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ABSTRACT

This summary report describes the findings of a study undertaken in 1995 by the Academy for Educational Development, a nonprofit educational evaluation and research organization for the New York Women's Foundation. The major purposes of the study were to document the status of girls aged 9 to 15 in New York City, identify exemplary programs for the age group, and make recommendations to the Foundation regarding programming for girls. Data analysis of basic indicators of demographic and socioeconomic status, health and welfare, education, and juvenile justice provided a general description of the health and welfare of girls in the city. A survey was mailed to 560 youth-serving agencies in New York City, and 75 were returned, for a return rate of 13%. In these programs, girls were underrepresented compared to boys. While 67 agencies reported serving girls, only 10 had girls-only programs. Five of these seemed to meet the Foundation's criteria in that they provided separate space and time for girls and had a positive youth development philosophy. Three of these programs are profiled as excellent examples of programming for girls. They include a writing group for junior high and high school girls, an acrobatic and unicycle club for girls aged 11 to 14, and a science and mathematics program for seventh graders. These programs are grounded in a coherent vision of how to support girls' development. They have staff who are knowledgeable about girls' issues, and they foster skills that are transferable to other areas of girls' lives. Agency staff identified many problems in creating effective girls' programs, including girls' self-perceptions, the attitudes of parents and community members, and insufficient resources. (SLD)

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# GIRLS PROGRAMMING IN NEW YORK CITY

## A Summary Report

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# **GIRLS PROGRAMMING IN NEW YORK CITY**

## **A Summary Report**

1997

**Academy for Educational Development  
100 Fifth Avenue  
New York, New York 10011**

*It's better that it's girls because with boys we would be embarrassed. We have more confidence because we are all girls. We are comfortable with each other.*

[girl in girls-only program]

*It's not acceptable to walk into a teen center with 400 boys.*

[director, community-based agency]

## **Introduction**

**T**his summary report describes the findings of a study undertaken in 1995 by the Academy for Educational Development (AED), a nonprofit educational evaluation and research organization, for the New York Women's Foundation. The major purpose of the study was to document the status of girls aged 9 to 15 in New York City; identify exemplary programs for this age group, judged by criteria established by the foundation; and make recommendations to the foundation regarding programming for girls.

The activities undertaken in the study included an **analysis of existing data** on the status of girls aged 9 to 15 in New York City; a **survey** of youth-serving agencies about programming for girls; **interviews with staff** from exemplary programs; **site visits**; and **focus groups** and **interviews with girls** in exemplary programs.

**Data analysis** of basic indicators of demographic and socioeconomic status, health and welfare, education, and juvenile justice provided a general description of the health and welfare of girls aged 9-15, as well as information on the frequency with which girls engage in risk behaviors, such as substance abuse, truancy, delinquency, and early and unprotected sexual intercourse. One fact that emerged from our research was that **most data are not disaggregated by gender** or in other ways that make a gender analysis possible. For example, education data are not disaggregated by gender, and childhood abuse data are not disaggregated by type of abuse. Thus it is impossible to determine the achievement status of girls or the extent of sexual abuse among girls in published analyses. This situation contributes to the lack of public awareness of gender issues.

### **Essential Conditions for Effective Girls Programming**

- A separate space and time for meeting
- Continuity over time in programming
- Involvement of all girls, not just those identified with problems
- Focus on positive youth development

**Data of particular concern in considering the status  
of New York City girls aged 9 to 15**

- The **high poverty rates for girls (and boys) in female-headed households:** over half of all children in female-headed households live in poverty, with even higher rates among Latinas and Native Americans.
- The **high incidence of STDs among teenage girls** (in the case of gonorrhea girls are 9 times more likely than boys to be infected), often an indication of sexual abuse.
- The **higher rate of death caused by suicide among girls aged 10 to 14 than among boys in age group.**
- The **continued increase in birth rates among the youngest adolescents—**aged 11 to 15.
- The **lower performance of girls than boys on the CAT** (California Achievement Test) in mathematics at most grade levels from the second to the eighth grade.

The AED survey was mailed to 560 youth-serving agencies in New York City, including community-based organizations, recreational centers, Beacon centers, and YW/YMCAs. The survey sought to determine more about the participation of girls (especially those between the ages of 9 and 15 years and from low-income communities) in program activities. It also asked about girls-only programs (if any) and the perceptions of staff regarding the challenges of providing services for girls. Of the surveys sent out, 75 were returned, representing a return rate of 13 percent. Responding agencies ranged from very small to very large, based on the number of youth served (29 to 205,000 youth served annually). Most respondents served a racially and ethnically mixed population; two-thirds served predominantly (more than two-thirds) low-income youth. Survey findings are summarized on the next page.

Of the 75 responding agencies, 10 had girls-only programs. Of the 10, we identified five with girls-only programs that seemed to meet the foundation's criteria. They provided girls with **separate space and time** for activities, as well as for reflection and discussion; they involved **all girls**, not just those identified with problems; and they had a **positive youth development philosophy**. We made site visits to five of these and profile three in this report as exemplary of excellent girls programming. They are **Young Women's Voices**, a writing group; the **Acro Club**, a girls' acrobatic and unicycle club; and **Operation Smart**, a science and math program. In addition to the above criteria, these programs are grounded on a **coherent vision** of how to support girls' development; they have **staff knowledgeable about girls' issues** and trained to address them; they promote **girls' ownership** of the program; and they **foster skills that are transferable** to other areas of girls' lives.

## SUMMARY OF SURVEY FINDINGS

- In the 75 surveyed programs, **girls were underrepresented compared to boys**: Of the 75 responding agencies, 67 agencies reported serving girls. These agencies reported that they served a total of 101,379 girls in their programs; the total number of youth served was 435,003. Therefore, of the 67 agencies that served girls as well as boys in their programs, **a little less than one-fourth of the total program participants were girls (23%)**.
- **Of the over 100,000 girls served by surveyed programs, approximately 1,100 girls (1%) were served in girls-only programs.**
- **Two-thirds of the surveyed agencies did nothing special to recruit girls to their programs**: Those that did offered programs for girls, used female participants and staff to recruit girls, or sponsored special girls-only events—such as a girls' sports day—to attract girls.
- **The most popular types of youth programs in surveyed agencies** were academic support, career development, sports and recreation, and performing arts programs. Surveyed agencies reported that, with the exception of sports and recreation, 50 percent or more of participants in these programs were girls.
- Surveyed programs described **many effective strategies to address girls' needs and interests**, including separate programs, forums, or rap groups for girls; emphasis on the personal development of girls; creating a positive climate for girls in the agency; and having qualified staff who are sensitive to girls' issues and needs and reflective of the girls' ethnic/ racial backgrounds.
- **Challenges identified to creating effective girls' programs** included girls' negative self-perceptions and peer pressure; girls' and parents' safety concerns; traditional norms held by parents and community members; insufficient funds; lack of support from men and boys in girls' lives; and recruiting difficulties.
- Agencies defined the **following supports for developing programming for girls and improving their access to youth programs**: funding and resources; technical assistance; consciousness raising and advocacy regarding girls' needs; knowledgeable program staff; and coordination and collaboration with other program providers and social service agencies.

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## Program Descriptions

In its third year, **Young Women's Voices** is sponsored by Interfaith Neighbors, a youth-serving agency on the Upper East Side of Manhattan that offers programs for young people from around the city. Young Women's Voices emerged from discussions among agency staff about the "silencing" of young women's voices in early adolescence, which they felt was very evident among girls in their programs. This inspired one staff member to design a curriculum using writing as a tool to help young women express themselves, build group solidarity, and become effective writers.

Two writing groups—one for sixth and seventh graders and one for eighth and ninth graders—meet once a week for two hours after school. There are about 10 girls in each group—equal numbers of Latinas and African-Americans and some Caribbean-American girls. The groups meet in comfortable rooms: one has a couch, books, easy chairs, and educational posters on the wall; the other is a conference room with a round table big enough to seat the entire group. The group leaders are a white woman and an African-American woman; both are experienced social workers, one of whom describes herself as "passionate about writing."

In each session, girls generally listen to a poem or short story, discuss it, and then write on a related topic. After a brief discussion and a writing period of about 40 minutes, there is a sharing time in which girls read their work and receive feedback. Girls also keep a writing journal to which the instructors respond. Other activities include visits from women authors and listening to famous women writers on tape—Maya Angelou is a favorite. Group members also read their work at agency events and help plan *Girl Power*, an annual all-girls conference.

The **Acro Club**, sponsored by Goddard-Riverside Community Center on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, is a unicycling, tumbling, and juggling program for girls aged 11 to 14. In its fifth year of operation, the club takes place before and after school in the gym of a local intermediate school. Approximately 20 girls from diverse backgrounds come to each session; generally a core group of 15 is consistent over time. In addition, a performance group of highly skilled girls perform at special events and unicycle "conventions" both in New York City and nationally.

During a typical session, girls split into groups for activities, some working on the giraffe—a very tall unicycle—others on the unicycle. Girls help one another mount and do tricks. While they practice, other girls work with a juggling instructor. After a short time, girls mount their unicycles and begin performing tricks as the director calls them out. After the unicycling tricks, girls join one another on mats for tumbling.

The club is facilitated by two men—one, a social worker, who previously developed a tumbling program for Latino boys, and the other, a teacher and now a full-time juggler and musician.

Both are committed to providing girls with the opportunities to learn "high risk," "high profile" activities that, "once mastered, promote feelings of pride and confidence." Both are convinced that the club would not work as a coed program: One said: "If there were boys in the program, they would tend to overpower the girls, take over the activities, and I'm not sure the girls would get the same sense of accomplishment they get now." The performance is an important part of the club. One instructor stated: "There is a high standard of excellence that the girls have to meet and when they know they have met it, by participating in performances, they are absolutely beaming."

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For the past three years, Girls Incorporated has been developing its **Urban Girls Initiative** in four cities—Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. The New York initiative targets three schools in East Harlem. For this study, AED visited Central Park East Secondary School—where two groups of 20 seventh graders meet once a week across the year for a two-hour period with a Girls Incorporated instructor. They participate in the inquiry-based science and math curriculum developed by Girls Incorporated's Operation SMART, a science/math initiative funded by the National Science Foundation.

The curriculum, which has been pilot-tested and evaluated by Girls Incorporated and outside evaluators, emphasizes hands-on approaches to science and math and encourages girls to work in groups, seek answers on their own, and experiment with equipment. Girls also learn about math and science careers by meeting women in

these fields and through field trips. At Central Park East, this science curriculum is followed by Girls Incorporated's Will Power/Won't Power, a curriculum that helps girls explore values about relationships and sexuality and practice assertive behaviors.

The Central Park East program is held in a science classroom on Monday morning. Girls sit in small groups at round tables; there are about 18 girls in the class, most of whom are African-American or Latina. After an informal discussion and a snack, the instructor describes the hands-on activity for the day. For example, girls are to construct the highest tower they can using only small marshmallows and toothpicks and a base with a fixed perimeter—the size of a large index card. Girls have about half an hour to complete the task. This activity time is followed by a brief discussion about the activity. Because of its success, in 1996-97, the program was expanded at Central Park East to include grades 7-12, with appropriate activities for girls at all grade levels.

### What Girls Said About The Programs

*I joined because you don't see people riding a unicycle. It's not something most people know how to do. I feel the freedom to express myself and nobody is going to tease me.*

*It's a lot of fun. I'm impressed that I've learned the unicycle. I couldn't even ride a regular bike!*

*In my language arts class, we don't do a lot of writing. I have all this creativity bottled up and don't know what to do with it.*

*I like a class without boys. You can share things that you wouldn't if there were boys. Taking the computer apart was so exciting.*

*Boys are inconsiderate. They wouldn't respect the equipment, the drills. They would just want to come in and do things their way.*



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## Recommendations

**B**ased on our research, we believe that the need for creative girls-only programming is great. We also believe that the idea of girls-only programming will not be a priority for most youth providers except to address issues such as sexuality and pregnancy prevention (which unfortunately are still perceived by many as "female" issues). Therefore, some of our recommendations to funders and staff in community-based agencies are related to changing this perception.

Further, many providers who are knowledgeable about gender issues and eager to develop programs for girls require information, technical assistance, and resources to develop programs. Our recommendations are focused on addressing both public perception and technical assistance needs by doing the following:

- ▶ **Developing public awareness** about girls' issues and how good programming can support girls' development.
- ▶ **Providing technical assistance** to youth-serving agencies and community groups that are eager to serve girls but require further information and resources.
- ▶ **Developing a network of community agencies** to exchange information about what works for girls, including electronic networks, such as GenderWise, a forum on the Internet dealing specifically with gender issues.
- ▶ **Undertaking research and evaluation** in the area of girls' programming.
- ▶ **Involving students and staff from colleges and universities** who are concerned with gender issues in assisting community agencies in developing and implementing programs that focus on girls.

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*For more information about this study, as well as about other AED work on gender and equity issues, contact Alexandra Weinbaum, AED, 100 Fifth Ave., New York, NY, 10011, 212-367-4577.*

The Academy for Educational Development (AED), founded in 1961, is a nonprofit educational evaluation and technical assistance organization committed to addressing human development and educational needs in the United States and throughout the world. AED's **School and Community Services** department has a strong commitment to excellence and equity in education and to developing links between schools, families, and community-based organizations to increase educational and employment opportunities for youth across the United States. We work with school systems, families, community organizations, and foundations and other funding agencies on programs addressing critical educational issues: educational reform; adolescent pregnancy and parenting; HIV/AIDS education and prevention; middle-grades education; equity; school-to-work transition; and family involvement in education. We design, implement, and evaluate model educational programs; provide technical assistance to schools and school districts; and disseminate information on issues relevant to youth through conferences, seminars, and publications. School and Community Services has worked collaboratively with schools and school districts, community-based organizations, and government agencies in 90 cities and 37 states. School and Community Services' main office is located in New York City.



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