

# Girl Power!



by Carrie McVicker Seth and Christy Sharp



## EMERGING PRACTICE

Quasi-experimental study, a correlational or ex post facto study, posttest only, single group pre-and posttest, comparison group.<sup>1</sup>



## CHILD AND FAMILY WELL-BEING<sup>2</sup>

- Capacity of families to provide for children's needs
- Appropriate services to meet children's educational needs
- Adequate service to meet children's physical and mental health needs

*In today's world, being a girl is a very special role, but a hard one too. There are a lot of pressures on teenagers these days, like drinking and school. I joined Girl Power! because I saw others in the...community having fun, showing their girl power, and learning how to be a better person, especially a better girl.*

*Girl Power! has proven that girls really have the power to stand up for themselves and make healthy decisions, which makes them a leader and not a follower.*

*I show my Girl Power! by standing straight and tall and [speaking] my mind with pride and dignity.*

—Excerpts from essays written by Girl Power! participants

Girls and young women develop in unique and powerful ways. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention note that girls are more likely than boys to report feeling sad or hopeless, to lack self-confidence, and to be concerned about their weight. As a result, girls and young women often practice risky behaviors for different reasons than boys.

According to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, girls often turn to substance abuse to improve mood, increase confidence, and lose weight, whereas boys use drugs and alcohol to seek a sensation or enhance their social status. Although the reasons for their substance abuse are different, girls and young women continue to receive treatments developed for males. There simply aren't enough coherent, gender-competent policies and programs that reflect the unique needs and strengths of girls and young women.



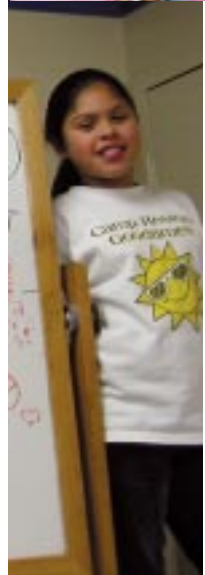
The juvenile justice system has certainly felt the need for gender-competent services. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, between 1980 and 2000, juvenile arrests increased 35% for females while declining 11% for males. In 2001, females accounted for 28% of total juvenile arrests. In a system traditionally dominated by boys, services and programs have been slow to meet the distinctive needs of female offenders, who often have a history of neglect and abuse, poor academic performance, and substance abuse.

The Valentine Foundation and Womens Way recommend that programming for girls offer a safe place, time to talk, and opportunities to develop positive relationships with other women, including mentors. All children and young people need networks of opportunity and encouragement that widen as they grow. Although the opportunities available to girls have expanded in recent years, barriers to equal access still exist. Prevention, opportunities for positive youth development, and early intervention can address risk before it escalates.

## Just for Girls

*I work with girls ages 10–13 whose families have immigrated from Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. They are eager to learn and to have fun. They are sharp and tender. Some of them are shy and afraid. They remind me of my tender and fickle years. They inspire me to encourage them to make good choices, to think critically, positively, and to stand up for themselves. I can see their hearts through their eyes.*

—Luz Marina Zuleta, Girl Power! Prevention Specialist



PHOTOS COURTESY OF GIRL POWER!

Participants of the fourth annual Girl Power! Conference get creative, have fun, and ask question of the speakers.

six hours of training to school counselors, service providers, volunteers, and nonprofit staff in community settings, and afterward offers technical assistance and collects data for the ongoing program evaluation.

An annual daylong Girl Power! conference offers program participants speakers and workshops designed to highlight the educational and career opportunities and overall life choices available to women. The girls at each site also choose community service activities to perform, such as working with residents in health care facilities, promoting a holiday anti-drunk driving campaign, or getting involved in a community drug-free pledge.

## Evaluation

During the 2002–2003 school year, the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) used several measures to gauge the program’s influence on girls’ attitudes and behaviors. CSAP measured demographics, life skills, the ability to identify healthy life choices, girls’ confidence and pride in their communities, their interactions with peers and adults, their ability to identify healthy recreational activities, and the decrease or delay in alcohol or drug use. A retrospective posttest developed by the Girl Power! evaluator gauged improvement in the girls’ competencies.

Of the 600 girls who participated in the program, the evaluation included complete pre- and posttests from 146 girls from the 35 program sites across Fairfax County. Most girls were between the ages of 12 and 15 (61%) and most were African American (27%), Hispanic (25%), or racially mixed (21%). Girls reported low levels of substance use after participating in the program, and cigarette smoking was viewed as a less favorable pastime.

The girls had higher levels of self-esteem (2.9 on a scale of 4.0) and reported feeling more attached to their neighborhoods at the end of the program year. The retrospective posttest evaluation showed statistically significant gains in some measures of interpersonal skills, problem solving, handling of anger, talking about the harmful effects of alcohol, and demonstrating knowledge about the transmission of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

“Girl Power! has caught on because it engages girls and gets them involved in positive activities,” says Laura Yager, Director of Fairfax–Falls Church Community Services Board. “We know they have fun, but we also know the program builds skills—skills we hope stay with them long after their years in Girl Power!”

*Carrie McVicker Seth is a research analyst with CWLA’s Research to Practice Initiative. Christy Sharp is a Program Manager in CWLA’s Juvenile Justice Division. For more information about Girl Power!, visit [www.girlpower.gov](http://www.girlpower.gov).*

1. Each program highlighted by the Research to Practice Initiative (R2P) is supported by research. For more information on the levels of research, visit the R2P website at [www.cwla.org/programs/r2p](http://www.cwla.org/programs/r2p), or e-mail R2P at [R2P@cwla.org](mailto:R2P@cwla.org).
2. By identifying practices and programs that research has shown to be successful in the outcome areas associated with the federally mandated Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs), CWLA’s Research to Practice Initiative (R2P) seeks to help states explore the evidence base for improving their programs. For more information, see “Many Efforts, One Voice,” *Children’s Voice*, January/February 2004, or visit the R2P website at [www.cwla.org/programs/r2p](http://www.cwla.org/programs/r2p) or e-mail [R2P@cwla.org](mailto:R2P@cwla.org).

In 1997, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) implemented the Girl Power! informational campaign. Today, when people call for more information, SAMHSA refers them to the Fairfax County–Falls Church Community Services Board in Falls Church, Virginia. That organization has taken the concept of Girl Power! and turned it into a 32-week evidence-based program complete with yearly process and outcome evaluations.

Fairfax County developed its Girl Power! program in 1997 with one small group of girls; it now boasts 35 local sites in the county and replication throughout Virginia and five other states. Girl Power! targets girls ages 10–15 at risk for substance use, school drop-out, juvenile delinquency, and other problem behaviors. The program helps build skills and self-confidence in school, arts, sports, and other endeavors.

“Girl Power! not only helps develop and strengthen valuable life skills in girls,” says Girl Power! Prevention Specialist Kara Schutter, “it’s also a place where girls can be themselves and create long-lasting friendships.” Fairfax–Falls Church built the program on four cornerstones—education, community service, alternative activities, and assistance for parents and caregivers.

“Girl Power! is inclusive of many things that girls need at this crucial age,” says Prevention Specialist Francine Nelson. “Learning about responsibilities, strengths, and power, and practicing these skills teaches them they can be anything they want to be.”

The program is offered to girls in grades 5 through 8; those who complete the program can come back as volunteer mentors in 9th grade. Meetings are held where the girls are most likely to be—in schools or community centers. Fairfax provides