

**Developing Friendships and Peer Relationships:  
Building Social Support with the Girls Circle Program.**

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*"Tell me your friends, and I'll tell you who you are."*

*Assyrian Proverb*

Female friendships are one of the most important dimensions of a girl's life, and their influence on her well being may be surpassed only by family relationships in her growth toward adulthood. Teachers, school counselors, and parents know only too well the consuming and complex emotional struggles girls face on a daily basis on playgrounds, in hallways, during class, on the phones and chatrooms. Girls' friendships are the subject of much media attention recently, with major motion pictures such as *Thirteen* (2003), *Mean Girls* (2004), and *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005) grossing between \$4 million and \$87 million dollars in revenue (Nash, 2005). These movies offer varied perspectives and experiences about the significant role that female peer relationships play, negatively and positively, in early adolescent and adolescent development. National bestsellers *Odd Girls Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (Simmons, 2002) and *Queen Bees and Wannabees: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends & Other Realities of Adolescence*, (Wiseman, 2003) as well as the book *Girlfighting, Betrayal and Rejection Among Girls* (Brown, 2003) address various gender-specific social behaviors and experiences that are both painful and common to female peer relationships throughout childhood and adolescent years. While perspectives vary on the factors that influence girls' peer relationships, there is agreement among writers, scholars, teachers, service providers and researchers that girls' friendships are critical in the developing adolescent's identity, behaviors, and overall health. Such stories and studies highlighting girls' peer relationships provide opportunity to consider the common problems of female friendships through a broad socio-cultural and gender lens, shifting the focus away from solely an individualistic approach.

Of particular interest in recent years has been relational aggression among girls, that which occurs physically, which is less common but increasing, and that which occurs covertly. Cultural attention to girls' mean behaviors portrays a dark side of female peer relationships, in which girls use relationships as the vehicle with which to express anger or power through rumors, exclusion, secrets, or gossip. Statistics indicate a rapid increase in female arrests for assault incidents in both Canada and the United States during the last decades, including assaults between females (Odgers & Moretti, 2002). However, the majority of girls use relational tactics both verbal and nonverbal to express anger or seek to gain social power (Olweus, 1993). From a socio-cultural point of view, most girls' aggressive behaviors may be covert because an obvious or direct expression of anger does not fit with notions of acceptability or attractiveness for girls: it's not nice. In addition, female oppression within western society forces girls to compete with each other for the few prized positions of popularity which afford status and power within the social settings where girls connect, and in which there is experience of limited access to power. Lyn Mikel Brown argues that girls' anger has been ignored in our society, and that the root source behind relational aggression is a lack of genuine empowerment for girls and young women (Brown, 2003). This empowerment involves a whole set of policies, attitudes, proactive tools and strategies that address gender, culture, race, class, and developmental needs for girls (American Association of University Women, 1994; Benard, 2004; Brown and Gilligan, 1992; Brown, 2003; Girl Scout Research Institute, 2003; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1998; National Council of Research on Women, 1998; Pipher, 1994; United Way of the Bay Area, 2003; Ward, 2000).

The Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) of female development, originally developed by Jean Baker Miller (1991) recognizes relationships as the central organizing feature in girls'

development. For girls, this core component of psychological make-up shapes overall health, so that girls' healthy connections influence all other arenas of individual health (emotional, physical, spiritual, cognitive). Conversely, compromised connections have negative influence in girls' overall health. Theorists Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown have suggested there is a critical need for girls to experience relationships in which they are able to use their voices authentically and without risk of alienation, in order to develop psychological health (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). In light of the cultural context girls live within, whereby according to the National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center (NYVPRC) (2005), at least 30% of youth (over 5.7 million males and females) are experiencing some aspect of bullying, as a target or perpetrator, at any given time, use of authentic voice in peer relationships is most likely very difficult. This number does not include those youth who are actively witnessing the bullying.

In a study of students at junior high and high schools in the Midwest, 88% of students reported observing bullying at school (Hoover et al., 1992). The difficulty in being real with one's peers is especially true at early adolescence, when statistics indicate higher incidents of bullying behavior (NYVPRC, 2005), and when the developmental and social-emotional pressures dictate a pressure for sameness amongst peers. These transitional years, in turn, shape girls' identities and peer relationship patterns as they proceed through adolescence. In social climates that discourage and interfere with natural self-expression within empathic and mutually supportive relationships, girls' connections weaken. In *Meeting at the Crossroads*, Brown & Gilligan explain that a "crisis of connection" ensues, in which girls must either forego expression of self and risk alienation from their own experiences and knowledge, or, if they speak their true minds, risk alienation and rejection from peers. The need to belong generally trumps the

authentic voice where emotional safety has not been established, in effect short circuiting girls' use of their full range of internal resources (knowledge, feelings, experiences, ideas).

Key questions facing educators, practitioners, and researchers are these: if girls' overall healthy development is indeed dependent on healthy connections with others, yet girls' peer relationships present significant forces of aggression and rejection, how can the resilient, pro-social influences of girls' friendships grow? What inherent strengths and capacities exist intrapersonally and interpersonally with girls that can counter hurtful interactions? How can professionals and concerned adults foster these strengths, and through what structures? If girls' development is inherently and predominantly attuned to maintaining connections, is it possible to re-define relational aggression as a learned but inadequate attempt at finding meaningful connection? While some girls are players in the cycles of aggressive behaviors, others find themselves outside of the security that peer relationships offer due to ineffective social skills. Still other girls are more moderately able to enjoy close and rewarding friendships. Can a prosocial, relationship-focused support structure for girls enhance developmental tendencies toward connection and provide sufficient anchoring for girls within positive peer connections as a pathway toward health?

This chapter presents an approach that aims to address these questions - Girls Circle, a gender-specific, relational-cultural empowerment model for girls' healthy development within a peer support group. First, a glimpse at current research will identify early adolescent and adolescent females' needs for growth promoting, positive relationship-based experiences with peers. Strengths, gaps, and differences, of other models will be identified. Next, the chapter will present the Girls Circle philosophy and the core components that foster girls' healthy relationships: the basic format of a Girls Circle; specific curricula that target peer friendship; and

facilitator methods. Outcomes revealing significant positive changes for girls in self-efficacy, perceived body image, and perceived social connection will follow. Examples of activities and experiences are included throughout the chapter, as well as girls and facilitators' reflective statements about Girls Circle. Essential considerations for programmatic success will be mentioned. Implications for future development of the model, as well as broader implications based on the Relational-Cultural theory of female development will be suggested.

### ***Peer Support: A Key Determinant in Girls' Health***

Friendships have both protective and risk-promoting factors (Benard, 2004; Dekovic, 1999; Maxwell, 2002; Pleydon & Schner, 2001; Storch, Masia-Warner, & Brassard, 2003). When students in middle school do not experience reciprocal friendships, increases in depression and lower academic motivation occur (Wentzel, et al, 2004). Likewise, adolescents who are targets of either overt or relational aggression show greater levels of anxiety and loneliness (Storch, et al., 2003). Feeling safe and comfortable in the environments girls inhabit is the subject of a report issued by Girl Scouts of the United States of America (Girl Scouts Research Institute, 2003). Surveys of girls' self-reports on feelings of safety reveal that "girls define safety in terms of relationships – when they trust the people around them, they feel safe". *Who* girls are with is as important as *where* girls are relating. Girls' biggest worry is being teased by others. Additionally, 45% reported that speaking in class is threatening to their emotional safety. Striking differences were noted between girls' attitudes and experiences – in academic success, ability to concentrate, quality of relationships, belief in their abilities – between girls who feel emotionally and physically safe and those who do not. Girls with less feeling of emotional

safety reported less friends and are slower to trust peers or adults. For teens, feeling safe involves being with friends.

In a study comparing friendships and peer relationships of female juvenile offenders and non-offenders, researchers found: (a) a significant correlation between a deviant peer group and prediction of adolescent female delinquency; and (b) girls in delinquency showed less communication and more perceived peer pressure (Pleydon & Shner, 2001). The study authors suggest that the level of self-disclosure is similar for girls in and out of delinquency, but that there is less inquiry and discussion regarding disclosures among delinquent girls. Finally, they indicate that females are more likely to conform to female peers' behaviors, even when in mixed-gender groups, and argue that interventions for female adolescents in delinquency should focus not only on individual approaches but also address peer group influences in interventions.

Peer support has been shown to have a more significant role than family support for students in middle and later adolescence (Wentzel, 1998). Girls value support from teachers and close friendships (Kilpatrick-Demaray & Kerres-Malecki, 2003). Adolescent girls perceive higher levels of support, and value social support more so than boys, especially once they reach high school. Prosocial behaviors by peers showed moderating abilities on loneliness and social anxiety of students (Storch, et al., 2003). Social support is described as both a buffer against life stressors, as well as a factor acting to promote wellness (Vaux, 1988). Students who are targets of peer victimization are less likely to show negative internal or external impacts when they have a mutual close friend (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, Bukowski, 1999). Peer support influences adolescents' motivation for involvement in talent and sport activities (Patrick, et al, 1999).

### ***Current Programs Aimed at Increasing Positive Connection:***

Espelage and Swearer (2003) provide a comprehensive view of bullying research and peer victimization. They suggest that prevention efforts should incorporate discussions with students related to peer pressures and obstacles to resisting social forces to comply with aggressive or unkind behaviors. Leff, Power, Manz, Costigan & Nabors, (2001) reviewed the following model programs that aim to reduce student bullying behaviors toward peers: Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), Second Step, First Step to Success, Anger Coping Program, and Brain Power Program. Their conclusion was that those programs which did not include relational aspects of bullying were falling short of their target goals. A Second Step, Middle School/Junior High program evaluation revealed significant changes, in that participating students who received the program for two years were less tolerant of aggression, including teasing, in their school communities (Schoiack-Edstrom, Frey, & Beland, (2002). The program did not change exclusionary attitudes or behaviors, however. In a study of self-esteem for early adolescent females participating in a Girl Scouts curriculum, there were no significant increases in self-esteem for girls who participated and girls who did not. Self-esteem was higher for participants in the Girl Scouts curricula, but with increasing age groups, self-esteem was found to decrease (Royse, 1998). Girl Scouts programs have traditionally served to provide socialization, leadership, and life skills experiences for girls in a gender-specific program. While self-esteem changes were nonsignificant, the study measure does not address how the Girl Scout curricula impacts girls' relationships.

Several studies indicate that support groups within communities or schools are effective settings in which to strengthen social connection, self-esteem, and body image (Waggoner, 1999; Laszlo, 2001; Conklin, 2002; Benard, 2004). Further, programs that integrate a cultural

and gender-relevant approach to prevention and intervention have been emerging over the past decade. Hudley (2001) urges researchers to address the challenges of the underserved populations when developing and implementing programs, especially children of color, urban residents, and girls. She suggests researchers consider culture as a primary factor in the health of the communities. This recognition of the significant role of culture is consistent with studies that recognize the inherent resiliency that is tapped when positive ethnic and cultural identity is emphasized (Benard, 2004; Leadbeater, & Way, 1996; Ward, 2000).

One such program, Sisters of Nia: A Cultural Program for African American Girls was evaluated for effectiveness in increasing cultural values and beliefs (Belgrave, Reed, Plybon, Butler, Allison, & Davis, 2004). Relational aggression was reduced for participants in the groups, while positive ethnic identity increased.

Another program, Go Grrrls, was evaluated for its effectiveness in empowering early adolescent girls with developmentally appropriate curricula that included a focus on making and keeping friends and other gender-relevant tasks toward building competencies (LeCroy, 2004). Significant positive increases in peer esteem, common beliefs, and helping endorsements were achieved, though body image and depression levels at post-test were nonsignificant. The researcher suggests that the body image measurement tool may have been insufficient, or possibly the curricula underperformed. The depression results raise questions as to whether depression can be treated successfully in an intervention program, and, if so, what methods might be appropriate for young adolescents. The overall positive results of the Go Grrrls program are encouraging and suggest that prevention programs that are developmentally designed and gender-relevant, with a focus on identity, body image, mood, mastery of life skills, and positive peer relationships are a feasible and important step toward improving girls' health.

Finally, a wellness model of health offered by Hartwig and Myers (2003) approaches girls development from a wholistic, strength model. This program, Wheel of Wellness, is being applied to girls and young women in the juvenile justice system. While presented as an assessment and intervention tool for use with individuals, the Wheel of Wellness incorporates resiliency factors and skills development with a proactive and positive approach, viewing girls and young women as capable of creating balance and developing competencies for successful and healthy lives. The approach is consistent with recommendations that include holistic, developmental and strength-based programs for effective gender-responsive programs for girls as described by Patton and Morgan (2001).

### ***Girls Circle***

The Girls Circle model, a structured support group for girls from 9-18 years, integrates relational theory, resiliency practices, and skills training in a specific format designed to increase positive connection, personal and collective strengths, and competence in girls (Hossfeld, Taormina, 1997). It aims to counteract social and interpersonal forces that impede girls' growth and development by promoting an emotionally safe setting and structure in which girls can develop caring relationships and use authentic voices. It has been utilized in a broad spectrum of prevention and intervention settings with diverse populations and programs serving girls since 1994. Recognized as a *promising approach* by the Office of Juvenile and Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) in 2005, the Girls' Circle is emerging as a gender-specific program with evidence and potential to positively influence the direction of social-emotional development for girls in the United States, Canada, and a growing number of countries around the world.

Girls Circle is based upon the Relational-Cultural model of female psychology, mentioned earlier, which views girls' healthy development as stemming from a core experience of positive and caring relationships with those in her family, peer, culture, and community. When these connections are weakened due to any number of conditions and causes, girls' well being suffers psychologically, socially, and in all areas of girls' growth. Girls Circle views issues related to girls' health risks such as relational deficits, violence prevention, early sexual activity, substance abuse, poor body image, self-doubt, poverty, and other concerns as factors continually affected by and influencing connections with others, especially primary relationships such as family, peers, and school communities. Within the relational-cultural theory, the Girls' Circle model aims to increase protective factors and reduce risk factors in adolescent girls, as defined by resiliency researchers such as Benard (2004). Such hallmarks of resiliency development in youth are high expectations, caring and support, and meaningful participation within their communities. To this end, a key component in the model is the council type format, with one group member speaking at a time, and with the expectation of attentive listening from other participants. This form of communication intends to increase empathy skills on the part of the listeners, as well as a mutual empathic understanding in the whole group. From the relational perspective, "the deepest sense of one's being is continuously formed in connection with others and is inextricably tied to relational movement. The primary feature, rather than structure marked by separateness and autonomy, is increasing empathic responsiveness in the context of interpersonal mutuality" (Jordan, 1997). Empathic connection is an integral aim of the Girls Circle model, to increase girls' psychological health in it's entirety, including self-efficacy,

social support, and body image (Steese, Dollette, Phillips, Matthews, Hossfeld, Taormina, 2005).

Girls Circles are 1.5 – 2 hour sessions, held on a weekly or biweekly basis, for 8 to 12 weeks minimum, in settings such as after school programs, academic tutorial periods, residential treatment group homes, recreational programs, mentoring organizations, and in individual homes and communities. Where time restrictions exist, Girls Circles can be adapted to fit a one hour period. Each session, a group of girls of similar age and development meet with a facilitator. During this time, the girls take turns talking and listening to one another respectfully about their concerns and interests. The girls express themselves further through creative or focused activities such as role playing, drama, journaling, poetry, drama, dance, drawing, collage, clay, and so on. Gender specific themes and topics are introduced which relate to the girls' lives, such as being a girl, trusting ourselves, friendships, body image, goals, sexuality, drugs, alcohol, tobacco, competition, and decision-making. Girls' positive relationships and empathic connections are fostered in the Girls Circle model through three interacting components: the six-step Basic Circle format, the gender- relevant curricula, and the facilitator's methodology.

**Basic Circle Format:** There are *six steps* within the Girls Circle format, each session. These are: Opening Ritual, Theme Introduction, Check In, Activity, Sharing of Activity, and Closing Ritual. These essential components are described below, and see Table 1-A, pg. 40.

**Opening Ritual:** a simple action that marks the beginning of the circle and fosters a special tone, distinguishing this time and place from others in a girls' daily life. *Examples: lighting a candle, making a wish, reading of a quote or passage, listening to specific song.*

**Theme Introduction:** a short description of the focus of the session activity and discussion.

*Examples: Being Included or Excluded, Best Friends and Boyfriends, or All About Blame.*

**Check-In:** Using council format based on Native American traditions, Check In is the phase of the session during which girls have the opportunity to “check in” one at a time with the other members of the circle, to share experiences, feelings, or ideas. Council format is an ancient practice that places each member of the circle on an equal basis and in direct relationship with each other person. This step may be time limited so that there is sufficient time for all girls to check in, and so that other planned activities can take place. However, Check In is a central aspect of the Girls Circle. Girls are able to voice concerns that may be of great importance to them. The facilitator’s discretion, together with group responses, can help guide the length of time available for check in. Should a girl have a serious matter to discuss, the time can be adjusted to allow for full expression and support. Participants can choose the subject they wish to share, and/or complete an unfinished sentence related to the theme of the day. Examples: feelings about the theme; one “high” and “low” point of the week; using a scale of 1 – 10 to describe their mood; something that happened at schools, a success or a disappointment, and so on. During Check-In, there is no cross talk, and a talking piece such as a talking stick or stuffed animal is employed. Once a speaker has checked in with the group, she passes the talking piece to the person on her left, in clockwise order. The practice within the group is of attentive listening during this time. When other girls have comments or feedback about a particular participant’s experiences, they wait until their own check in time to share. Depending on time availability, the talking piece can continue to travel around the circle when members have additional reflections to state. Feedback, however, is provided only if a speaker requests or agrees to such a response, and participants are encouraged to speak from their own experience, if they have a statement to make that they believe may be helpful to another participant. In this way, experience, rather than advice is generally offered.

**Activity:** The activity portion of the circle allows girls to explore and express their experiences and beliefs through a variety of verbal, non-verbal, creative, and experiential mediums. Activities ideally combine both verbal and non-verbal components, in order to invite girls with a wide variety of learning styles to engage in critical thinking processes and to connect their own experiences with the topic of the session. Activities can be broadly divided into two categories, (a) verbal and (b) non-verbal or creative.

**(a) Verbal activities:** The verbal portion of an activity period is generally a guided discussion, typically placed before a creative or experiential activity. Discussions tend to be left-brain or linear-oriented in style. In settings that have *less than* 1.5 hours for the full circle, facilitators often rotate verbal and creative activities each week, so that there is a time dedicated to discussion as well as a time dedicated to creativity. The guided discussion serves to establish relevance of the topic, explore general ideas and experiences about that topic, and identify girls' concerns and needs. An example of a verbal activity is a guided discussion about Anger and Girls' Relationships. In this discussion, the facilitator asks questions to invite girls to talk about their observations and experiences about how girls show their anger to one another, and what the goals, behaviors, and outcomes might be. Additionally, the discussion might invite girls to talk about the social and cultural messages about anger and females, practices that may backfire on girls, and tools that are most helpful when girls want to manage a conflict in such a way that they feel confident, capable, and mature. The purpose of the activity is to hear the girls' experiences, and to encourage peer exchange, in order for the girls to develop their own best strategies, rather than to become passively "educated" by the facilitator as to best practices. Engagement and involvement are the critical goals, because the resiliency-based philosophy in practice here is that

the girls have the knowledge and wisdom inside them, in most instances, to resolve problems, given a listening and respectful environment that promotes such thinking and articulation.

An alternative verbal activity might be a paired activity, where girls join with a partner, discuss a topic together for varying lengths of time, then rotate partners, and discuss a related topic with another participant. Following multiple partner pair-shares, the whole group reconvenes to debrief the experience, find commonalities, raise ideas, or identify strategies for common problems.

Verbal activities offer several benefits to girls' groups. Most girls show interest in talking, and want to address a variety of social and gender issues. While the council format used during Check In permits a specific time for each girl, verbal activities increase the opportunities for talking and sharing of experiences, and target topics that girls might not raise to the group, or address on their own. Further, the exchanges allow girls to hear a variety of viewpoints that are not necessarily addressed outside of the safety of the circle.

***(b) Non-verbal or creative activities:*** Creative activities put girls in touch with their inner experiences. Frequently, these approaches are right-brain oriented activities that utilize imagery, perception, impression, space, color, imagination, or rhythm for expression. Facilitators select creative activities to enhance the exploration of the session's theme, based on the interests of the group, or follow the curricula provided using the Girls Circle Theme and Activity Guides (see pgs. 41-43). In the "Friendship" Theme Kit, for instance, one theme is "Feuds, Followers, and Fairness", in which the associated activity involves dividing girls up into small teams, providing a scenario related to peer conflict, and challenging each team to develop a resolution strategy that demonstrates respect, empathy, and fairness. Each team then performs that strategy to the whole group. The active practice of resolving a peer conflict in such a way becomes an important

embodied experience for girls, enhancing verbal discussion, so that they might have a more developed option to utilize in real life situations outside of the circle. **Examples of creative activities include:** *role-play, mime, video creation, collage, poetry, storytelling, murals, yoga, mask making, beading, songwriting, listening to music, guided visualizations, exchanging facials, poster-making, creating traditional meals, or creating affirmation mobiles.* **Examples of themes relevant to girls' friendships include:** *Passive, Aggressive or Assertive Response Styles; Stereotypes; Inclusion/Exclusion, Cliques; Self-Care; Cultural Clashes; Handling Stress; Sisterhood; Heroines; Getting Along with Others; Give and Take in Relationships; Building Trust; Relationship Styles.*

**Sharing of Activity:** After the activity, girls reconvene in a circle and are invited to share their experience of the activity. Since the activities are designed to promote expression and learning about a particular theme, reflection and discussion can help girls become aware of perceptions, behaviors, alternative options, or simply to identify feelings around the theme. This sharing period also increases group member's empathic capacities and social connections, as they listen to one another and find differences and similarities. Depending on the type of activity that occurs, the Sharing of Activity might be a brief group discussion, in which the facilitator asks open-ended, thoughtful questions, *or*, a time to go around the circle using the council format, as in the Check In step of the format. For example, after a role play activity such as peer conflict scenarios described above, a guided group discussion may be more useful, while following a more individually-oriented activity such a personal collage, going around the circle might be most appropriate. The important factor for the facilitator is to give a clear opportunity for every girl to participate, including those who might shy away from doing so. Generally, participants in these circles have varying levels of comfort or discomfort in self-disclosure. Girls are welcome

to share at their own pace. Facilitators and group members may allow for girls to pass if they choose provided that the “pass” option is not used as a way to refuse participation (see Creating Group Guidelines). With increased experience in the consistent format of the circle, participants generally increase their self-disclosure during this process, taking risks in revealing more and more of themselves. In part because of this truth-telling, girls begin to develop voice, deepen their bonds to one another, experience safety, and build trust within the circle.

**Closing Ritual:** The closing ritual is a short, simple, and important action that marks the completion of the session, recognizes the importance of the process that has occurred, and provides a positive tone to the group members as they transition out from the circle session. It unites members together for a final moment to bring awareness to their group as a whole, and offers appreciation and respect to each. The closing ritual reinforces emotional safety for the girls, in effect anchoring the importance of their shared words and creative expressions within the group. This action provides closure, and assists girls in feeling comfortable with what has occurred in circle, and moving forward. For some groups, the opening and closing ritual are identical, while for others, distinct. Examples: *Ring and listening to the tone of a bell, holding hands and “passing the pulse” around the circle, each girl stating one positive affirmation or statement about herself or a compliment or hope for the girl on her left, a group statement of purpose, or a theme song.*

The Basic Circle format as described above can be implemented and adapted in a full range of settings where girls convene. The six steps create a simple structure that supports the group experience with a balance of talking, listening, activity, time for spontaneous expression as well as focused dialogue or exploration. Although the time allotment for each step may need to be adjusted according to the setting and the girls’ developmental stages, (younger girls might

appreciate shorter Check In time and lengthier Activity time while older girls might want the reverse) the model promotes adherence to the six steps as much as possible. Consistent and predictable application of the format reduces girls' anxiety and increases their security and sense of emotional safety in the circle, which, in turn, invites genuine expression.

### **Gender-Relevant Curricula:**

The Girls Circle curricula address girls' friendship development in several of the nine separate Theme and Activity Facilitator Guides. Three of the nine guides address peer relationships comprehensively and directly. These are: "Friendship", for ages 9 – 14, "Honoring Our Diversity", for ages 11 – 18, and "Relationships", for 14 – 18 year olds. Additionally, most of the additional six guides include one or more units that address peer relationships themes, while the overall content delves more specifically into other arenas of girls' lives, such as decision making about drugs, alcohol, and sexuality, identity as a female, and a specific guide dedicated to court-involved girls. "Honoring Our Diversity" is a twelve week guide that assumes girls' need for opportunities to break down social, emotional, cultural, and class-based barriers toward peer understanding and peer relationships. It provides activities to engage girls in learning more about their own and their peers' cultural, social, and family backgrounds and underscores the powerful role that ethnic, cultural, and family experiences play in shaping girls' identities. Unique and common challenges and strengths are identified, and ultimately, an opportunity to gain understanding that girls have similar needs, and that unity amongst female peers can offer an empowering alternative to the divisive, competitive climate that prevails in most school communities. The "Relationship" Guide takes the peer relationships to a more mature audience of teen girls. In it, aspects of friendliness and self-care are explored in a rich context of activities that identify and challenge patterns in which girls blame one another, hold pre-conceived notions

and assumptions about each other, and label and box each other into roles, all of which impede empathic connection. The Relationship Guide brings out these patterns, offers playful yet critical examination of these practices, and brings new and respectful patterns of relationship into practice through ceremonial rituals such as the ancient eastern practice of a tea ceremony. Experiences such as this one demonstrate a way of relating toward one another based in practices of respect, kindness, and empathy and consistent with the Girls Circle philosophy. For the reader's view of a session by session Girls Circle experience, an in-depth view of the "Friendship" Guide follows.

The "Friendship" Theme and Activity Guide is an eight week plan, and aims to build girls' interpersonal skills while diminishing the power of cliques and exclusionary practices. During pre-adolescence and early adolescence, girls' social behaviors and experiences often seem to mirror the rapid physical and emotional changes of puberty. Close friendships change, as girls become interested in exploring new styles, attitudes, friends, and behaviors. Trusted relationships shift, and a heightened sense of uncertainty, anxiety, and self-consciousness emerges as girls' developmental tasks center around peer acceptance. Frequently, secrets and whispers, shared glances, passed notes, playground territories, gossip, rumors, name calling and teasing become common practices amongst 4<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls.

Following initial icebreakers, the "Friendship" Guide requires the group to begin the circle experience by setting up group agreements, or guidelines, that create emotional safety in the group. The principles of respect, kindness, and honesty are integral to these guidelines. The "Friendship" Guide encourages a tone of friendliness as an inherent expectation of the group experience. Once this fundamental expectation is established, the Guide moves on through various weekly themes and activities. In week two, girls are encouraged to look inward, to

define the qualities they recognize within themselves. This activity asks girls to speak to their strengths, literally, and to make a flower with petals that display a number of her own attributes. Such an activity challenges the cultural norm that one should not speak positively about herself. In fact, girls typically respond initially to this exercise by saying “I don’t know”, “I don’t have any”, or “this is weird, you’re not supposed to brag”. It is important for girls to understand the distinction between bragging and recognizing or acknowledging one’s strengths, and this activity increases girls’ capacity. The activity also demonstrates the underlying philosophy, that every girl has strengths and uniqueness. Another purpose for girls’ identifying their strengths is to increase girls’ attention to their own views and perceptions, to counter the exaggerated importance of the external world from which girls attempt to gain self worth.

Next, girls address the problem with cliques by talking and listening to one another in pairs, together with girls with whom they don’t typically mix. Facilitators find random methods to assign partners, and girls tell each other stories about their own experiences with inclusion and exclusion. The task requires girls to talk to each other, bypassing the strict covert rules about who talks with whom. It levels the playing field, and assumes that all girls have some experiences in common, inviting understanding and promoting empathy. Further, girls’ *own* stories become their bridges to more genuine connection, in contrast to the common basis for connection amongst school girls of telling stories about *other* girls. Following the paired sharing, the group reconvenes to identify individual and group observations from the experience. A guided discussion invites girls to consider the motivations of exclusionary behaviors, the impact of them on girls’ sense of self, and an exploration of strategies that girls can employ to avoid exclusion and be more inclusive with one another.

The fourth session addresses girls' diverse family experiences, recognizing differences and similarities as important aspects of developing positive peer relationships. Identifying and describing the cultural and familial influences that shape their lives, girls begin to fill in the blanks for one another about who they are as individuals. This process assists girls in transcending the pressure to look, act, and be perceived as the same as everyone else. Instead, they are encouraged to reveal traditions and interests particular to themselves. Assumptions by others in the group are challenged as well, when girls learn more about one another. Favorite meals, the meaning of certain names, family treasures, all of these aspects of girls' lives begin to show more of a girls' real life. In the middle school years, the developmental task of identity formation is taking shape. Because of the powerful need for belonging that surges in early adolescence, personal identities often take back stage to collective or group identities. Early adolescents want to belong to a group, and will sacrifice individual leanings for peer group sameness. The "Same and Different" focus of this fourth session permits girls to view themselves more broadly, and because it is expected, girls have permission to show the variety of their experiences.

The fifth session encourages mini-teams of girls to define the qualities and characteristics of a good friend. Each team creates and decorates a poster to identify the characteristics, then all the mini-team posters are glued or taped onto one large mural, and decorated by the whole group. Spokespersons present their team posters, and the whole group debriefs the exercise with guided questions regarding the key aspects of a good friendship, and personal goals regarding these qualities. This session spells out the main message about what really counts to girls in a close friendship relationship. Generally, the stated qualities include honesty, a sense of humor, caring about the other person, not going behind their back, and doing things together.

Facilitators can have the girls read or state the key points, and can invite the girls to notice features that *are not* listed as important aspects of friendship, such as “beautiful clothes, popular, gets good grades”. This stated observation can increase girls’ recognition of *what they themselves value most*, contrary to what they perceive to be of value to others.

The sixth week, “Feuds, Followers, and Fairness”, presents girls with a set of tools to address and to successfully manage difficult peer relationship conflicts. Common problem scenarios are provided, or girls can offer their own problematic scenarios for use in the group. One scenario, for example, states:

*“You learn that one friend is mad at another. Both friends seem to want you to take their side. One of them tells you to stop including the other. You want to be friends with both of them. How?”*

An acronym, “R.E.F”, meaning Respect, Empathy, and Fairness, is presented as the criteria girls can use when developing a healthy and effective response to the various peer conflicts that arise. First, girls describe to the group the common reactions and behaviors girls show when situations occur. Then, small teams are once again created randomly and each team develops a two minute role play to demonstrate both the problem scenario and a solution that incorporates the R.E.F. criteria. The teams perform their skits to the whole group, which receives instruction to show appreciation for each team’s performance. Following each skit, a brief discussion invites girls to tell about their feelings and views about the specific methods demonstrated, and their own ideas about resolving the problem. This role play permits girls to go directly into the peer conflict situations they face routinely at school and in extracurricular activities. Because they perceive themselves as “just acting”, girls are willing to try out responses they might otherwise never

attempt. This experimentation allows players to voice and show alternative responses to peers. Frequently, girls need encouragement trying out the “R.E.F.” responses, but once they have done so, marked increase in positive and confident affect appears. The stage becomes a practice zone. Girls can end the activity by identifying a current personal situation and a response they wish to apply in the coming week. Optional videotaping of these skits for additional group review can enhance skill building, as girls witness their own new responses in action.

The seventh session focuses on the whole group’s strengths. This team-building and team-honoring activity recognizes that the group is a powerful group because its members have strengths to share. Sets of index cards or decorative cards identify individual strengths, talents, and gifts. All of these cards are ceremoniously joined with string, becoming a chain, and hung up in the room to show the collective strengths of the group. This chain visually demonstrates the uniqueness and unity of the group, girl to girl, link to link. The facilitator encourages girls to see the wide range of qualities shown on the chain, and to recognize these items as a potential source of help to each girl in the group, as the group’s assets.

The eighth and final session of the “Friendship” Guide is an appreciation ceremony. An activity using colored paper, scissors, markers and pens allows girls to write compliments and appreciations to one another, and these are available to girls to bring home at the end of the circle. Food and beverages can be served while listening to music or sharing favorite memories together. During a closing circle, girls can make individual wishes, and a collective wish can be created as well. Facilitators can acknowledge the sequence of events in the circle, and the relationship styles and behaviors that have shifted. Celebrations such as this one are a vital part of every community, recognizing stages of growth and cohesiveness, accomplishments, and the impending completion and transition out of the group.

## **Facilitator Methodology:**

Girls Circle facilitators, representing professionals and service providers in a wide spectrum of child and adolescent programs including education, youth development, substance abuse, mental health and juvenile justice settings, play a key role in the overall experience of the Girls Circle groups. Aspects of this role include preparing for the theme and activity plan each session, knowing and accessing professionals for consultation and referrals as needs arise for girls, having cultural competence, promoting interaction, developing group agreements, involving circle members as much as possible, and managing difficult group dynamics. Of utmost importance is the facilitator's primary task - protecting the physical, emotional and social safety of the group environment.

The facilitator begins groups with engaging icebreakers and activities that quickly create a fun, playful, relaxing, and safe atmosphere for all girls. Because members of the group may or may not know each other, and are likely to have social, peer, or cultural differences, it is important for the facilitator to acknowledge differences and commonalities in the group, with an appreciation for the diversity of girls. Ideally, the facilitator shares characteristics with the girls that may include ethnicity, race, or cultural heritage, but this is not required. What is most important for facilitators is to know their own assumptions and biases, to be open and interested in cultural differences, to acknowledge these, and to incorporate representations of varied female traditions and experiences, so that there is comfort for girls to relate experiences and to show as much as they choose about themselves.

The facilitator invites the group to develop group guidelines that lay the foundation for group expectations, interactions, and behavior. Ideally, all participants contribute to creating these codes of interaction, jointly. Once a guideline is identified, such as "one person speaks at a

time”, the facilitator asks the group for consensus on that idea. When there are differences of opinion, the facilitator encourages the group to consider views and needs, and to develop compromises or revised guidelines that satisfy the group. Examples of common guidelines include: respect everybody, listen to the speaker, be honest, talk from your own experience, be open minded, keep things confidential. Facilitators invite girls to make posters, sign them, and place them in noticeable places in the group room. Fully inviting group members into the process encourages girls’ sense of ownership of and accountability to the group.

In addition, facilitators explain their legal and ethical responsibilities to the group, including their obligation as mandated reporters. Providing a clear and explicit policy upfront helps girls know what to expect from the facilitator. This policy can also be placed on a poster, and put in a visible place in the group room. Regular reading or stating of both the group guidelines and the confidentiality and exceptions policy provides girls with clarity, and security in having the knowledge of the facilitator’s obligations should the information shared meet the criteria.

Particularly important in maintaining safety is the facilitator’s task of addressing group members’ hurtful behaviors. There are a variety of strategies facilitators may employ when responding to dynamics such as exclusion, cliques, insults, name calling, secrecy, and other relationally aggressive or relationally oblivious behaviors. The chosen responses depend on the facilitator’s judgment and knowledge of the particular situation and participants involved. Options may include: noticing and naming the observed behaviors, asking members what the intent of their actions or words are, reminding girls of their group agreements, introducing activities and discussions that target disruptive dynamics, and turning the problem over to the group for exploration and problem solving. Individual facilitators often develop unique

strategies that match their personality styles, some using humor, others firm requests, and still others, non verbal techniques.

At times, a group's configuration or a specific participant can challenge the authority of the facilitator. Experienced facilitators develop responses that blend limit setting and high expectations with neutrality and a non-shaming, non-punitive approach. Skilled facilitators avoid power struggles, and look for the strengths within individual girls. When recognizing these capacities, facilitators give girls new and positive images to uphold. Girls Circle facilitators value inclusive approaches, providing important limits while showing a nonjudgmental, respectful attitude toward the girls, even and especially when their behavior disrupts the group. Facilitators maintain a perspective on the girls capacities to make choices and mistakes, and to learn from these decisions. Consequences such as kicking girls out of the group for a session or for good, are extremely rare, not advised, and unnecessary in most situations. From the relational perspective, girls grow and develop in relationships with others. The various manifestations of acting up that girls show while in group can be considered as attempts to make connections with others, however misguided by faulty beliefs and faulty learning. As in restorative justice circles, Girls Circles uphold kind, clear expectations of girls' potential and capacity to manage challenges and develop skills in and through relationships. With offerings of consistent, encouraging words and deeds, facilitators convey caring and respect for girls' feelings. They provide acceptable choices for behavior.

A common concern for group facilitators is the question of self-disclosure when working with youth. Given the powerful influence that these role models have on girls' lives, facilitators show prudent attention to the matter of self-disclosure. In general, the Girls Circle model recognizes the significance of authentic relationships between caring adults, such as the

facilitators, and girls. Facilitators strive to express themselves genuinely, while setting limits and boundaries around personal or sensitive information. Many trained facilitators use guideposts or questions for themselves when confronted with a girls' question about their personal life, history, or activities. They might ask themselves, for example, "How will this information benefit the group?", "Am I willing to share this same information with these girls' parents?", or "Is the purpose of sharing the information self-serving?"

Sometimes, facilitator self-disclosure can be an important opportunity for girls, to expand their knowledge about a situation, or because hearing the story prompts girls to reflect or consider experiences from a different lens. An example may be a situation where girls express hopelessness or discouragement about graduating from high school and having optimistic future opportunities. A facilitator could tell a story about a time she herself felt similarly, but encountered an opportunity that changed her perspective, and created new possibilities.

Self-disclosure in very simple ways can also be effective when the Girls Circle group is still in an early stage of trust building, not yet sure of what to share, or how much, as in during Check In. They can set an example by sharing a feeling they have, using self-expression for the purpose of assisting the group. Facilitators keep in mind the key purpose is to support the girls in developing bonds of trust, and use of voice. While avoiding self-expression to meet personal emotional needs within the group, facilitators benefit from regular self-care such as adult peer support when providing this significant service to girls.

Facilitators must balance attention to the needs of individual girls and the needs and interests of the group as a whole. They must also balance use of the particular curricula content, activities and themes with the energy, interest and needs of the group members. At times, one or more girls may need extra time to talk about a specific situation. Sometimes, the girls' interest

revolves around a different topic more immediate to their day. In these instances, facilitators rely on both their own best judgment and the girls' input in deciding together where the group needs to go with its attention. Sometimes, a group gets off track or distracted, and the facilitator brings the girls' focus back to the theme and activity of the session. Girls often demonstrate their interest in talking at great length. The guidepost here, as in most instances, is to remain flexible to meet the energy and interests of the group, while proceeding to offer new experiences and activities that promote girls' healthy development.

Finally, facilitators promote active listening, critical thinking, and active use of voices by involving girls in discussions. Using thoughtful questions and a discussion style, facilitators seek to hear the experiences, ideas and observations of the group, and to encourage exchanges between members. Recognizing the powerful influences peers have when they tell their stories or make their opinions and beliefs known, facilitators emphasize gathering the variety of experiences from the girls, with interest and open mindedness. From this perspective, facilitators convey a clear message, "Your ideas matter; say more." Facilitators can express their own points of view, and their concerns for girls, but do so in such a way as to reflect, underscore, or even challenge positions of others. They show patience, respect, and willingness to let go of the idea of being "right".

***Criteria for Programmatic Success:***

Successful programs within organizations are those which receive administrative support on theoretical and practical bases. Girls Circles function best when: groups are time limited, closed groups or when there is a process for the rapid transitions in settings where girls are unable to stay for the entire 8 to 12 week process; there is space consistency and confidentiality;

consultation and support are available regularly and on a crisis basis; staff receive facilitator training, adequate preparation time, curricula, materials and supplies. They have knowledge of community resources, clear policies regarding facilitator mandated reporting responsibilities and procedures; mental health and medical consultants available for referrals. Girls may need transportation assistance, and snacks are a helpful addition. Parental consent and communications, as well as communication between service providers and host settings such as school personnel, help build a network of support for the program and the girl participants. Finally, co-facilitators need established time for communication, planning, and debriefing.

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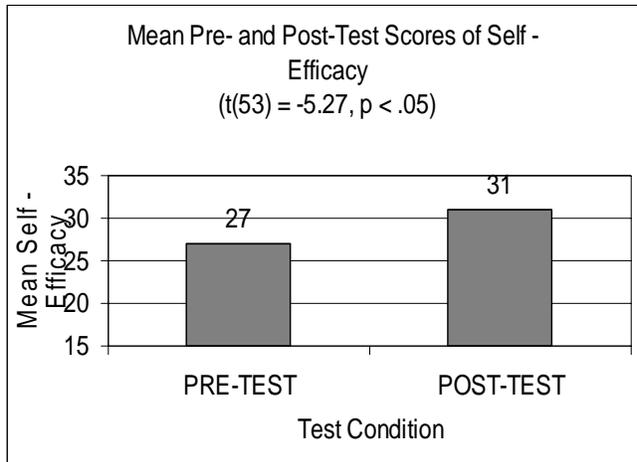
### **Research-Based, Highly Valued Program**

Outcomes for girls in the Girls Circle program have demonstrated significant positive changes in perceived social support, perceived body image, and self-efficacy. Additionally, girls' and facilitators' responses to feedback questionnaires reveal strong appreciation for the experience. Three studies (Steese, et al, 2005; Rough & Matthews, 2005, and Irvine, 2005) evaluated the effectiveness of the Girls' Circle as a prevention and intervention model to improve girls' lives. In the first study, sixty-three girls ranging in age from 10 – 17 years of age participated in nine Girls Circle support groups across the United States for ten weeks. These girls were of diverse racial-ethnic backgrounds: African American (18%), Caucasian (51%), Hispanic (21%), Asian (2%), Native American (3%) and other (5%). Girls were from urban (48%), suburban (25%), and rural (27%) areas. The girls completed the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1998), the Body Parts Satisfaction Scale (Berscheid, Walster, & Bohrnstedt, 1973), and Schwarzer's General Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer, & Scholz, 2000). Statistical analyses incorporating the paired-samples t-test revealed a significant increase in Self-Efficacy scores (Table 1-F), Body Image

(Table 1-G), and Perceived Social Support (Table 1-H). Results indicate that all three variables improved at the end of the 10-week Girls' Circle curriculum.

*Self-efficacy*

**Table 1-F**



Self-efficacy refers to one's belief in his or her ability to do the things necessary to achieve desired results (Bandura, 1995). Student identity and peer relationships are two key aspects of adolescent development which are greatly influenced by beliefs in one's abilities (Bradley and Corwyn, 2001). Self-efficacy is also enhanced through positive ethnic identity (Benard, 2004; Rotheram, 1996).

When asked to describe changes they noticed in themselves since participating in Girls Circle, middle schoolers in Victoria, B.C., said, "I have learned how to deal with my stress", "I learned how to explain how I feel"; "I learned to have patience". Following an after school Girls' Circle experience at a Middle School in Southern California, one girl wrote: "I learned

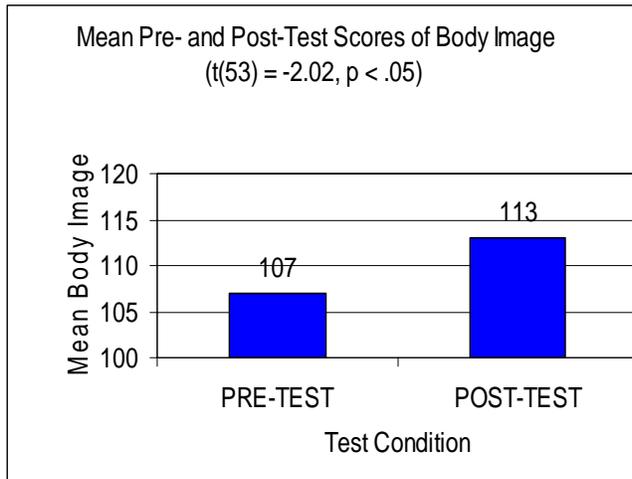
about wiping away my inner critic and listening more to my positive side ”, and another wrote: “I don’t down myself”.

One Girls Circle facilitator, a licensed clinician and parent of a thirteen year old girl in Santa Rosa, CA, hosted a Girls Circle as a parent facilitator for her own daughter and six other girls in the community. She and other parents were concerned that the girls were rapidly losing their voices. Using the “Friendship” theme and activity guide, the facilitator assisted the girls in discussing peer conflicts and dilemmas, and developing strategies to respond to peer problems. In one example, girls reported being bothered by classmates who asked them to pass a note along to another classmate, or to show them test answers. They didn’t want to pass notes or cheat, but individually, they were at a loss for an adequate response. Together they brainstormed ideas and determined they could simply say, “I don’t pass notes”, or “I don’t share test answers” in a calm, matter of fact manner. The facilitator states that “their own ideas were incredible; they were specific, and they reported success with their solutions. The role plays were very powerful. (The girls) felt they could speak for themselves. Developmentally, if you get it at the right time, it doesn’t take that much for them to find their voices.”

### *Body Image*

A striking result was the significant positive increase in perceived body image evident in the research, since just two units of the ten week research curricula focused on body image. So much of a girls’ identity is focused on how she looks (AAUW, 1994). These results suggest that the Girls Circle body image theme and activities can promote girls’ re-thinking and re-shaping their own ideas and expectations regarding identity and body image.

**Table 1-G**



Body image is the mental representation one holds of one's physical appearance. Negative body image can lead to eating disorders (Cash & Lavalley, 1997), depression, anxiety, sexual difficulties, poor self-esteem (Cash, 1990) and increased suicide risk (Eaton et al, 2005). Perception of one's physical appearance has been consistently recognized to be the number one factor in predicting self-esteem (Harter, 2000). Current research indicates that girls as young as 8 to 9 years of age have negative views of being overweight and high levels of body image dissatisfaction (Hill, 1993; Koff & Reirdan, 1991; Rolland, Farnhill, & Griffiths, 1997). O'Dea and Abraham's (2000) results were consistent with previous research in regards to positive changes in body image and intervention programs.

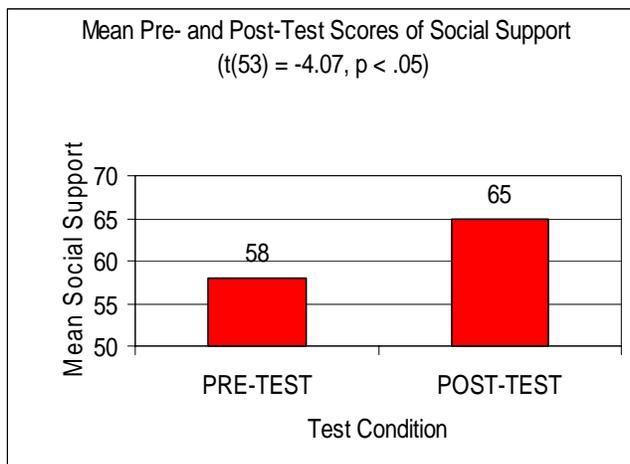
At the middle school in Southern California, Girls Circle participants wrote to their facilitators (a classroom teacher and a trained parent volunteer): "I learned to love myself more and to be more appreciative of my body and myself", "You're beautiful no matter what". Seventh grade Girls Circle participants at a girls' camp in Pennsylvania wrote about their

experiences to their facilitator, a camp counselor. After experiencing the Body Image theme and activities sessions they wrote: “I will pay attention to my body and myself. I won’t let people say you look ugly...”, “I have learned to not threaten my body...don’t go on diets.”, “I learned to be kind and take care of myself”. This author’s own experience facilitating dozens of Girls Circles consistently suggests that adolescent girls feel uncomfortable in their bodies, especially when receiving uninvited or unwanted stares, comments, evaluations, and overt and covert messages related to physical attractiveness or sexuality. The safe arena for talking about these difficult experiences is a great relief for girls when they recognize they are not alone and their feelings are shared by others. They gain an opportunity to observe the cultural conditions within which females grow up, and a chance to strengthen a positive, self-defined evaluation of their physical being.

### *Perceived Social Support*

Social support is defined as the experience or the perception of being cared for, valued, included, and/or guided by others, especially of one’s family, peers, and/or community members. Social support from peers, teachers, and parents has been recognized as a protective factor for children and teens (Benard, 2004). The table below displays significant increases in perceived social support for girls participating in the Girls Circle program.

**Table 1-H**



Girls' comments regarding their social growth include: "I have become more aware of people's feelings and how to look at a situation through their eyes"; "I've learned how to talk to different people"; "I will try to stand up for other girls if they are in trouble and definitely stand up for myself. I won't let boys push me around or call me names"; "(I liked) the unity that we had and the openness that we had", and "I have people that I trust and understand". In the highest security detention facility for girls 12 – 22 years of age, in Ventura, CA, girls participating in Girls Circle offered comments such as: "I learned that everyone goes through something during their lifetime", "I learned that its okay to open up around others", "I really appreciate this group and I'm glad that I feel comfortable with these girls in the circle", "I can sit back and listen to girls and hear what their saying instead of judging them", and "(I learned) that I'm not alone on how I feel".

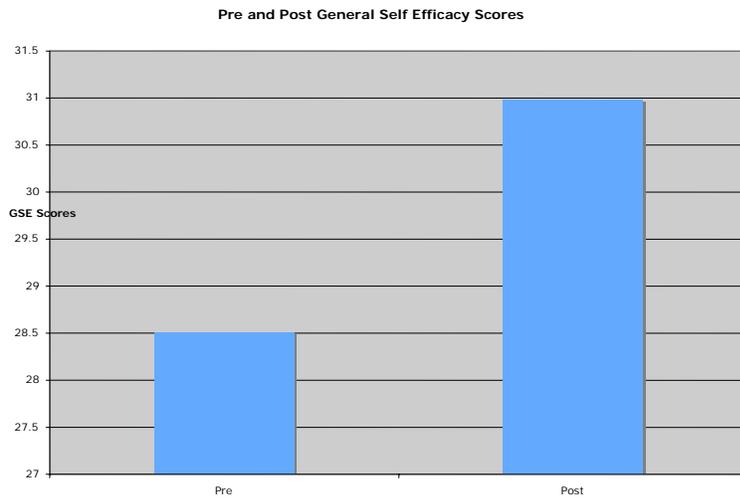
A facilitator at a juvenile detention center in Ohio, writes "It is amazing how the Girls' Circle has changed the relationships amongst our girls. They are even talking more confident about themselves. Where we used to hear all negative comments from some of our girls, they are starting to realize they actually do like themselves."

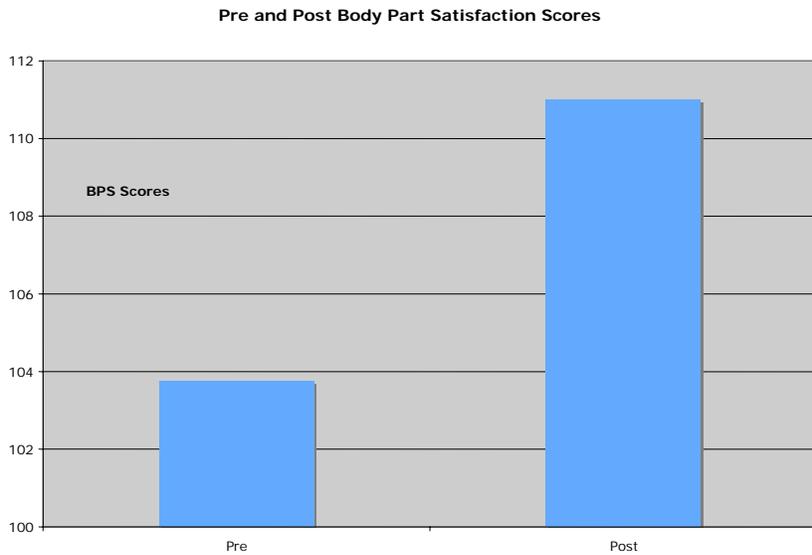
A residential treatment facility for girls in delinquency in Nebraska integrated the Girls Circle model into their group treatment approach. Where there had been regular physical altercations between girls prior to implementation, staff reported a drop to only one such incident in the five months since the Girls Circle model began. Staff also reported an increase in level of staff rapport and morale, as tensions and stress appeared to be reducing in the setting.

At the mountain camp in Pennsylvania, girls utilized the "R.E.F. (Respect –Empathy-Fairness)" approach from their "Friendship" Girls Circle experience to manage peer conflicts

outside of group. In one instance, some of the girls struggled with a new camper whom they found to be mean and intimidating. The girls considered how to be true to themselves, yet inclusive of the new girl. Applying the “R.E.F.” criteria, they discovered various opportunities and ways in which they could see things from her perspective, show kindness, and be clear about their own limits. “They tried and tried, and gradually, through listening to her, and by talking authentically, they gained compassion” stated their facilitator.

In a replicate and extension study in 2005, 49 girls, ages 11 – 17 years, from across the United States participated in Girls Circle support groups for 10 weeks. This study found significant increases in self-efficacy and body image (Rough & Matthews, 2005).





Positive increases in perceived social support approached significant levels. The mean score for Pre-MSPSS was 65.71 with a standard deviation of 16.19, and the mean score for Post-MSPSS was 67.16 with a standard deviation of 15.33. One possible explanation is that the participants of the second study (2005) revealed pre-test scores as high as those achieved at the post-test with the initial group of girls. Perhaps the second group of girls entered the study with a higher baseline of perceived social support. Complete analysis is underway at this time.

Another study in 2005 looked at the impact of the Girls' Circle model for court-involved girls in eight juvenile justice settings nationally. Results of this study revealed significant increases in self-efficacy, body image, and perceived social connection. Interestingly, when these girl's outcomes were considered with the second study subjects' outcomes, there were greater gains in perceived social connection for court-involved girls than for non-court involved girls. A current research evaluation of the impact of a Girls Circle program is underway with girls in an Arizona secured facility and in community parole programs. Results of this study will become available in 2007.

While girls' responses and feedback about their experiences cover a wide range of topics and vary according to program feedback processes, there are many common responses regarding their overall experiences. The following words might best convey what girls say about Girls Circle:

*"I would tell my friends to join up (with Girls Circle) because it's so much fun and you can just be yourself".* 10<sup>th</sup> grader

*"It's such a good feeling to come there and just relax; I can be myself there."* 10<sup>th</sup> grader

*"I notice I understand my friends more now."* 7<sup>th</sup> grader

***Summary:***

Social relationships are vital to girls' growth and development. Beyond family connections, friendships offer companionship, safety, security, social protection, motivation to participate, positive self-identity and connection to culture and community. Close friendships can mitigate effects of hardship, scapegoating, or victimization, and act as a buffer against depression, anxiety and loneliness. Humor, shared experiences, and mutuality offer meaning and pleasure, aspects of a balanced and healthy lifestyle. Having positive relationships, especially good friends, is of great value to adolescents, and has significant impact on overall well being.

While most girls have friends, friendships are highly unstable during adolescent years and girls regularly witness or experience cliques, betrayal, exclusion, and competition for status in peer groups and with boys. Some girls are randomly assigned to "outcast" status, while others struggle with learning styles or personalities that are ineffective in establishing or sustaining reciprocal relationships. In and out of classrooms, girls find themselves in settings that they consider emotionally unsafe. These settings are dependent on persons as much as place. When girls feel unsafe, or unwelcome, their moods, attention, confidence, body image, and academic performance, peer relationships, and development of competencies suffer. Unfortunately, most

girls report feelings of concern about their emotional safety, including and often amongst each other. Girls who experience sexual and physical abuse have profound needs for environmental safety, and heightened difficulties trusting others.

Emotional and physical safety are basic needs for every growing girl. When these needs are met, girls have better capacities to learn, take important developmental risks, and develop skills, talents and interests. Educational settings and institutions serving girls are turning increasingly toward approaches that address and improve emotional safety. Recognition of girls' gender-relevant, developmental needs for connection improves the outcomes for health related services.

Prevention programs aimed at improving peer connections, reducing bullying, increasing positive ethnic and gender identity, and improving self-esteem have been mentioned.

Girls Circle is a research-based model that integrates gender, resiliency, and relationship-focused approaches with adolescent and early adolescent girls across varied settings. Increases in self-efficacy, perceived body image, and social connection suggest that Girls Circle may be useful for broad prevention programs as well as targeted groups. Girls Circle promotes girls' involvement and influence in exploring and shaping their journeys through adolescence in meaningful ways. The empowerment methods meet girls where they are and encourage ownership for participants. Its' basic premise rests in Relational-Cultural theory, acknowledging the significance of healthy connections as the touchstone for all development.

Girls Circle will benefit from evaluations that compare participant groups with control groups in future studies, as well as studies that include more diversity, especially among Asian and Native American girls. Research which utilizes multiple methods, while maintaining a commitment to serve girls first without denying service to girls when programming is available

can be utilized. Qualitative studies and longer term evaluations will enable assessment of Girls Circle as a prevention or intervention method over the adolescent span. The impact of the program for girls in the juvenile justice system will be evaluated for recidivism rates as well as curricula-specific outcomes such as social connection and self-efficacy.

An important question is how to implement a Girls Circle program in large school settings, where emotional safety is of major concern to girls. Since groups generally consist of 6 – 12 girls, there are logistical challenges to implement circles broadly as a prevention method, yet the setting provides the greatest potential of access for girls. As a prevention and intervention model for promoting girls' growth, Girls Circle helps girls to resolve the relational impasse: girls can speak truthfully, offer and receive caring and attention, address relevant topics, experience genuine acceptance and belonging, and grow healthfully toward young womanhood.

**Table 1 – A Basic Circle Format**



<b>Opening Ritual</b>	<i>Begin the circle with an opening ritual that marks commencement of the circle process, fosters a special tone, and invites participants into the unique space and time of the circle.</i>
<b>Theme Intro</b>	<i>The introduction of the theme is presented by the facilitator and is usually a short, synopsis of what is planned for the meeting. The chosen theme will usually be tied into the activity and discussed and shared in greater detail at that time.</i>
<b>Check-in</b>	<i>Check-in is a time for the girls to check in with the group and express whatever they wish or perhaps say something about the theme. One person speaks at a time. A talking stick may be used. Respect is emphasized and given by listening. Girls are welcome to say as little or as much as they choose.</i>
<b>Activity</b>	<i><u>Verbal activity</u> (discussions) and <u>creative activity</u> (artistic) puts girls in touch with their inner experiences. It allows them the ability to express themselves in a safe and protected environment without the danger of losing connection with others.</i>
<b>Sharing of Activity</b>	<i>The sharing of the activity is when the circle reconvenes to allow time for sharing. Through careful questioning, girls can begin to share responses and feelings, interpret themes, explore commonalties, and make the connection between the theme and their experiences in the real world.</i>
<b>Closing Ritual</b>	<i>The closing ritual brings a special close to the shared experiences and sends off the members safely with a positive tone, sense of gratitude, and respect. It reflects the intimacy that has developed and it unites the circle together for a final moment to bring awareness to the communal energy and heartfelt sharing.</i>

**Table 1 –B**

**Friendship Theme and Activity Guide - Overview**  
**Recommended for ages 9 -14**

**8-Week Program**

Week	Theme	Activity
1	<b>A Friendly Place</b>	Creating Group Guidelines, Making Poster, Choosing a Name
2	<b>Being My Own Friend First</b>	“The Qualities I Possess” Activity
3	<b>Being Included, Being Left Out</b>	Pair Sharing, Group Sharing
4	<b>Same and Different</b>	Questions Sheets, Drawings
5	<b>The Whole is Greater than All the Parts</b>	Mini-group Posters and Whole Group Mural
6	<b>Feuds, Followers, and Fairness</b>	Role-Plays
7	<b>Our Qualities &amp; Strengths</b>	Chain of Strengths
8	<b>Appreciation Celebration</b>	Flower Petals

**Table 1 – C**

**Honoring Our Diversity Theme and Activity Guide - Overview**

**Recommended for ages 11 – 16**

**12-Week Program**

Week	Theme	Activity
1	<b>Beautiful Diversity</b>	Icebreakers, Creating Circle Guidelines, Journal Decoration *Optional: obtain video for Week 3
2	<b>Beyond Fear</b>	Team Building Games, Journaling, Group Discussion, and Personal Stories
3	<b>Stereotype Busting</b>	“Graffiti Wall,” Journaling; Wild Garden Poster *Optional: Video
4	<b>Cultural Treasures</b>	Treasure Tiles, Journaling
5	<b>Heroines</b>	Heroine “Autobiography,” Stage Readings, Journaling
6	<b>Culture Clash</b>	Physical Drama/Enactment, Medicine Wheels
7	<b>Stress Stories</b>	“Girls’ News Hour,” Connection Web
8	<b>Sisters!</b>	Magic Coin Trust Exercise, Discussion, Group Trust Fall, Journaling
9	<b>Local Action, Part 1</b>	Yoga Postures, Group Decision Making
10	<b>Local Action, Part 2</b>	Letter-Writing Campaign, Journaling, *Reminder for girls to bring excerpt or item for week 11
11	<b>Soul of My Culture</b>	Artistic Expression: Poetry, Dance, Music, Art, Journaling, Group Poem & Photo *Reminder: Food plan for Week 12
12	<b>Community</b>	Meal and Music; Appreciations; Closing Circle; Journal Distribution

**Table 1-D**

**Relationships with Peers – Theme and Activity Guide - Overview**

**Recommended for ages 13 – 18**

**10 Week Program**

Week	Theme	Activity
1	<b>Connecting with Each Other</b>	Creating Group Guidelines, “Commonalities Bead Game”
2	<b>“Labels” – Exploring New Perspectives</b>	Vision Quest Game
3	<b>Expressing Myself</b>	Guided Visualization, Poetry Reading and Poetry Writing
4	<b>Accepting All Different Parts of Myself</b>	Quick Writing, Group Poster, Bowls of Compassion
5	<b>Cultivating Respect</b>	Tea Ceremony
6	<b>Romantic Relationships – What Is It Worth to You?</b>	Analyzing Teen Relationship Stories, Relationship Definition Exercises
7	<b>Girlfights or Girlfriends?</b>	Blame Game Talk Show
8	<b>Giving Voice to Feelings – Part I</b>	Journaling, Feelings Identification Exercise, Role-Play
9	<b>Giving Voice to Feelings – Part II</b>	
10	<b>Wholeness and Completion</b>	Mandala Making

For Further Questions or Comments about the Girls Circle model, facilitator trainings, theme and activity guides, ongoing research, consultations, and other questions, please contact:

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