

## GIRLS CIRCLE NATIONAL RESEARCH PROJECT: EVALUATION RESULTS YEAR ONE <sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

Girls Circle is a model of structured support groups promoting healthy relationships and lifestyles for adolescent girls. Ceres Policy Research conducted an evaluation of 15 Girls Circle programs across the country in juvenile justice, school, and community settings, with completed surveys from 278 girls. Girls Circle facilitators administered pre- and post-participation surveys measuring the expected short- and long-term outcomes for girls completing 8-12 week programs. Statistical analysis of the data, completed by Ceres, found that participants reported gains in six of twelve short-term skills. Participants also reported statistically significant improvements in: (1) a decrease in self-harming behavior, (2) a decrease in alcohol use, (3) an increase in attachment to school, and (4) an increase in self-efficacy. Looking across different sub-populations of respondents, most girls benefited equally from participating in Girls Circle.

### **Girls in Juvenile Justice System**

For the last 30 years, researchers have focused on the ways gender might shape different academic and social outcomes for girls and boys. Beginning in the 1970's and continuing into the 1990's, researchers focused on gender differences in academic achievement. The early education literature in this area initially found that girls exhibited higher verbal skills that led to higher grades and test scores in English. This same literature found that boys exhibited higher visual-spatial and computational skills that led to higher grades and test scores in mathematics. Further research found that, while these differences continued to be statistically significant, they diminished by 1990 (Vogel 1990; Hyde, Fennema, & Lamon 1990). Nonetheless, interest in gender differences in academic achievement continues.

More recently, researchers have become interested in differential delinquency patterns. A particular interest in girls within the juvenile justice system began as arrest rates for girls rose 103 percent between 1981 and 1997 while the arrest rates for boys only rose 27 percent (Acoca & Dedel 1998). Detailed analysis of juvenile justice data found that girls were being arrested and detained for different reasons than boys. Boys are more likely to be arrested and detained for violent offenses. Girls, in contrast, are most often detained for technical violations, theft, or drug and alcohol related offenses. Girls in many jurisdictions are also more likely to be held in detention for prostitution. In addition, judges sometimes decide to hold girls in detention to protect them from domestic violence, which is not the case for adolescent boys (Sherman 2005).

In addition, researchers began to uncover the reasons for these differential delinquency patterns. Girls involved in the juvenile justice system diverge from their male counterparts in how they handle stress and

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<sup>1</sup> This is a bonus paper. During the conference, Beth Hossfeld and Kitty Tyrol will present a workshop on Girls Circle: Promoting Resiliency in Girls through Gender Responsive Groups.

trauma. They internalize traumatic experiences that can manifest as depression, self-harming behavior, and substance abuse.

With different emotional and social patterns, girls benefit from gender-specific programming. This paper reports the findings from an evaluation of one gender-specific program, Girls Circle.

## **The Girls Circle Program**

Girls Circle Association (Girls Circle) was founded in 1996 as a support system to help young girls make healthy decisions. Girls Circle is a research-based model that encourages girls to be themselves within a structured support group. Girls Circle developed nine separate activity guides to be implemented within these support groups that represent unique 8-12 week programs organized around themes of friendship; being a girl, body image; diversity; connections between the mind, body and spirit; expressing individuality; relationships with peers; identity; and paths to the future.

Girls Circle groups are held weekly in most cases and last approximately an hour and a half. The groups are led by women trained to implement the Girls Circle guidelines, which involve giving each girl a turn to speak without being interrupted and ensuring a safe and confidential space. The structure helps foster respect in the young girls for themselves and for each other. The group offers them an opportunity to express themselves using journaling, poetry writing, acting, role playing, drawing, working with clay, and/or dancing. The mission of Girls Circles is to instill self-confidence and improve girls' interpersonal relationships. The expectation is that these improved relationships will, in turn, improve girls' current lives as well as their futures.

Girls Circle has trained over 500 organizations nationally on their model of support groups. As a result, Girls Circle programs have been implemented with girls representing many socio-economic groups, geographical areas, ethnic identities, religions, and sexual orientations.

## **Research Design**

Ceres Policy Research worked with Girls Circle to design a pre- and post-participation survey that would reflect a range of short- and long- term outcomes. The survey also measured the self-efficacy of the girls before and after the program and rated their satisfaction at the groups' closing. Ceres also incorporated a number of demographic questions as well as questions about detention history, history in the child welfare system, and school engagement. All sections were designed to measure outcomes for all participants as well as different subgroups within the population. In this way, Ceres could explore whether some subgroups benefit more than others from participation in the groups.

The authors collected 278 surveys from 15 national sites in 19 cities that hosted Girls Circles. These cities include Mansfield and Magnolia in Arkansas; Cortez and Longmont in Colorado; La Grande, Umatilla, Hermiston, Pendleton, Milton, and Albany in Oregon; Santa Rosa, California; Phoenix, Arizona; Fallon, Nevada; Tampa, Florida; Columbia, South Carolina; St. Louis, Missouri; Manchester, New Hampshire; Rathdrum, Idaho; and Honolulu, Hawaii.

All participating groups followed the Girls Circle format. Each group used Girls Circle curricula. Study groups selected units from all nine activity guides according to the interests and needs of their respective groups. Twenty-nine percent of the circles were 8 weeks long, 24 percent of the circles were 10 weeks long, 18 percent of the circles were 12 weeks long, and 20 percent of the circles were 14 weeks or longer.

Each organization distributed and collected pre- and post-surveys. These organizations then entered the data into the database created by the evaluators and sent the completed databases back to the evaluators for analysis.

## Data Analyses

Ceres Policy Research analyzed the surveys from the Girls Circle groups. The evaluators relied on three statistical tests. The evaluators used a t-test to determine whether variables changed over time for the girls in the circles. The evaluators used analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine differences between subpopulations of girls. If more than one variable appeared to be shaping an outcome, the evaluators used regression analyses to sort out which variables were shaping the outcomes.

Findings from these tests were considered “statistically significant” when there was a 95 percent likelihood that change occurred over time ( $p \leq .05$ ), that the groups were different, or that particular variables shaped an outcome. The statistically significant results are reported below (see Girls’ Outcomes below).

## Demographics of Girls

The girls varied by race, age, sexuality, and languages spoken. They also varied in how many children they had, those who had been suspended and expelled, and those who had experience with home removal, in detention or in the foster youth system. Demographic details about respondents are provided below:

- The girls were 52 percent white, 17 percent were African American, 16 percent were Latina, 4 percent were Native American, 3 percent were Asian, 7 percent were other.
- Twenty-nine percent of the girls fell between 10-13 years of age and 71 percent were 14 to 18 years old.
- The majority of the girls identified as heterosexual (81 percent), 9 percent were bisexual, 1 percent identified as lesbian/gay, and 1 (0.4 percent) participant was transgender; 3 percent were unsure.
- Sixteen percent of the girls were bilingual, Spanish/English speakers, 7 percent were bilingual in English and another language, and 73 percent spoke English only; 4 percent were other.
- Ninety-two percent of the girls did not have children, while 6 percent had 1 child, 1 respondent had 2 children (0.4 percent), and 1 respondent had 3 children (0.4 percent).
- Fifty percent of the girls had never been suspended from school, while 79 percent had never been expelled; 45 percent of the girls had one or more experience(s) with running away.
- Over half (67 percent) of the girls had not been removed from their home while 28 percent had experienced home removal.
- More than one in four (26 percent) of the girls had been in foster care or been placed in a group home and 42 percent had been held in juvenile detention or another secure facility.
- Almost three-quarters (73 percent) of the girls reported that they attend school regularly and 61 percent reported that they complete homework regularly.
- Over half (57 percent) of the participants talk to parents or other family members about what is happening in their life.
- Sixty percent of Girls Circle participants were involved in some form of community activity in the last year.

## Girls’ Outcomes

The Girls Circle survey has four outcomes sections: skills acquired after Girls Circle participation; a section to measure long-term effects of Girls Circle; a section to measure changes in self-efficacy; and a section to measure girls’ overall satisfaction with Girls Circle.

### Short-term Skills

T-tests were run to see if there was a change of skills for girls after participating in Girls Circle. That is, the evaluators wanted to determine whether there was a change between the pre-participation survey and the post-participation survey.

The results of these tests are reported in Table 1. The first column reports the question number. The second column reports the survey question. The third column reports whether the t-test was significant. Significance levels are reported if the test was significant. The evaluators report “ns,” or “not significant,” if the test was not significant. The evaluators report “as,” or “approaching significant,” if the test was close to being significant (a significance level between 0.05 and 0.10).

Table 1. Skills acquired after Girls Circle participation

Question Number	Survey question	Significance Level
B1	When I meet a new person, I find things that we have in common.	$p \leq 0.03$
B2	I try to see beyond girls' reputations.	as
B3	I use my words to express my feelings.	ns
B4	I tell adults what I need.	$p \leq 0.00$
B5	I feel good about my body.	ns
B6	I forgive myself when I make a mistake.	$p \leq 0.01$
B7	I pick close girlfriends and boyfriends who treat me the way I want to be treated.	$p \leq 0.03$
B8	I tell people how much they mean to me.	$p \leq 0.01$
B9	I treat girls who are NOT my friends with respect.	ns
B10	I am proud to be a girl/young woman.	ns
B11	When I make a decision, I think about all of my options.	ns
B12	When I'm mad at someone, I try to talk things out.	ns

Analysis of variance tests and regression analyses were also run to see if there were any subgroups among the participants that had different rates of improvement than others.

There were very few differences across subpopulations of girls. This indicates that most groups of girls benefit equally from participating in Girls Circle. We did find that girls held in juvenile detention, residential treatment or another secure facility did improve, but not as much as girls who had never had these experiences.

## Long-term Effects

T-tests were run to see if girls achieved the anticipated long-term outcomes of Girls Circle participation. The results from these tests are reported in Table 2. The first column reports the question number. The second column reports the survey question. The third column reports whether the t-test was significant. Significance levels are reported if the test was significant. The evaluators report “ns,” or “not significant,” if the test was not significant. The evaluators report “as,” or “approaching significant,” if the test was close to being significant (a significance level between 0.05 and 0.10).

Table 2. Long-term effects of participation in Girls Circle

Question Number	Survey question	Significance Level
C1	I like school.	$p \leq 0.05$
C2	I participate in a sport, activity, or hobby that I love.	ns
C3	I try to take care of my emotions and body.	ns
C4a	I make my own decisions about if or when to have sex.	ns
C4b	I make my own decisions about if or when to drink or use drugs.	ns
C5	I use protection if I have sex.	ns
C6	I eat healthy food.	$p \leq 0.01$
C7	I don't hurt my body when I'm upset.	$p \leq 0.02$
C8	I don't drink.	$p \leq 0.02$
C9	If I drink, I don't get drunk.	$p \leq 0.02$
C10	I build relationships with adults who help me with my goals.	ns

Analysis of variance and regression tests were run to determine which subgroups improved in relationship to each other and at what magnitude.

There were very few differences across sub-populations of girls. This indicates that most groups of girls benefit equally from participating in Girls Circle. We did find that LGBT youth like school more after being in Girls Circle, but not as much as heterosexual youth.

## Self-efficacy

A t-test was run to see if there were changes in participants' self-efficacy (Schwarzer & Scholz, 2000). Girls' self-efficacy did improve overall ( $p \leq 0.02$ ).

Analysis of variance tests and regression analyses were run to determine if subgroups had different patterns of increased self-efficacy. A number of subpopulations experienced differences in self-efficacy gains:

- LGBT girls experienced a larger increase in self-efficacy than heterosexual girls.

- Girls of color experienced gains in self-efficacy, but not as much as white girls.
- Girls with no children and those who were mothers experienced gains, while pregnant girls experienced a decrease in self-efficacy.
- Girls who had been suspended experienced a gain in self-efficacy, but not as much as girls who had never been suspended.
- Girls that who had been held in detention, been placed in residential treatment or another secure facility experienced a gain in self-efficacy, but not as much as girls who had never been held institutionally.

### Participant Satisfaction

In the final section of the survey, girls were asked to report on their experiences. They were provided a set of questions and asked to circle “1” if the statement is never true; “2” if the statement is sometimes true; “3” if the statement is usually true; or “4” if the statement is always true. Participants’ responses are reported in Table 3. The first column reports the survey question number. The second column reports the survey question. The third column reports the average response.

Table 3. Participant satisfaction

Question Number	Survey question	Mean
E1	I could share what I was thinking in Girls Circle.	3.2
E2	I could ask Girls Circle leaders for help.	3.4
E3	Everyone supported me when I made decisions about my life in Girls Circle.	3.2
E4	Everyone respected me in Girls Circle.	3.4
E5	Girls Circle leaders focus on what I’m good at.	3.5
E6	Girls Circle is fun.	3.5
E7	No one shares others’ secrets in Girls Circle.	3.2

On average, girls gave their circles and facilitators high scores. Girls felt that all of the statements were somewhere between “usually true” and “always true.”

In addition, girls were asked a series of open-ended questions. The evaluators report the five most common answers to each of the questions below.

When asked, “What have you learned about yourself since starting Girls Circle?”

- 17 percent of the girls reported that they learned respect for themselves and their bodies;
- 10 percent learned that they can be open and still be respected;
- 9 percent gained self-esteem, confidence, and independence;
- 5 percent reported that they learned nothing; and
- 3 percent said they learned self-awareness.

When asked, “What have you learned about the other girls in Girls Circle?”

- 22 percent reported that they have a lot in common with them;
- 18 percent reported that they thought the other girls were sweet, friendly, and strong;
- 7 percent learned that they are all different and unique;
- 3 percent learned other girls have difficulties in life at times surpassing their own hardships; and
- 5 percent reported that they didn’t know.

When asked, “What have you learned about relationships from Girls Circle?”

- 5 percent of girls reported that they learned that they bring happiness to other people and that they are important from being in Girls Circle;
- 5 percent learned that they are difficult for other people to handle;
- 4 percent realized that they are the decision makers in the own lives;
- 4 percent learned about trust and honesty in relationships; and
- 3 percent said they learned nothing about relationships.

When asked, “Have you changed in any way from being a part of Girls Circle?”

- 21 percent of the participating girls report that they had changed in a good way after being a part of Girls Circle;
- 14 percent reported they didn’t learn anything;
- 5 percent said that they became more open and talkative;
- 5 percent reported that they learned to be nice and respectful to others; and
- 4 percent reported that their attitude in general changed as a result of being in Girls Circle.

Finally, girls were asked seven questions that measure the quality of the circles and their facilitators. They were provided a set of questions and asked to circle “1” if the statement is never true, “2” if the statement is sometimes true, “3” if the statement is usually true, or “4” if the statement is always true. On average, girls rated each question between “usually true” and “always true.” This indicates that girls were very satisfied with the circles and their facilitators.

## Conclusions

Girls Circle participants reported an increase in six skills developed over the short-term:

- Finding things they have in common with a new person;
- Trying to see beyond girls' reputations;
- Telling adults what they need;
- Feeling good about their body;
- Picking friends that treat them the way they want to be treated; and
- Telling people how much they mean to them.

Participants also reported an increase for four long-term outcomes:

- A decrease in self-harming behavior;
- A decrease in rates of Alcohol use;
- An increase in attachment to school; and
- An increase in Self-efficacy.

When looking at differences across subgroups, there were very few differences across sub-populations of girls. This indicates that most groups of girls benefit equally from participating in Girls Circle. Two subgroups had more than one statistically significant difference: LGBT Girls and Girls Held in Juvenile Detention, Residential Treatment, or Another Secure Facility.

### **LGBT Girls**

LGBT girls experienced a larger gain in self-efficacy compared with heterosexual girls. In addition, LGBT girls like school more after being in Girls Circle, but not as much as heterosexual girls.

### **Girls Held in Juvenile Detention, Residential Treatment, or Another Secure Facility**

Girls who had been held in a secure facility are experiencing gains in short-term skills, but not as much as girls who had never been held in a secure facility. These girls are also experiencing gains in self-efficacy, but not as much as girls who had never been held in a secure facility.

## **Implications**

There were very few differences found for girls who participated in Girls Circle suggesting that it is a promising model for girls in multiple locations (i.e. urban, suburban, rural); in multiple settings (i.e. juvenile justice, education, after-school care); for different lengths of time (i.e. 8-week, 10-week, 12-week, and 14-week cycles); and across different demographic sub-groups (i.e. ethnic/racial identity, sexual identity, age). Moreover, these findings suggest that the Girls Circle model is particularly flexible, as facilitators may choose from the full range of activity guides and obtain the same outcomes for girls participating in circles. Implications for foster youth, LGBT youth, girls who have been suspended and expelled, and girls who have been held in a secure facility are described in more detail below.

### **Girls in Foster Care & Group Home**

There were no differences found between girls who had experience with being a foster youth or living in a group home and those who had not. Girls who had been in foster care or lived in a group home showed the same gains in short-term skills, self-efficacy, and long-term skills when compared with girls who hadn't experienced foster care or group home settings. These outcomes suggest that Girls Circle is a very promising model for girls involved in foster care and group home settings.

### **LGBT Girls**

There were very few differences between LGBT and heterosexual girls. LGBT girls had greater gains in self-efficacy than did heterosexual girls. LGBT girls also reported liking school more after being in Girls Circle, but not as much as heterosexual girls. This suggests that LGBT youth have the potential to gain in long-term life skills and to improve how they feel about themselves from participating in the circles. In order to understand the differences in rates of improvement between these girls, interviews should be conducted with Girls Circle participants. These outcomes suggest Girls Circle is a promising model for organizations providing direct services to girls who are LGBT identified.

### **Girls Expelled or Suspended**

There were few differences between girls who had been suspended and expelled and those who hadn't. Girls that had been expelled did not show differences in short-term skills, long-term skills, or in self-efficacy. Girls that had been suspended did experience a gain in self-efficacy but not as much as girls who had never been suspended. In order to understand the differences in rates of increase in self-efficacy, interviews with Girls

Circle participants are recommended. Interviews are also recommended to understand the reasons why no differences were found between girls who had been expelled and those who hadn't. Overall, these outcomes suggest that the Girls Circle is a promising model to use when working with girls who have been suspended and/or expelled.

### Girls Held in Juvenile Detention, Residential Treatment, or Another Secure Facility

There were also very few differences among girls who had been held in a secure facility such as juvenile detention and those who had not. Girls with experience being in a secure facility reported that they are gaining in short-term skills but not as much as girls who hadn't been detained in a secure facility. These girls are also gaining in self-efficacy but not as much as girls who hadn't been detained in a secure facility. These outcomes suggest that girls in detention have special needs regarding short-term skills and self-efficacy. Interviews with Girls Circle participants are recommended to understand the differences. Overall, the outcomes suggest that Girls Circle is a promising model to use with girls who have had experience in a secure facility.

### Future Research Directions

The next phase of the Girls Circle evaluation project will take two different directions. Ceres Policy Research will be conducting qualitative interviews and/or focus groups with girls who are participating in circles to better understand the experiences of girls in juvenile justice settings. We will also expand our quantitative analysis of outcomes for girls in juvenile justice and school settings. By collecting administrative data on recidivism, suspension, expulsion, and other disciplinary processes, we will explore the relationship between Girls Circle participation and girls' paths within disciplining institutions.

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