



# **GIRLS' PERSPECTIVES ON GIRLS' GROUPS AND HEALTHY LIVING**

**Research Summary  
June 2012**

## WHAT WE DID

IN 2011, the British Columbia Centre of Excellence for Women's Health partnered with the Girls Action Foundation, and researchers from the Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women's Health, the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence, York University and the University of Montreal on a study of Girls' Perspectives on Girls' Groups and Healthy Living.

In this study, we wanted to learn about the following three areas:

1. Best practices in health promotion with girls and healthy living issues such as prevention of tobacco uptake, obesity, physical inactivity and dating violence;
2. The central elements of girls' empowerment group approaches and how they might provide a model for gender-specific health promotion; and,
3. What girls say they get from these groups.



## GIRLS' PERSPECTIVES

WE ASKED GIRLS participating in 7 girls' groups, in 5 provinces questions such as: What kinds of topics did you discuss, and activities or actions have you done as a group? What would make the group even better? Has the group helped you with choices about things like smoking, drinking and having sex? Have you had any discussion or activity or learning in the group about healthy and unhealthy relationships? body image?

⇒ Girls felt that the opportunity to build friendships with other girls, and share what they are going through, was helpful in improving their self-esteem. Girls reported that the group increased their self-respect and self-acceptance, helped them overcome shyness, and gave them the confidence to resist peer-pressure. They also found it valuable to be able to meet and speak with older girls.

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

⇒ Girls felt that the girls-only format of groups enabled them to freely share what they are experiencing as girls, create bonds with other girls, and experience a sense of empowerment with being a girl.

“[This] group just makes me feel more powerful for being a girl.”

⇒ Many girls reported that they valued the experience of having a safe and confidential space to share their experiences with other girls. Girls spoke also of the importance of cultural safety.

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

Regardless of the individual group mission, mandate, topic or format, it was the value of meeting together with other girls that stood out.

⇒ Girls mentioned how they had learned coping and decision making skills through participating in the girls groups; and had learned about new tools or resources available to them.

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

⇒ Some girls said the group was a place where they could go and be happy, despite other stresses in their lives. Girls suggested that participating in the group allowed them to decompress and relieve stress by talking with others about what they’re currently dealing with. Some girls asked for more programming on coping with stress.

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

⇒ Girls also found this safety and support in the online space [kickaction.ca](http://kickaction.ca).

“We get to know the solutions of problems and learn lessons from others. We get to express our views and ideas to the world and it helps us function better in our everyday lives, thus on-line spaces specifically for girls can play a huge role :)”

## PROMISING PRACTICES IN GIRLS' HEALTH PROMOTION

FROM THE RESEARCH LITERATURE, we identified the following 9 promising practices in health promotion with girls. Girls’ health promotion should be:

1. Skill building – fostering skills such as critical thinking, finding resources, media literacy, networking, civic engagement and leadership
2. Gender-specific, girl-centred, promoting development of a sense of self as a girl
3. Participatory, girl-driven
4. Enhancing of social connections, relational
5. Self-esteem building
6. Multi-component
7. Culturally safe/sensitive
8. Strengths-based
9. Attentive to the topics of: healthy relationships, safety, diversity, body issues, school, family, substance use, mental health, and equity

# FACILITATORS' PERSPECTIVES

WE ASKED 11 GROUP FACILITATORS and 7 young women who had participated in girls groups and were now volunteering in some capacity, questions such as: What are the most important contributions that girls' groups make? What group topics, activities, and actions stand out as particularly helpful? Are the groups supportive in making choices about things like smoking, drinking and having sex? Do the groups help girls navigate issues such as body image, bullying, and dating violence?

⇒ **Enhancing communication skills was most often mentioned as a key contribution of the groups by facilitators: skills such as active and respectful listening, speaking of feelings and opinions, expressing empathy, critical thinking, building rapport.**

⇒ **Group facilitators also mentioned the vital importance of the groups as safe spaces to build relationships, and learn these skills.**

⇒ **Helping girls to make healthy choices was seen as a contribution, not by focusing on specific topics, but through having the opportunity to try new things, to look at their strengths, and to build and explore relationships with themselves and others.**

⇒ **Group facilitators saw that giving girls information, tools, discussion space and opportunities for leadership, helps**

them to explore alternative viewpoints, gender stereotypes and behaviours, which assist them in navigating the difficult issues of body image, bullying, and dating violence.

**As such, the group facilitators' responses map directly to the nine best practices. Girls' groups (such as those offered by member-organization in Girls Action Foundation's national network), which employ an empowerment model that incorporates principles and practices from popular education, media literacy, and strengths-based and civic engagement approaches, advance the practice of girl-centred health promotion.**

The research team for this project has included: Nancy Poole and Tina Talbot, British Columbia Centre of Excellence for Women's Health; Cheryl van Daalen-Smith and Shvata Thakur, York University; Jennifer Bernier, Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women's Health; Margaret Haworth-Brockman and Mara Fridell, Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence; Bilkis Vissandjée, Nathalie Y, Jonathan Kuntz, University of Montreal; Tatiana Fraser and Fabienne Pierre-Jacques, Girls Action Foundation.

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**For more information about this research study, visit <http://girlsactionfoundation.ca>**