

HOW CAN YOU TELL IF A PROGRAM IS GIRL-FRIENDLY? JUST ASK:

Does the program offer opportunities to develop trusting relationships?

Girls want a welcoming place to talk about their lives. Girls often feel alone, unheard, and uncertain about the future. They want opportunities to create respectful and caring relationships with adults and other girls.

Can girls interact meaningfully with girls they consider different from themselves?

Although many girls entered the study with stereotypes about girls they perceived as different, shared work helped challenge their biases. Girls want a space to expand their views and learn from other girls.

Does the program offer activities that girls consider meaningful?

Girls want fun and interesting things to do. Girls name a lack of meaningful activities as one of the most common reasons that girls join gangs, use drugs and alcohol, and engage in fights.

Does resource allocation demonstrate respect for all girls?

Programs should explicitly welcome all girls, regardless of race, income, religion, linguistic background, sexuality, family composition, and ability. Programs should provide disability access, bilingual materials, transportation, financial support (for uniforms, equipment, fees, etc.), and childcare.

Do adults support girls' leadership and encourage them to make their own decisions?

Girls want adults to support rather than direct them. They want adults to help them work through ideas and offer guidance. They do not want adults to take over their projects or overprotect them. Girls want a voice in program development and evaluation.

Do girls have opportunities to learn new things, take healthy risks, and make mistakes?

Girls want to hone existing skills and to explore new arenas without embarrassment. They want to develop skills to articulate and act on their own desires and encouragement to think critically about their lives.

In mixed-sex settings, do girls get equal attention?

Girls want both girls-only and mixed-sex activities. In mixed-sex settings girls often feel shut-out, unheard, or overlooked. Girls want adults to be sensitive to gendered power issues and to ensure that girls can participate fully.

Speak for Yourself is an invitation to rethink traditional assumptions about working with girls and a call to place girls at the center of conversations about research and programming. It is Girl's Best Friend Foundation's hope that this report will provide useful information for girls, their parents and caregivers, researchers, those funding programs and services, and those instructing, counseling, and advocating for girls. We hope they will gain inspiration from the hard work and courage of the girls who shared their insights with us.

To view the complete report and learn more about the history of the research project, please visit www.girlsbestfriend.org/programs/speakforyourself.html.

Lynn M. Phillips, Ph.D.

Dr. Phillips is a social and developmental psychologist and author of *Flirting with Danger* and the National Council for Research on Women's *The Girl's Report*, as well as several other national publications on adolescent girls and young women.

Girl's Best Friend Foundation

Since its creation in 1994, Girl's Best Friend Foundation has funded more than 100 Illinois organizations providing positive programs that build on girls' strengths, empower them to make decisions for themselves, and give them a safe space to grow. The Foundation is committed to collaborating with grantee partners throughout Chicago that provide girl-friendly spaces where girls and young women can recognize and utilize the power of their voices and ideas.

“It's not so hard to find services if you're either in trouble or you're a superstar. But for girls who don't fit either one of those, it's easy to fall through the cracks unless adults are really careful.”

— Advocate interview, Woodstock

METHODOLOGY

In January 1999, Girl's Best Friend Foundation-sponsored researchers initiated a collaboration with six community agencies and 65 racially, ethnically, socially, and economically diverse 12- to 18-year-old girls in rural, urban, and suburban communities across Illinois. Participating agencies included the Carole Robertson Center for Learning, Centro Comunitario Juan Diego, and Girl World in Chicago; Green Meadows Girl Scouts in Champaign-Urbana; McHenry County Youth Services Bureau in Woodstock; and the YWCA in Rockford. An additional 168 girls and 30 adult advocates participated in focus groups and girl-conducted interviews. The girl researchers also surveyed adults and teens in their neighborhoods to better understand attitudes toward girls and the availability of girl-friendly resources in each community. The research initiative incorporated seven research methods: ongoing discussion groups, focus groups, advocate interviews, individual interviews, girl-conducted peer interviews, journal writing, and girl mapping. (Review the complete report, *Speak for Yourself: What Girls Say about What Girls Need*, at www.girlsbestfriend.org/programs/speakforyourself.html, for more detailed descriptions and demographics of the girl researchers.)

SPEAK for YOURSELF

What Girls Say about What Girls Need

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



900 North Franklin, Suite 210, Chicago, Illinois 60610
contact@girlsbestfriend.org www.girlsbestfriend.org
T 312.266.2842 F 312.266.2972

Lynn M. Phillips, Ph.D.
LEPJ908@aol.com

Written and directed by
Lynn M. Phillips, Ph.D.

Sponsored and facilitated by
Girl's Best Friend Foundation

SPEAK for YOURSELF

What Girls Say about What Girls Need

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What do girls need to grow up healthy, safe, and strong?

What concerns do girls want to share with adults?

How can adults and girls work together to help girls thrive?

We asked more than 200 girls these questions. *Speak for Yourself* reveals what they had to say.

Speak for Yourself: What Girls Say about What Girls Need is based on an intensive, two-year study conducted by girls and about girls. The report presents the insights of more than 200 girls in six Illinois communities—12- to 18-year-old girls from urban, suburban, and rural areas, representing diverse race, class, and religious backgrounds. *Speak for Yourself* was written and directed by Lynn M. Phillips, Ph.D., a social and developmental psychologist and author of *Flirting with Danger*, and the National Council for Research on Women's *The Girl's Report*, as well as several other national publications on adolescent girls and young women. The research was sponsored and facilitated by Girl's Best Friend Foundation, the only foundation in Illinois that exclusively funds programs for girls.

Speak for Yourself documents a collaboration among girls, adult researchers, and girl-friendly community agencies. The study's design reflects Girl's Best Friend Foundation's desire to listen to girls and honor their expertise, as well as its belief in girls' ability to create meaningful social change. Our aim was twofold—to gather information about girls' wants and needs, and to promote girls' empowerment and leadership skills through participation in the research process and in partnership with adults.

WE WANTED TO KNOW MORE ABOUT ADOLESCENT GIRLS, SO WE ASKED THEM.

A core group of 65 Illinois girls provided information as research participants reflecting on their lives. These same girls became researchers—they explored girls' concerns, learned research skills, and put those skills to work conducting interviews and surveys with adults and peers in their neighborhoods. *Speak for Yourself* examines not only the girls' findings, but also what they and their adult collaborators learned about how girls and adults can work together to help girls thrive.

HOW CAN ADULTS HELP GIRLS?

In individual and group interviews, girls identified violence, drugs and alcohol, sexuality and relationships, and loneliness as among their most pressing concerns. They also considered how adults could help them to address these concerns. Overall, girls were less concerned with the *types* of programs available to them than with the quality of the relationships and the degree of respect they found *within* programs. Whether adults wish to help girls by funding, creating, or fine-tuning girls' programs, or simply by selecting an empowering program for their daughters, they need to know what a girl-friendly program looks like. Here are the qualities the girls found most important. **A girl-friendly program offers girls opportunities to:**

- Build relationships and have their voices be heard
- Work with girls whom they perceive as different from themselves
- Prepare for and assume leadership positions
- Create a setting where everyone matters
- Make a difference
- Learn to analyze and articulate their concerns
- Have fun while working hard
- Stretch beyond their own perceived limits

WHAT GIRLS WANT MAKES SENSE.

Girls want to be respected as valuable community members. They want to feel emotionally and physically safe, and they want to have a voice in decisions that affect them. Girls want adult support as they challenge themselves to learn and grow.

“If I had to say one thing that girls need most, it would be someone to listen to them, believe in them—somebody that understands we can do a lot more than people give us credit for. And then we need somebody to give us a chance to learn and do it.”

—Clarice, 15,
African American

“I'd like [adults] to know that girls are a lot stronger than they think. We have a lot going for us and we have a lot to say.”

—Alicia, 15,
Mexican/Puerto Rican

PITFALLS FOR ADULTS TO AVOID

Girls are fortunate to have many sensitive, responsible, and effective adults working to promote their healthy development. However, even well-meaning adults may unconsciously adopt the destructive practices and assumptions uncovered during this research. Adults who wish to support girls should make every effort to:

Avoid romanticizing girls.

Girls are strong and determined, but they should not be romanticized as savvy social critics who do not need adult support. If adults hold unrealistic images of girls, they may undermine girls' attempts at leadership by failing to offer necessary resources or guidance.

Avoid overprotecting or underestimating girls.

Girls are neither fragile nor downtrodden victims. When adults underestimate girls' strengths and abilities, they fail to recognize what girls can accomplish and neglect to challenge girls. Adults need to honor girls' strengths and give them credit for what they can do themselves.

Keep girls out of adults' conflicts or power struggles.

Adults should work through unresolved personal issues and deal with adult disagreement directly. If adults are struggling over differences in perspective, they must not make girls choose sides or involve them in a “custody battle.”

Learn when to step in and when to let go.

Adults need to strike a balance between offering needed support and getting out of girls' way to let them work through challenges on their own. When adults step in too quickly, girls miss the chance to develop their own strengths and strategies. But if adults fail to challenge girls' assumptions when needed, girls may not stretch their thinking into new dimensions.

Acknowledge what adults are and are not prepared to do to support girls' endeavors.

Girls should have as much latitude in decision-making and as many leadership opportunities as possible. However, in cases where decisions cannot be shared or where resources are not available to support girls' ideas, adults should explain the reasons for these constraints and help girls explore other avenues.