpful to have more information on] how to help girls deal with stress, because you know they're at a age where stress will be there in their life, you know, whether it's school, whether it's in their home, whether it's outside of school, any, you know relationships, families, friends, so you know, how to help them deal with stress and stress tips.

Stress, in many forms, is a central issue in many girls' lives. It is important that the girls groups offer a space where girls can feel free of stress, and also provides opportunities to learn new strategies for coping with stress in healthy ways.

Skill building

Some girls mentioned how they had learned coping and decision making skills through participating in the girls groups. Several girls felt that the girls-group had helped them to resist peer pressure and/or better cope with these issues. For example, the following participant spoke about how the Girls Group helped her to improve her decision making skills in regards to resisting peer pressures:

So these girls groups, I feel like these girl groups can help because at the end of the day no one can help you make your decision, you know. Your decision is your decision. But at least you'll know that there's two sides.

Girls also reported learning about new tools or resources available to them through their participation in the girls groups. Some girls said they felt more dependent because of the skills they had learned in the groups.

I just know what to do now. I can, I'm kind of independent. I know what I have to think about so I can go anywhere basically. I was, I couldn't do that; at the beginning of this program I didn't know how to take the bus.

Several girls spoke about how their involvement in the group had improved their problem solving skills. For example, the following girls talked about how the groups provided them with resources and support in being able to address problems in their lives:

Like knowing that there's all sort of problems and knowing different ways to figure it out, like being able to fix it besides like just trying to figure it out on your own.

I think girls groups are important because it helps us, it helps girls open their minds to different opportunities out there for them, whether it's career-wise, whether it's you know, you know, it helps them build their personalities, it helps them learn relationship problems, issues, how to help them in I would say in almost every aspect of their life, so.

Girls also talked about how the groups had supported them in working through various issues they have experienced such as peer pressure, bullying, abuse, grief and suicide. In one group, the participants had recently dealt with the suicides of peers, and spoke about how the group was helpful in dealing with grief:

Yeah, I have to agree with everyone. Just getting a fuller understanding of just suicide, grief and loss and all that definitely helped, and also gave you like, I don't know, what

you call it, maybe school skills, or just like life skills that you can like use like outside of group, and like to help other people.

Some girls mentioned they were interested in learning more about coping skills, particularly in regards to experiences of trauma from past abuse, the death of friends and family members, grief and loss, and suicide.

Mentoring support

One component of the Girls Groups was the involvement of slightly older peers as mentors. Girls found it valuable to be able to meet and speak with older girls. Being able to discuss concerns with girls who may have already dealt with similar issues was identified as beneficial.

And I think back in our girl group, what had happened was like they've been all through it already, they've been through high school, they're older than us, so we started in like Grade 8, Grade 9 times, so they already broke down like high school for us, like how it would go, based on their experiences .

I love them[older girl mentors], because they're so funny and they're so – I wouldn't say they're really young, but they're young enough to where they understand what it was like to be our age, and it's just so much fun. They're amazing.

Girls enjoyed the opportunity to learn from girls who were older and therefore had been through many of the same experiences, yet young enough to understand one another and create friendships. Some girls in the Brampton Group suggested that future groups could include older girls as mentors.

Perspectives of Older Girls and Peer Facilitators

Self-esteem and communication

Among older girls and peer facilitators, communication and building self-esteem were most often mentioned as the benefits gained from participating in girls' groups. Being able to talk freely and confidentially was an important factor in improving how girls felt about themselves and a **gender-specific** group often provided that safe environment.

Yeah, because it's a safe environment that we can talk about stuff like your period and you don't have to worry about being embarrassed and all that kind of stuff, which is kind of nice, yeah. – Peer Facilitator

And I, I just enjoyed that every week, having to go around and listen to everybody's week. Because like you see them in school but you don't actually stop and think "Oh, I wonder how their day is?" – Older Girl

I, there's a lot of judgment between women when men are around, and there's still a lot of judgment when men aren't around. But if you're in a place that's like "yeah, this is a girls group" people seem to put away their judgment and just be real and be there

for you know, the hour or some. – Older Girl

People stick up for themselves more after they do these programs – Older Girl

By having a safe space to talk, girls' self-expression and self-disclosure increased, which challenged their notions of being different from others. Further, increased communication improves girls' listening and communication skills, which improves their relationships. They also reported learning communication skills and teaching these skills as peer facilitators and as a tool to anger management.

Just made it feel like it's more supportive, like I wasn't, I didn't feel like, oh yeah, I'm the only one that feels like this. Just, I don't know, it felt good to know that somebody else deals with that same thing, or something really similar. – Older Girl

And how to communicate properly, and I know a lot of the girls weren't communicating properly and they weren't able to express their feelings and . . . – Peer Facilitator

so many of the girls would come in by themselves, no friends, very shy and then they'd leave with lots of friends and they'd go into middle school where they would have those friends still and it was really cool to see. – Peer Facilitator

. . . that just in general, programs like this really strengthen your interpersonal skills, because you're put with a group of women that you wouldn't necessarily see or acknowledge otherwise, or you may have previous judgements about, that turn out to be totally false, so your interpersonal skills and your ways to communicate get strengthened a lot. – Older Girl

Yeah, because the girls come in saying "I can't," and we try to show them that they can do whatever they want. Like if they put their mind and heart to it, it doesn't matter what people say. – Peer Facilitator

As with the younger girls in the focus groups, **body image** was a key topic related to self-esteem for older girls and peer facilitators. They spoke of and experienced the unique societal pressures for girls to look a certain way. Yet, they were also able to view these pressures within the context of media messages and to reframe and critically analyze the messages.

Body issue, like body issues are probably the number one thing that gets talked about in most of the girls groups around here. – Older Girl

I was just Googling stuff because I didn't have any inspiration. I'm like, oh, I'll Google beauty, see what comes up. I was shocked because all of them were, like all of the pictures that came up on Google were of very thin, blonde, Caucasian women. – Older Girl

Like if some people like me like that's good; the ones that they don't I don't really care because like they're not worth it, and I don't know, I guess that's how the girls group helped me, like seeing like you don't really need to impress people, you just, yeah, just make friends and they won't care what you do with your body or anything, they won't care. And the, like the ones that don't matter, yeah, don't, it doesn't matter! – Older Girl

Leadership

The opportunity to be a leader and the responsibility of leadership was a topic that both older girls and peer facilitators mentioned as something they valued from being in a girls' groups. A theme heard often was having a desire to help other girls and feeling that they had that opportunity to do that within the group. Moreover, girls reported becoming more aware of their own behaviour and the way they treated others as a result of taking on a leadership role.

I thought that if I could help in somebody's life then that would be awesome and I just thought it would be really cool, and yeah. – Peer Facilitator

Well, and the hypocrisy between, you know, you can't tell a girl to stop being mean to someone else when you think about, you know, I really was doing that today. – Peer Facilitator

I would say that it's matured me a lot, that I don't, you know, it doesn't seem like the age gap between me and some of the girls that I run the group in is significant, like three, two or three years, but you really start to feel when you're in the position that you really are the adult in the situation, you have to grow to accept that and so you have to, you know, realize that there's behaviours that you have as a teenager that are, that you see in these younger girls and going, you know what, that's really not a behaviour you want, so you start to grow and say okay, there's things I have to change about myself in order to be more of an adult and more of a role model for the girls you're working with. – Peer Facilitator

Some felt that the leadership skills they had gained opened up other opportunities in the community and the workplace.

I've gotten to go sailing and camping on two different leadership expeditions. I've gotten to do two or three camps in the summer for this, and then now I still I guess volunteer at the YWCA. They asked me to come and speak to the younger girls just like this weekend, at their conference, so. – Older Girl

And it also, like it also helped me get the job that I have now because I, it's like, it was like "Ohh, you were leadership stuff. We want you!" and all that type of stuff.

Friendship and trust

Of the older girls and the peer facilitators interviewed, many found that they became friends with people they didn't expect to befriend. Some who normally didn't trust other girls felt comfortable coming to their group, some learned to trust other girls, and some decided to behave differently in their friendships. Others realized that their current friendships were unhealthy and some chose to make new friends. Older girls who were mentors or peer facilitators reported that they grew as people and found personal value in working with younger girls.

There was more younger girls than older girls there, and I don't know, I wouldn't have even thought twice of talking to them, and then it end up being like really close friends and I do stuff on that side of the school now. – Older Girl

It's alright to, to be around girls. Like you know, having you have that trust issue and

how to, how to cope with each other and just how to have fun being with other girls.

A month ago now, I had a legit epiphany on life. And it's like okay, I dropped a lot of friends that I realized that were very unhealthy relationships.

And I feel like my ability to connect with other people has improved too, that part of it is you really have to learn as you go along, well how do I apply this knowledge, and so you learn how to, to do things in such a way that people feel more comfortable and you feel like you're more open.

Critical thinking

Older girls described analyzing media messages and images of beauty and being aware that what they see in the media is different from reality. Media literacy was almost always talked about within the context of body image and acceptance. Becoming media literate was helpful for older girls and considered important by the peer facilitators, but they still acknowledged that the messages are strong and some struggle to maintain a positive body image.

I was thinking about this the other day and I was wondering what would happen if we, like just for like maybe 24 hours, 48 hours, swapped everyone on TV and every like, in all of the media sources, same names, same such, but change their appearances a bit to be, you know, like bigger or not so air-brushed and have a, have like weird moles and like every once in a while they get a rash and, [laughs] you know . . . like just have like them be human for 24 hours and see what happens to the world. - Older Girl

I would say talking about the influence of the media for sure, because I think a lot of the girls feel that way, that you know, they're never going to look like that magazine cover, and I mean I know for a fact that I felt that when you look and go, well, I'm never going to look like that, it's just, it's not even physically possible for me to look like that, so . . . - Peer Facilitator

Older girls and peer facilitators also discussed rethinking their behaviours by understanding others' viewpoints and deciding to adjust their actions accordingly. They mentioned that the anti-bullying training had helped them personally and with mentees. Many of them recognized that unhealthy coping skills are often the result of abuse.

Well actually, for the initial training that was something; like they asked me "Well why are you wanting to do the training?" and that was, my basic thought was when you know this really resonated for me, it really was something for me that made it easier for me to become a teenager and think okay, you know, I know I'm not the only one who feels this way and there's reasons why everyone else feels this way. It's society, it's not just me. So, so I, I kind of hope that I could bring that to the table for some of these girls.

. . . or bring up something like "my buddy was just telling me how like oh, your guy's buddy is bullying . . .", so like we work on a plan on how to get it into our little buddy's heads not to bully my buddy, for example, or anyone else, you know.

Substance use, sexuality and healthy choices

Older girls reported that they were able to make informed decisions because of the education in their groups around tobacco, alcohol and drug use. They appreciated the “non-preachy” approach of their group facilitators when it came to topics of substance use and sexuality. A few older girls commented on the value of substance-use alternative activities planned in their groups, and peer facilitators thought it was an important topic to discuss within the groups in a very real way.

Listening to women talk honestly about drug use, alcohol use and sex, it gives you a good idea of where people are at, and not that you, not that it makes you feel like you have to match them, but you know, that way you know where most people stand on those sort of issues, which can, if you're struggling with finding that place for yourself, can really help you, I think. – Older Girl

I mean like K, like if we ever wanted to talk about that; like we do talk about that sometimes and maybe she's not like “don't ever do drugs or ever drink!” you know . . . like because obviously no. Like she says you got to learn from your own experience and stuff, but like she doesn't, she doesn't . . . She doesn't approve or disagree with it, you know, so. . . . I can see how it can help someone. – Older Girls

. . . are less likely to do, get into drugs and bad things. So if you have a group like that to go to . . . you come home for dinner, then do it [go to group] or something, you know . . . – Older Girl

I think it helped me a lot more with like the drugs and alcohol and sex stuff more than it has with body image, because when we fit in those groups it kind of stuck with me a lot more. – Older Girl

So many of the girls were so intrigued by like what can happen and that they're like stunned because the things that they hear in middle school or high school or elementary school is very different from what really happens. – Peer Facilitator

One peer facilitator hoped that she could help younger girls understand that they can make healthier choices for themselves and still have friends.

Well you know it came up in our group once, like we kind of had a thing; you'd step into the circle if you've done whatever and you know, I think a lot of the girls were quite stunned by the fact that you know, have you smoked weed? Well of course I didn't step in the circle. Have you had sex? Didn't step in the circle [laughs], so I think that for them kind of stopped them a little short and a little bit, like you know, thinking about you know, she's 16, but you know, I think – it made me feel better about the choices I've made, and I mean at 16 it is kind of unusual, but I hope that for the other girls that it made them feel like if they choose to make similar decisions that they, that's it, it's not weird that you know, you don't have to be smoking pot or having sex to be normal, you don't have to be 16 and partying all the time to be normal. I hope that that's something they took from that, like you know, at least the thinking process. Like you know, she's doing well in school, and it's, you don't have to do these things to be, to have friends or to get along. – Peer Facilitator

Perspectives of Group Facilitators

We spoke with 10 group facilitators leading diverse girls' groups. The facilitators provided a rich view of the role of girls' empowerment groups in supporting girls to achieve healthy living goals and grow in a wide range of other ways. Central to the facilitators' understanding of the contribution of girls' groups is the creation of a safe space where girls have voice, learn and make connections:

So I would say that's probably the biggest thing, is just having a space that they feel safe and get empowered and look at strengths and they could just kind of share what they need to.

Well, I guess we begin by just having a safe space, right; building rapport, building a relationship because I think that's kind of the, the roots of it

Which is why I think it's important for girls groups in any sort of community because it just creates a place where you see people out of your spectrum and can learn and teach and relate.

Regardless of the status of the girls who I've seen come to group, wherever their family is at, whatever their family situation, once there is a sense of inclusion, commonality and security, and this is very broad and it speaks to any type of group or any type of community inclusion, there is a starting point for self-awareness and mindfulness and self-respect.

Well I think it's a positive space, it's a positive environment. They're supported, you know, they have a chance to be themselves and to feel comfortable with themselves. We don't, we don't, you know, they can wear whatever they want.

Skill development

Communication skills - All the group facilitators stressed the key role of the girls groups in supporting the development of communication skills. Facilitators talked about fostering communication skills, such as: assertiveness, learning to ask for help, expression of feelings, active/respectful listening, addressing swearing, and cross cultural communication. Most discussed the benefits for girls to have the opportunity to communicate problems and experiences in the group, which in turn frequently led to girls' experiences of self-validation or a change of behaviour. Beyond the safe and confidential space and activities that foster communication *within* the groups, facilitators also mentioned promoting communication skills through personal counselling/information, soliciting program feedback from girls, and weekly phone-calls to the girls.

when we're in that space where we've shed all that outside mask, I guess, we really get to see each other and we practice active listening, and compassionate listening, so I'm going to suspend my inner dialogue and really hear you and maybe not respond, but really hear you, and I've heard and seen girls. . . talk to each other as if they were totally connected, not based on what they look like, or what they're wearing, or what they're into, and it's really moving.

Like you can have a difference of opinion and that's what it is, but it doesn't mean that either one is wrong or right, it's just a difference of opinion. So modeling that as well as

discussing that again.

when we talk about communication skills and do some practice around, you know, better ways to communicate and they go home and try those things out, they will say that it's been the start of a good conversation with their mum in particular, but not always, sometimes dad as well

they'll say often that they've learned things to kind of calm themselves down or, because we talk a lot about self-care and, and you know, ways to kind of talk about their feelings rather than it coming out in anger.

So yeah, helping them to kind of cope with that [bullying, eating disorder, or substance use] is, is really trying to build them up to feel like they can say no to it or have communication skills on how to stop it and know where the resources are if they, if they're really in a bad situation.

I think like the biggest thing we can do for young women doesn't come with money, like you say, it really just comes with talking.

Leadership skills were also often mentioned. Group facilitators sought to promote leadership skills by way of activities such as role modeling, tapping on personal skills and experiences, finding opportunities for community involvement, and encouragement to become peer facilitators. Many gave examples of girls' leadership within their groups, and training as leaders, mentors and peer facilitators.

we're building leadership skills, we're building basically like a little community between the girls. We want to be able to build support, be able to know how to trust each other and how to keep things confidential and just be able to support girls as girls

and I really do think that they do feel like they're leaders and that they're learning leadership skills and that they can apply them outside of the group

in an ideal world I'd like to be able to involve girls in more activism projects, so we've done a couple in the past where we've gotten little bits of extra funding, but girls really want to get out there and sort of demonstrate what they're learning, and you know there's a point where the groups are confidential and they take that really seriously, but there's also, if they've been coming to group for a while they feel almost like they want to go out there and deliver the message or they want to create awareness, they want to teach other people or show friends. So it would be nice to, you know, have more resources to be able to do things, like make videos or do books or, or you know, art shows or whatever it is.

Critical thinking skills - The Girls Action Foundation approach works from a positive-oriented lens that emphasizes the assets and capacities of girls' own realities and experiences and embraces reflexivity and a critical perspective. The fostering of critical thinking skills is an important contribution girls' empowerment groups make to girls consideration of and action on healthy living goals.

And it was obvious but we were just like, you just give them the space, just give them the information and they make the decision for themselves. Are you doing it for yourself, are

you doing it for your mum, are you doing it for the culture/religion reasons? Which reasons are you doing it for? And think about it, visit it, reflect on it.

I've seen examples of girls coming back saying "You know, I checked out the Diva Cup [menstrual cup] online and I see what you're talking about, all these different things, but I'm not ready to make that choice. Like I feel like you, if I don't choose this then I'm not, I'm not looking after myself." And they're critically thinking and they're taking it home with them other experiences, information they ask from me, and they're learning in a safe environment which is centered around girls.

I've seen relationships form and respect from a place I never would have thought, and it blows my mind because I'm like I wow, I never even thought to go there, and I see them problem-solving, when they're in triads. You know, "if I was at a party," or "maybe you could try this . . ."

Media literacy

The opportunity to critique media images and media gender beauty norms is an important component of girls' empowerment groups:

I had a girl in a group once say "How come there's no, no guys group? How come there's no boys group?" And that was a great question and it spurred a theme throughout the entire group, the entire, you know, seven weeks after that. And it brought a lot of attention to why girls feel the way they do in society and they brought in examples and we started critiquing magazines that are aimed at selling product to women and making money off of the insecurity about, looking like any of the girls in the magazine so, so talking about that and saying "Oh yeah, that makes sense," and highlighting you know, harmful consumerism and also being sensitive to – it's aimed at guys as well.

So I think looking at gender stereotypes, looking at how, you know, socialization of girls is different, girls are represented differently in the media, all of that kind of stuff are really important conversations that, that they start to begin to think about how their experiences differ and how girls are treated differently, talking a lot about power and the girls really get that.

So I think just talking about it and talking about their feelings when they see advertising or they see shows on TV that don't represent them, having that discussion I think helps them to feel more that they're okay or their body's okay. They really, I mean they really enjoy all the activities around body image, exploring it . .

Like we watched a couple of videos about the media and like the Dove campaigns, and they didn't see those before but they did learn from those that like these images of women on magazines and stuff aren't even real, and that it can really damage your health if you're caught up in all the like dieting and stressing over what's going on

Healthy living topics

Body Image - Facilitators saw body image as a key issue for girls and referenced activities, discussions, and education related to understanding body development and counteracting negative body image.

and we've had days where they've taken off their makeup and then we've had talks about what it feels like to not have any makeup on, and you know, we've had the life size Barbie that's been created where it's you know, seven foot whatever with a 13 inch waist and when they see that visual they, they really get that. We've looked at looks, there's lots of great videos and YouTube videos out about, you know, the photo-shopping and things like that, so they, they really enjoy exploring that topic

We've done an exercise where we brought in like a baby picture of ourselves, and asked "Okay, write down some wishes you have for that baby." And we passed them around and it was really moving and really incredible and then "Say some of the things now to this baby that you would, that you say to yourself, you're, you're – the tape that plays in your head: you're too fat, you're not pretty enough, you don't fit in, you, you know, you need to do this more, and say that to the baby." And all of a sudden the girls are like "Yeah, I don't want to do that anymore."

So I think just talking about it and talking about their feelings when they see advertising or they see shows on TV that don't represent them, having that discussion I think helps them to feel more that they're okay or their body's okay. They really, I mean they really enjoy all the activities around body image, exploring it . . .

And I guess one of the things we really sort of look at is, is how our bodies are our friends. So because I'm a bigger person I'll say "Well I can kayak for eight hours, I'm really, you know, I have upper body strength. I may not be, you know, a sprinter or can do the things with a different kind of body, but you know . . .", you know, you try to find the ways that you know your body is your friend, and we have sort of write a letter to your body and things like that, and so that hopefully everybody, well we try to, you know, help the girls to see that it, that there are, you know, there are good things about their body and it's not all that.

Again on this issue safety is key

...think where it does make a difference is they have a place where they've – they haven't really talked about it, because even if it's been in a classroom setting they haven't felt safe enough to really talk about it . . .

The group experience of discussing body image has sparked confidence to get help

Body image for sure, feeling the pressures of looking a certain way or a lot of weight issues. We have girls who actually have gone on to seek help for those issues after coming to girls groups

Obesity was not often mentioned specifically in the context of how body image and healthy weight was discussed, however weight loss programs, the connection of poverty with unhealthy foods, weight as a barrier to physical activity, the need to assist with moderate weight loss, bullying related to weight, and the connection to media pressures were.

I've been careful to, you know people talk about weight loss programs, like wanting to do weight loss programs, and I kind of emphasized that, you know, it's not so important to focus on the weight as it is about being healthy and getting fit, because you know, there's a lot of negative things associated with being focused on, like just being focused on the actual weight of a person

you know, just talking about obesity and then they talk about, you know, diabetes and stuff, and it's just kind of, you know, looking at, you know, for instance poverty, right. It's unfortunate but you know, a two-litre pop is cheaper than a jug of milk.

But I know in some, in the program design sessions, like some of the girls from this group and the various facilitator section said like their weight and like how they looked was kind of a problem, kind of prevented them from participating in physical activity, say gym class or something, so it's definitely something we do need to address and talk about, yeah

I think it's quite a bit more difficult for the girls who are really struggling who get bullied, who get the fat comments, things like that, because even though the girls will support them in group, they're still out there living that every day, and so it's, it's hard for them because they know that maybe within this group everyone gets it, but in the real world it's not as easy.

Consistent with the Girls Action Foundation's overall approach, and with other healthy living topics addressed in this study, facilitators saw a key contribution of girls groups' to be providing the groundwork around positive body image, so that specific information on nutrition, exercise and other healthy living topics could be heard and acted upon.

just bringing somebody in and talking about nutrition or exercise or more of the specific topics related to healthy living, but if the respect for yourself and your body isn't there, how are people going to respond to that, you know. It might, it's sort of like you have to do the ground work first, in terms of respecting and saying I deserve, to not overeat or under eat or binge or do these radical things, my body deserves to be respected, and then if people truly internalize that kind of belief I think they're more receptive over the long run, without instruction to make choices on their own.

Some facilitators mentioned that a considerable focus of the group is on food.

we have a snack and it's a healthy snack and we talk about it, and if the girls want to talk about you know, I'd rather have chips, I'd rather have junk food, let's do this, then we talk about that too, like how is that going to impact you? Like rarely will I say no, I'll offer options, and usually the girls are down with that

mentioning "Oh, do you know that, you know, that tea is fair trade and do you know what fair trade means?" and do you know, like for me, a lot of the meeting is centered around the food, and a lot of times girls just want to have pizza, and that's okay too.

Mental health, tobacco, alcohol and other substance use – Facilitators acknowledged how common depression and anxiety issues were, and also the pressures of a teen party culture. They noted they did not for the most part do structured sessions on mental health and substance use topics, instead they created space for issues to be brought forward and found

fun ways of discussing these issues. This space gives girls opportunities to figure out their own stances to these concerns.

so finding out where they're at, what their understanding of it is, what their fear is. We play another game called "Fear and Protector" and we silently choose with our eyes, one person in the room to be our fear and one person in the room to be our protector. And when I say go we have to at all times keep our protector in between us and the fear. Now nobody knows who's who so we're all running around thinking, you know, maniacs. And you know, once we debrief that game "What that like for you? Did it work? You know, what was happening?" we start discussing, you know, how is that like real life?

They look forward to the [named group] every week and just seeing everybody and like there's been comments that "Yeah, I've had such a bad week, but I was just excited for [named group]," that's the only good part of this week,"

So I think the opportunity for discussion about alcohol and sex and drugs and all the rest of it takes away some of that tabooess of it and more just some of the hard reality of it, and because we have a diversity of girls we have some girls who have taken that road . . . but then can speak honestly about it . . . : . . . and then the girls that maybe are wondering can look, say like "Wow, it doesn't sound too appealing actually

they've talked about you know, just pressures and even just like drinking and smoking and stuff like that. . . And I would say harm reduction in terms of substance use, they'll come and they'll say that that because of conversations we've had that they've been safer at parties or they've implemented things with their peers that they maybe wouldn't have otherwise.

But I think they, you know, in terms of substance use they, because we sort of explore it from, you know, with a gender lens, so you know, the differences between substance use with girls and boys and what are sort of kind of underlying stuff that's going on there, and so I think sometimes when they have a better understanding of the context, then they, it helps them to make better decisions because they might think "Oh, I know that I won't really want to drink tonight because I like that guy," or whatever it is .

And so smoking, it's very rarely a topic

I would say just being open and empathetic and validating you know, and like really being open to listen to their story and having a safe place to do that, right. And not . . . yeah, I would say kind of not being really like jumping on it, right, like saying kind of like finger wagging, right. "Well this is bad and . . .!" you know, but just kind of, you know, being able to have that process and letting them kind of explore and figure out their own ways

Physical activity/inactivity

So we knew how much fun we had when we were in basketball, and then there was another basketball program where one's part of as [named group], where the mosque at that point, which is at [named street intersection], they had a study circle, so you would learn, and then there was basketball, and I was supposed to take two sessions. So we had that system where we're used to learning something and then playing basketball

So we had outdoors, so kind of like outdoors activities, . . . but one of the things they identified was, you know, they might not be so interested in like organized sports as like

different types of physical activity, so active just had, you know, different things like, I don't know, dance, skipping, choreography, like stuff like that. . . And we also like looked at what the barriers and facilitators to physical activity they felt they had,

and other big one I think that was interesting to both of us was yoga, and working on wellness and using yoga and meditation, in terms of mental health and physical health for stress management and things like that, which are relevant in our lives that we also keep working on. So I think yoga, we haven't, we don't have that in our programming for this year, but it was definitely an idea we had talked about at the start is, in terms of overall wellbeing I think yoga has a lot to offer. And the girls I think it's nice to be active as well, and physical trainer session.

Like doing dance in programming or that sort of thing is something they love, then instead they're saying "Oh, exercise is good, it makes me feel good, I know the benefits," and that's going to avoid them having problems with their weight, but without getting them all afraid and caught up in notions of how they should look or what might be wrong with them, you know.

then we also incorporate forms, different forms of physical activity, so we do culturally-specific forms of physical activities, so we do a lot of dance, Bhangra, Zumba, yoga so empowering them through knowledge and empowering them through physical literacy and you know, we find that if girls have bad experiences with sport or gym at an early age they tend to write off physical activity. They don't see themselves as an athlete, so we focus on non-competitive, you know, the fun of being active, the fun of being active with other girls.

But I know in some, in the program design sessions, like some of the girls from this group and the various facilitator section said like their weight and like how they looked was kind of a problem, kind of prevented them from participating in physical activity, say gym class or something, so it's definitely something we do need to address and talk about, yeah.

Resources were identified as an issue in implementing the needed physical activities:

Yeah, I just fantasize though about having like the resources to actually run like a week for these girls, you know, outside the city where there would be like dancing programming and healthy living would be integrated and it would be fully staffed and have resources and just how they would be coming out of that. What kind of leadership roles there might be capable of taking on after more of those experiences, if the resources were there.

Rock climbing is something that they always come up with, but you know, we have a very small budget, so the idea of renting a bus and taking everybody rock climbing isn't exactly feasible for us right now,

The connections of physical activity with other healthy living outcomes were noted:

So CAAWS you know, is interested in, in getting everybody active to and to, so that they can enjoy the benefits of physical activity, not only the health benefits but the psychosocial benefits and the, you know, the emotional benefits and the, the different outcomes to do with you know increased educational gains and decreased illicit use and less teen pregnancy and all these great things that we know come from being active and

learning how to have fun and . . .

Safety – Girls groups spend considerable time on acknowledging violence against girls, and helping girls find tools to deal with it and not bully.

Because there are so many levels of it, and I think you know, there's a really obvious aspect of violence that we can all speak to and, but I think one of the more important things is speaking to some of the less obvious aspects of violence, like bullying and judgment and segregating and excluding and all the rest of it. So it's an empowering place to be able to sit in a group of girls and sort of through discussion and other people's problems start to identify some of that violence and that it also is violence and how does that affect us how does it affect how we see people and how does that effect how we act in our life and how we act with other people.

one of the things is just helping them to know that it's not okay and not normal, because if they've been living in a situation where there's a lot of violence around them they think that it's just the way it is, so helping them to see that it's, it's not okay

We're always talking about power in girls group, and why would someone bully? And when we get to the core of bullying, and they're sitting with girls that they don't know or maybe know of from the other school, all of a sudden we're able to suspend judgment and go "Wow, "Jane" is really listening to me and she's really being respectful. I'm not going to listen to so-and-so who said this about her and I'm not going to Facebook, you know, bully her anymore." So I think that's, a part of healthy living is seeing each other for who they are individually without those outside stigmas.

bullying, relational issues between girls, again trying to understand why, you know, they're friends with someone and then the next day they're not friends; a lot of stuff around internet and just a lot of girls coming and saying that they're experiencing bullying,

one of the modules is bullying . . . and we, we talked about bullying, like identified like all the different types of bullying, like and examples of how they might see it play out and they made their own anti-bullying commercials, [laughs] well they, we didn't actually get to tape them or anything, but they kind of acted them out for each other.

It's interesting that we've already experienced that, where we did a group on healthy relationships and someone was able to talk about some experiences she had, and we talked about kind of warning signs and she was able to give advice

Foundations

The promising practices foundational to this skill development and learning/action on healthy living issues most often mentioned by facilitators were:

Relational support/connections - Girls groups provide the opportunity for girls to get help from adults and older girls (mentors), as well as peers.

It wasn't just about the activities, it was also building that connection, building that trust.

So they know my role, they know they can trust me and they know they can come to me

for resources. They know they can call [other facilitator] at any time and she will, you know, honour their confidentiality as well. So my role specifically as a facilitator I help by being a person they can trust and download to.

the last session we had I made a point of saying "Hey [name of girl], I think you're really articulate. I really want you to be there for this session because I know you have important things to say." And when they get that kind of validation and encouragement, which often they aren't necessarily getting from other people, you see their back straighten up a little, they, it enhances their pride and their belief in themselves

Our program is a mentorship program, so having that role of older girls mentoring younger girls enables us to go through training and then all sorts of different activities that bring many age females together, which is also a really empowering tool because the older girls want to set an example and be amazing people, and so they shake off some of their maybe more shameful [laughs] parts, and are just very empowered, strong women to role model the younger ones, and they don't want to be seen as bullies or judgmental, so they really let go of some of that stuff, so that's really cool.

Relational support with a trusted adult helps girls connect with their parents, help out their siblings, and support each other

Yeah, I mean some of them have talked about how they've helped a friend or a sister, so they've taken information to someone else, and helped them. I know we've had a couple girls who've reported back that they, you know, "Oh, I told my sister this information and she broke up with her boyfriend," or something like that.

They don't know how to negotiate because they're scared. But then back when we were trying to teach them, negotiate with your parents, build the trust with your parents and then go from there, and always have the communication line open

you also have girls who are coming here because they have nowhere else to go where they feel safe in the school, and maybe they don't have much of a social network and are feeling really lonely and isolated and are drawn to things like this because of that.

They're building friendships that they never felt before.

Gender specific space – Having the chance to meet as girls, helps girls develop their ideas about gender socialization, and creates opportunities for resistance to gender and racial stereotypes and gendered role limitations.

So I think looking at gender stereotypes, looking at how, you know, socialization of girls is different, girls are represented differently in the media, all of that kind of stuff are really important conversations that, that they start to begin to think about how their experiences differ and how girls are treated differently, talking a lot about power and the girls really get that

we also wanted to unite young women, we wanted to unite the whole political atmosphere of the Somali community within itself

But when you have a girls club or a space that is just for girls, they're much more likely to share their viewpoints and to take on leadership roles in the space, and that, that's definitely a benefit. But I also think it really helps them with their sense of confidence in themselves and their ability to make decisions for themselves, and the importance of

them receiving respect, that's something that we definitely foster and over long periods you can see that grow and change for them.

Participatory programming – The empowerment that comes from girls determining the topics for discussions and guiding the selection of activities was seen as critical:

but I mean we kind of, you know, ask intermittently throughout the program like what, you know, what are you liking, like what can we do differently and those kind of things too, so. It gives a lot of opportunity for their input, which I think is important for, you know, since the goal is kind of to empower them to like make healthy choices in their lives. It, you know, making their own decisions is an important component of that! [laughs]

the biggest thing we do is we get their input, so we value you know their opinions, and we don't assume that they want to do yoga, that they want to Zumba.

we have option days where we can sit down as a group and discuss what it is that they're interested in, and I think that by valuing their opinion and integrating it into the programming is quite meaningful and you know, that was one of the reasons I wanted to get them involved in the study was to show them that, you know, your experiences, people are interested and people want to hear about how you feel about, you know, being in a girls group and . . .

that their opinion matters, and that their opinion is valued and that what it is that they want to spend their time doing is what, you know, we want to, to provide for them. So instead of coming in as an authoritative expert and imposing what I think would be fun or what I think would be important, you know. And also it gives them more ownership or more, more sort of motivation and more intrinsic motivation to want to come out to the group if they feel as if they, they are part of the sort of planning process

Multi-component - The groups' facilitators worked diligently to create diversity in the activities. The group facilitators valued the **workshops** as a way to engage girls in a fun way. Workshop components referenced were: guest speakers, games, videos, icebreakers, and cooking classes.

Developing interest in physical activities and sport was a program goal. **Physical activities** mentioned were: physical games, self-defense workshops, basketball, exercise, dance and skating. **Collective community action** and event planning activities (for pizza making party, regional forum, an environmental program and job talks) were mentioned.

Expressive arts were utilized frequently: theatre games, sharing photographs, video production, writing/journals, songs, mock commercials, dance, decorating the space, drawing, doing collages, making masks and other art and craft activities. **Field trips** such as restaurant nights, museum visits, library trips, and camping were mentioned.

Discussion

Analysis of the focus groups with girls, mentors and facilitators reveals that the girls' groups align with the best practices identified in the literature review. Best practices include: facilitate skill building; be gender-specific; be participatory, girl-driven; enhance social connections; build self esteem; incorporate multi-component/faceted; be culturally

safe/appropriate; be strengths-based/asset-based; be empowerment-oriented/voice-centred. The girls' groups facilitated skill building; girls commented on improvements in their communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving through engagement in the groups. Girls' groups were gender-specific and participatory; providing a girls-only space and having girls drive the discussions and topics covered contributed to girls' ability to comfortably share and connect with others, and enabled girls to develop their voices. Girls frequently spoke about the importance of the groups for enhancing their social connections by building friendships with other girls, and with older peers, facilitators and family members. Many girls spoke about improvements in self-esteem after participating in the group; some girls commented that they felt proud about being a girl, and were more self-confident and enabled to resist peer pressures. The girls groups were multi-component in nature, focusing on diverse topics, ranging from physical activity and diet to body image, bullying and peer pressure. The groups also utilized multiple formats, including discussion sessions, peer mentoring, role playing, physical activities and field trips. The groups were designed to be culturally sensitive and relevant. In particular, one group of Somali girls and one of new immigrant girls who were interviewed spoke about navigating cultural norms and expectations including ideals of beauty and family pressures. Finally, the groups honoured girls' strengths and voices, valuing their knowledge in determining discussion topics, and providing a safe space for girls to freely discuss the key issues and concerns in their lives.

In assessing the impact of these girls' groups, the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. Although sessions were not limited to specific health risks or topics, the focus on empowering girls enhances the protective factors associated with health risks such as substance use, unhealthy relationships, unhealthy weight, and physical inactivity and related health concerns for youth. By providing a safe, non-judgemental space where girls can create connections with peers, mentors and facilitators, and work through the problems and concerns they are encountering, girls expressed that they felt more confident and had more skills to make decisions about their health and deal with other challenges in life.

While the content of individual groups varies based on local context, program model, and issues identified as important and relevant by girls, all of the programs reviewed included components on body image, gender-based violence prevention, and physical activity. The program manual *Amplify: Designing Spaces & Programs for Girls* developed by the Girls Action Foundation includes modules specific to Body Image & Self-esteem, Healthy Relationships, Safer Sex, Sexuality, and Violence Prevention and these issues are addressed to some extent by all affiliated groups. These topics are areas of strength for girls' groups as the approaches used build upon traditional health promotion information and strategies and add components such as critical thinking, empowerment, and media literacy.

While issues such as diet, obesity, heart health, and salt intake were rarely addressed directly in the groups, most groups incorporated a combination of activities based on discussion, creativity, and physical activity which allowed facilitators to address these issues through discussion as they arose and through role-modeling. The development of additional backgrounders or modules on these topics may provide facilitators with additional tools for addressing these topics.

Tobacco use/prevention was not identified as a discussion topic in the girls' groups. However, girls and facilitators did comment that they discussed peer pressure more broadly. Some girls commented that through their participation in the girls' groups they

began to understand that they don't need to smoke or drink in order to have friends and fit in at school. Of the 40 focus group participants who completed the Demographic Questionnaire, 20% (n=8) responded "yes" to the question "Do you drink alcohol?", while 18% (n=7) responded "yes" to the question "Do you smoke cigarettes?" (The answers may reflect current or past behaviours). Girls' groups may indirectly impact health behaviours like the prevention of tobacco uptake and smoking reduction, by improving girls' ability to recognize and resist peer pressure, and building connections to peers who don't smoke and learning other avenues for stress reduction. Many of the key outcomes discussed during the focus groups, such as improvement in self-esteem, relationship building, and critical thinking skills function to increase girls' resiliency and enable them to make more informed choices about their health.

Overall, girls' groups have built on and extended effective practices in promoting healthy living while simultaneously addressing the social and political issues that their members face. While most groups focus on a handful of key healthy living topics, the emphasis on skill-building, strengthening of social connections, and empowerment provides girls with the opportunities to learn about issues that are relevant to them, apply the tools they acquire into practice with the support of others, and provide a foundation for further exploration of concepts of healthy living. As girls' groups continue to expand and evolve, there are opportunities to make explicit certain aspects of health promotion. This may be done through the application of key prevention and health promotion lenses (see examples in table below).

Prevention and health promotion lenses	Prevention using an empowerment framework
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Resiliency ■ Relational ■ Developmental ■ Empowerment oriented ■ Harm-reduction oriented ■ Trauma-informed ■ Culturally informed/safe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide fun activities to increase girls' awareness of, and ability to address issues that impact their lives and communities ■ Build critical thinking skills ■ Build communications skills, self-awareness and self-esteem ■ Encourage girls to say what they want to change in their community, and support them to take action ■ Amplify girls' abilities to turn their experiences and skills into community action and leadership ■ Connect girls to mentors and role models
Health promotion frameworks based on best practices	Girls Action Foundation. (2009). <i>Amplify toolkit: Designing spaces and programs for girls</i> . Montreal, PQ.

Girls' groups can offer an effective model for gender-specific health promotion. If girls' groups, such as those affiliated with the Girls Action Foundation, are supported in further expanding and refining their work through the utilization of health promotion best practices frameworks, it may be possible to measure healthy living outcomes as a product of

these groups. In turn, health promotion agencies may benefit from more closely examining models of engagement used in these girls' groups as a possible strategy for extending the reach of other health promotion efforts.

Limitations

There were some limitations in this study that define its results. Perspectives of study participants were gathered and compared to practices found to promote positive outcomes as described by other research on girls' groups and health promotion programming related to healthy living issues. Therefore, our results do not define new best/ promising practices or systematically confirm the quality of the practices defined in the literature.

Second, participants were limited to those who were current or former members of Girls Action Foundation affiliate groups only. Not all eligible affiliate groups chose to participate in the study or were in session during the timeframe of the study. As such the study sample is smaller than anticipated. Furthermore, not all the groups invited by the Girls Action Foundation that indicated their interest in the study involved girls who met the requisite age eligibility criterion of 13-15 years, some, in fact, involved girls of up to 18 years of age.

Third, affiliate group programs were not uniform in their design, but adapted the Girls Action Foundation framework and activities into their programs to fit diverse local needs. Moreover, some groups were time-based and only enrolled new groups at the beginning of a new cycle, while other groups were on-going and open to new enrolment at any time. Therefore, this study is not an evaluation of girls' groups in general or of any Girls Action Foundation programs in particular.

Lastly, although the data reflects girls' current and past experiences with participation in girls' empowerment groups, it does not provide a measure of before-and-after outcomes regarding girls' participation in all-girls groups. Therefore, this study is not a measurement of behaviour change, but a description of the feelings, thoughts and opinions of girls.

Summary

Girls' groups such as those affiliated with the Girls Action Foundation offer participants the opportunity to address healthy living concerns such as physical activity, violence prevention, and substance use as well as support empowerment, social justice, and skill-building. Through an analysis of grey and academic literature, nine promising practices in health promotion with girls were identified during this project. These promising practices align with both the principles and objectives of girls' group programming and the findings of focus groups and interviews with girls, mentors and facilitators on what girls' say they get out of these groups.

Overall, girls' groups have built on and extended effective practices in promoting healthy living while simultaneously addressing the social and political issues that their members face. While many groups directly address healthy living topics, others indirectly support healthy living by enhancing the protective factors associated with health risks such as substance use, unhealthy relationships, unhealthy weight, and physical inactivity. As girls' groups continue to expand and evolve, there are opportunities to include healthy living goals as part of a girl-centred model of health promotion.

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Appendix 1–Research Questions: Girls’ Perspectives on Girls’ Groups and Healthy Living Project

Questions for Girls’ Focus Groups (girls age 13-15)

1. Can you tell me a bit about what made you decide to come to this group?
Prompts:
Was it because it was all-girls’ space, and if so, can you talk about the need for all-girls’ space?
Was it because you wanted the opportunity to talk about issues, and if so what were those issues: bullying? sexuality? self-esteem . . . ?
2. Can you tell me about what kinds of topics have you discussed, or what activities or actions have you done as a group? Can you talk a bit about what you have gotten out of these discussions and activities, or what you like about the group so far?
Prompts:
Do you think you do things differently now that you have been in the group? What has been the best thing about participating? Why do you still keep coming to the group?
Let’s talk the connections you’ve made in the group: did you know these girls before? What do you like about hanging out with this particular group of girls?
3. Can you talk about what more you would like to get from participating in the group? What would make the group even better, what activities would you like to do in the future, what other topics would you like to have the group deal with?
Prompts:
Would you like to have the opportunity to talk more about topics that have already been covered, and if so which ones?
Beyond talking about issues, are there skills you would like to learn, or actions you would like the group to take?
4. Does the group help you with choices about things like smoking, drinking and having sex, and if so, how?
Prompt:
Do you ever talk in the group about the pressures to do these things?
What have you learned about the health impacts of using alcohol and tobacco on girls’ bodies?
5. In your group, what have you learned about healthy and unhealthy relationships?
Prompt:
Have you talked at all about bullying? Or other kinds of violence?
Is there anything you have learned in the group that has helped empower you about violence and relationships?
6. We know that girls normally fill out in shape at puberty, and at the same time there is a tremendous amount of pressure on girls to be thin in our society. Has there been any discussion or activity in the group that has helped you deal with that?

Any other points you want to make about being a part of a girls group?

Questions for Interviews with Girls (16-18)

1. What attracted you to participate in a girls' group when you were younger?
Prompts:
Was it because it was all girls' space, and if so, can you talk about the need for all-girls' space? Was it because you wanted the opportunity to talk about issues, and, if so, what were those issues: bullying? sexuality? self-esteem ... ?
2. Looking back, can you tell me about what group topics, activities, actions or connections stood out for you as particularly helpful? Do you think you do things differently now due to your participation in those discussions or activities, or because of the connections with other girls in the group?
Prompts:
What was the best thing about participating?
Let's talk the connections you've made in the group: are you still connected with any of the girls from that group?
3. Now that you are older and have had more experience, can you think of anything that might make girls group even more helpful, what focus, or activities, or actions or topics might be helpful to include?
Prompts:
Can you give me an example of a situation where you applied what you learned in a girls group, or an area where you think girls need more skills?
4. Did the group help you with choices about things like smoking, drinking and having sex, and if so, how?
Prompts:
Did you ever talk in the group about the pressures to do these things?
What did you learn about the health impacts of using alcohol and tobacco on girls' bodies?
5. In your past group, what did you learn about healthy and unhealthy relationships?
Prompts:
Did you talk at all about bullying or other kinds of violence against girls in the group and if so, how did that work?
Is there anything you have learned in the group that has helped empower you about violence and relationships?
6. How are you dealing with the challenges which face most young women around having a healthy body and a positive body image?
Prompt:
Did the girls' group have any influence on how you navigate this territory of body image, and if so how?

Kickaction Online Question

Facebook, blogs and twitter, no doubt about it, we live in a super-connected world. However, young women are making the web their own and creating girl-only online spaces to connect, be healthy and speak up!

Kickaction is teaming up with the BC Centre of Excellence for Women's Health to find out how young women are using the web and we want to hear from YOU!

As a young woman, what do you get out of participating in all-girl online spaces, like Kickaction?

How do you think Kickaction could improve to be a better tool for young women?

Questions for Interviews with Group Facilitators

1. What do you see as the most important contribution that girls' groups make?
2. What group topics, activities, actions stand out for you as particularly helpful for the girls you work with?
Prompt:
Do you have any examples where girls have indicated that they do things differently, due to participation in those discussions or activities or because of the connections with other girls in the group?
3. In an ideal world, what would you be able to offer in a girls group that you are not able to at this point?
Prompt:
Would the focus, or activities, or actions or topics you cover be different in way? What else would be useful?
4. As well as learning about the overall benefits of girls groups, we are interested in how they assist girls with healthy living goals. Do you see that the group you facilitate helps girls with choices about things like smoking, drinking and having sex, and if so, how?
Prompts:
Did they ever talk in the group about the pressures to do these things?
Do you cover the health impacts of using alcohol and tobacco on girls bodies, and if so, what are the challenges and benefits of doing this?
5. How do you help girls to face and cope with violence in their lives?
Prompts:
Did you talk at all about bullying or other kinds of violence against girls in the group, and if so, how does that work?
Do girls tell you about how the group has helped them face harassment, bullying, assault or other violence in their lives?

6. What importance does discussion or activities about body image have in your group? How do you help girls navigate that territory?

Prompts:

What do you think about the government's concern about increasing levels of obesity on the part of Canadians?

How do you think girls groups might address issues like obesity, if at all?

Appendix 2–Demographic Questionnaire

Date _____ Code _____

Girls' Perspectives on Girls' Groups Project

A Bit about Me

To help us summarize who has participated in this study please provide the following information. Note: You do not need to provide your name, and the answers from any one group will NOT be identified.

COMMUNITY

What city or town do you live in? _____

AGE

How old are you? ____

WHO DO YOU LIVE WITH? *(Check all that apply)*

- With birth parent(s): ____
- With another relative: ____
- With foster or adoptive parents: ____

IS YOUR FIRST LANGUAGE?

- **English** ____
- **French** ____
- **Other** ____

DO YOU IDENTIFY AS? *(Check all that apply)*

White ____

Aboriginal ____

Black or African Canadian ____

Asian or South Asian ____

Other visible minority (please describe) _____

DO YOU DRINK ALCOHOL? Yes ____ No ____

DO YOU SMOKE CIGARETTES? Yes ____ No ____

Thanks for providing this confidential information