

Youth Organizations and Positive Development: Lessons Learned from a Century of Girl Scouting

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I. INTRODUCTION

Girl Scouts is the largest organization in the world dedicated to girl leadership development, with 3.2 million active members and more than 59 million alumnae. Since 1912, women have explored new fields of knowledge, learned valuable skills, and developed strong core values through Girl Scouting.

The Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI) was founded in 2000 as a vital extension of Girl Scouts of the USA. GSRI conducts original research, evaluation, and outcomes measurement studies; releases critical facts and findings; and provides resources essential for the advancement of the well-being and safety of girls living in today's world. Since its inception in 2000, the GSRI has employed a research-to-action approach so that insights from our work with girls and young women can directly inform Girl Scouts of the USA's program and policy development, as well as impact the larger youth development field. In the last decade, GSRI's research and evaluation work has touched numerous organizations in the public and private spheres, making a practical impact on the lives of youth and providing other organizations with evidence needed to make a case for their own work.

II. A POSITIVE IMPACT OF GIRL SCOUTING ON WOMEN ALUMNAE

To commemorate 100 years of Girl Scouting, GSRI launched a study on Girl Scouting's impact on the lives of adult alumnae in 2012. The findings are timely and important to the organization and other youth organizations doing similar work. The study, *Girl Scouting Works: The Alumnae Impact Study* finds that women who were involved in Girl Scouting as girls display particular positive life outcomes to a greater degree than women who were not involved in Girl Scouting. The outcomes include: sense of self; civic engagement; participation in community service; educational achievement, and income. Positive life outcomes were measured by self-reported items on a questionnaire administered to over 3,000 women across the country.

Alumnae interviewed reflected on their Girl Scout memories very fondly, pointing to positive relationships (sisterhood, teamwork), outdoor and community experiences (camping trips, being exposed to nature, community work), fun activities (crafts, earning badges, selling cookies), and having a safe place to try new things. Additionally, Girl Scout alumnae included in the study appeared to internalize the value of community service. All Girl Scout alumnae surveyed had higher levels of participation in community service and volunteerism than non-alumnae surveyed, regardless of the number of years spent in Girl Scouting. The most common negative experience alumnae reported was not having stayed in Girl Scouts long

enough, which actually reflects positively on their time spent in the organization. Other negative experiences reported included poor relationships with troop leaders and other girls.

The Girl Scout alumnae who reported the highest levels of positive outcomes and satisfaction were those who were Girl Scouts the longest. African American and Hispanic alumnae also reported higher levels than alumnae from other racial/ethnic groups. 73 percent of African American alumnae and 70 percent of Hispanic alumnae rated their Girl Scout experience very highly, compared to 65 percent of Caucasian alumnae and 59 percent of Asian alumnae.

III. GIRL LEADERSHIP TODAY

In 2005, as the Girl Scout movement approached its next century, Girl Scouts of the USA renewed its commitment to leadership development as a core focus of its mission through the development of the enhanced Girl Scout Leadership Experience (GSLE), which is tied to nationally-recognized measures of life outcomes for girls.

Figure 1: The 15 Outcomes of the Girl Scout Leadership Experience



Fifteen age-appropriate outcomes, or benefits, emerged around three main themes: “discover”, “connect”, and “take action”. (see Figure 1).

By participating in Girl Scout programming, girls are expected to discover their skills and talents while taking on challenging goals, connect with others in teams while learning how to resolve conflicts and build healthy relationships, and take action to make the world a better place while learning about their community and the world at large.

The GSLE model begins with a definition of leadership that girls understand and believe in: a leader, girls say, is defined not only by the qualities and skills one has,

but also by how those qualities and skills are used to make a difference in the world. Based on research with girls both inside and outside of Girl Scouts, girls aspire to a kind of leadership focused on personal principles, ethical behavior, and the ability to affect social change while collaborating with others, as opposed to the “command and control” style of traditional leadership. Current Girl Scouts score highest in the following areas: developing positive values, cooperation and team building, advancing diversity in a multicultural world, and feeling connected to their communities. Themes that emerge from both past and current Girl Scouts tie to a strong value system, a venue to grow healthy relationships, and a larger connection to the community and changing world.

IV. LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS

Based on our collection of research, experience working with girls and young women, and knowledge of the youth development field, we offer recommendations for maximizing youth developmental outcomes for girls through programming, and expanding the scope of programming to benefit all youth in our communities. The first three recommendations come from recent program evaluation studies with current Girl Scouts, representing diverse girls across several states. The final two recommendations stem from girls’ and young women’s insights on over a decade’s worth of research focused on girls’ healthy development. These recommendations are also documented in other youth developmental research as critical components of youth programming.

1. Expose Girls to a Diversity of Activities

Girls who experience a greater diversity of activities in Girl Scouts report higher leadership impact than girls who experience few activities in Girl Scouts. Current Girl Scouts who say they have become more active leaders in their schools and communities because of their experiences in Girl Scouts scored higher on all 15 outcomes of the GLSE, and participated in five different types of activities. These girls are also more likely to be deeply involved in Girl Scouts, attending at least three meetings and events per month. Additionally, these girls have higher participation in all activity areas (the outdoors, math and science, self-esteem, healthy relationships, healthy living, projects to help the community, and arts and crafts) compared to girls who report lower leadership impact. The opportunity for outdoor activities, like camping, hiking, outdoor sports, and outdoor field trips, is particularly important. In fact, Girl Scout alumnae rated “exposure to nature” as the greatest benefit of being Girl Scouts as girls. Experiences and exposure to the outdoors are essential to all youth, given high rates of youth physical inactivity, obesity, and limited exposure to green space.

2. Reach Girls in Underserved Communities

Girls from lower socioeconomic status (SES) families can benefit greatly from high quality youth programming, often to a greater extent than those from higher SES families. Girls with a lower SES were significantly more likely to rate the leadership impact of Girl Scouting very high and make positive comments about their personal development and community service experiences in Girl Scouting, compared to girls from a higher SES. This has important implications for the youth development field, as youth from families with fewer resources stand to benefit the most from youth organizations focused on building positive values and relationships, as well as skill building, confidence, leadership, and the like. This is especially critical since children from higher SES families are twice as likely to be involved in extracurricular activities such as sports, theatre, school activities, religious services, and Scouting compared to children from lower SES families.

3. Build Conflict Resolution Skills

Conflict resolution is a life skill essential for getting along with others and navigating all types of relationships. Girls who say they have been leaders in their communities because of Girl Scouts score very highly in conflict resolution. However, the opposite is true for girls in Girl Scouts who reported low leadership impact. In fact, conflict resolution is a key area in need of improvement among all Girl Scouts, compared to other outcomes (e.g., positive values). Girls need opportunities to learn how to handle conflicts, communicate effectively with peers, and stand up for themselves and others when they aren't treated well. This will help girls stand up to bullies and become better bystanders when bullying does occur.

4. Encourage Girls to Take Action in their Community

Contrary to popular belief (and gender stereotypes), girls are capable of leading and making differences in their community. Girls say that when they help others, they feel better about themselves. Importantly, many youth don't feel they have much power to change things or make a difference in their communities, be it at school, in religious organizations, in after-school programs, on a sports team, or even at home. It is therefore not surprising that the majority of girls expressed an interest in leadership training opportunities in which they could safely experiment with trying on leadership roles.

5. Involve Trained and Supportive Adults

Supportive adults are the cornerstone to the success of Girl Scouts and other youth-serving organizations, and to the development of young women who are strong leaders. However, effective volunteers are much more than warm bodies; they are often the gatekeepers of high quality youth experiences, especially for younger girls.

As such, in addition to being inclusive, encouraging, and good models for all girls, adults working alongside girls need to be able to facilitate a cooperative learning process and girl-led experiences, giving girls increasing responsibility as they progress.

V. CONCLUSION

No organization can do it all alone or meet the needs of all girls. At a time when funding for youth programs is scarce, it is becoming wiser for organizations to join forces with other like-minded groups to bring services and programs to our youth. The potential for impact grows when youth organizations join forces with industries, non-profits, schools, and universities in a given community. Our goal in the next decade is to further expand our partnerships so that through collaboration and knowledge sharing, we can work with other organizations to best serve girls, as well as youth, families, and communities in our country.

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