



## Is Girls Circle an Evidence-based Program?

*This article describes the Girls Circle model as a program designed within evidence-based approaches of Motivational Interviewing and Strengths-Based practices and principles. Additionally, it addresses the model's applicability to vulnerable populations, the integration of research-based practices responsive to the adolescent female brain, trauma, culture, and gender. The article addresses current findings, evaluation, and the Girls Circle as integral or complementary to core services for girls.*

**Girls Circle is designed in the evidence-based principles** of Motivational Interviewing and Strengths-Based approaches that target resiliency and protective factors, in addition to stimulating critical thinking and moral reasoning through experiential activities and guided discussions. The Strengths-Based approach - now being adopted by several states' education departments as a developmentally-appropriate approach - is recognized for its effectiveness in engaging school-aged youth. Motivational Interviewing, a core approach of the behavioral health sciences field, is recognized by the corrections field as an evidence-based practice. Cultural responsiveness and trauma-responsive practices further enhance the potency and relevance of these Strengths-Based and Motivational Interviewing applications in the group context.

Girls Circle is a female-responsive program for girls 9 – 18 years of age regardless of risk factor. Girls Circle focuses on being responsive to adolescent female development from a holistic perspective which takes into consideration the effects of a girl's culture, gender, relationships and environment, as well as trauma by establishing a safe group experience that recognizes and fosters girls' capacities for healthy relationships, empathy (being a primary and essential social skill), self-expression, the development of meaningful educational, career, and relationship goals and interpersonal skills. In addition, accountability is fostered especially through the strengths-based, motivational interviewing principles and practices that generate awareness and ownership of decisions and goals within a collective atmosphere of support. The program is structured and consistent, with flexibility for program-specific objectives and participant-directed topics, within adaptable time frames. It creates a welcoming environment in which girls and young women seek to voice and explore experiences, thoughts and behaviors. Additionally, the model stimulates emotional regulation in a supportive way that establishes healthy and caring relationships with peers and adults and re-connects them to society in a pro-social capacity with the primary goal being a successful participation in community, or successful re-entry into community from correctional settings.

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It is also complimentary to other models of intervention that solely target mental health, substance abuse, school truancy, pregnancy prevention, gang involvement and other high risk behaviors.

There are many examples of communities that deploy the Girls Circle format within the framework of Evidence-Based Principles. Girls Circle facilitators offer exercises that focus on gender-relevant themes which influence emotions, thoughts, attitudes and behaviors toward self, family, peers, and community. Girls Circle is not meant to be a replacement program to cognitive behavioral treatment or other services. Several communities are pairing Girls Circle with model CBT programs such as Aggression Replacement Training or Dialectical Behavioral Therapy and are reporting high levels of client engagement as well as client AND staff satisfaction. Girls Circle appears to do very well as an option in the menu of core programming.

Nationally recognized as a promising approach by the OJJDP, the Girls Circle program was implemented in a three year Title II grant-funded program through the Sonoma County Probation Department and community based organizations in Sonoma County, CA. Named "Circles Across Sonoma," the program was highly praised by facilitators, probation officers, girls and families. While evaluation is underway<sup>i</sup>, the program has been renewed<sup>ii</sup> by the Sonoma County Probation Department for the 2010-2011 year. To date, over 900 girls have completed the program with a strong completion success rate. Data thus far indicate significance in body image, self-efficacy/esteem, and communication to adults. Completed analysis is expected at year end 2010. Previous national studies on the model have seen significant increases in girls' social support, perception of body image, self-efficacy, attachment to school and communication with adults. Importantly, significant decreases have been seen in girls' self-harm and drinking behaviors.<sup>iii</sup>

The research behind Girls Circle is clinically sound and based on solid approaches endorsed by the behavioral health sciences field. Like its parent Motivational Interviewing and Strengths-Based approaches, Girls Circle does have the versatility to be applied to low risk populations such as schools, camp and after school programs, job training programs, mentoring, and it is now being demonstrated as a valuable program that makes sense in correctional and rehabilitative settings as well.

The strengths-based, motivational interviewing Girls Circle program: (1) enhances treatment readiness and client responsivity, and (2) develops and fosters a positive culture of self directed change. In the behavioral health sciences field, it has been demonstrated that program outcomes are substantially improved when the treatment readiness and client responsivity is enhanced. Clinically, this makes sense - if the client is not receptive to the program, or if the client has not resolved the ambivalence to change, it would be a struggle for that client to meet program goals.

The value of Girls Circle is as follows: this structured program addresses girls' inherent needs and strengths to connect with others. In successfully doing so, it taps girls' own self-motivations toward agency and empowerment. Topics, activities, and environment are conducive to girls' capacities to address their needs, identify and change unhealthy or unsafe behaviors, and develop and practice skills that are amenable to group work and better able to meet core needs. The girls

are able to transfer those skills to other parts of their lives, whether it be their classrooms, neighborhoods and families, job training, emotional regulation and/or mental health programs, their substance abuse education, physical health, or life skills education and interpersonal relationships.

In addition, Girls Circle is a culturally responsive program. Cultural responsiveness has been identified as a primary principle of education and youth programming. A salient aspect of the Girls Circle model, format and curricula that include nine current Facilitator Activity Guides for girls' programs and one Mother-Daughter Circle Facilitator Activity Guide is its capacity for cultural responsiveness. Girls' identities are shaped by and inexplicably tied to race, ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status, geographic region, sexual orientation, religion or belief system, and gender. These central characteristics of identity, when recognized in strengths-based activities and discussions within Girls Circle groups meet fundamental developmental needs that assist adolescent girls in developing self-worth, coping and resiliency skills, interpersonal boundaries, goals, critical thinking skills and resources for safe, healthy and legal activities.

For young women of color or disenfranchised populations, there is a disproportionate share of the total female population in the juvenile justice system. Youth of color generally show higher death rates, school dropout rates, higher teen birth rates, disengaged youth, poverty rates, single parent homes, and homes with no full time employed parent.<sup>iv</sup> Evidence-based cognitive behavioral programs in youth programs have not yet, to our knowledge, shown evidence of significant positive effects on youth of color or female youth specifically. Girls Circle is designed with positive cultural resiliency elements and is therefore likely to add important benefits to the overall program and educational goals for young women of color.

Girls Circle and its' counterpart The Council for Boys and Young Men share a central tenet of theoretical orientation – a youth's relationships with others is the central organizing and influencing feature in his/her overall development. Therefore, all program elements are designed to recognize, build upon, restore and sustain youth within healthy relationships, a KEY principle of Strengths-Based models and an essential element for readiness to change. Relational practices and strategies recognize and build upon girls' capacity to form social bonds which allow them to more easily engage in critical thinking processes and to develop safe, legal and healthy skills.<sup>v</sup>

Girls Circle is a gender-responsive approach that reflects the recommendations of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention for female-responsive policies, programs, and training for those serving girls.<sup>vi</sup> The pathways which shape adolescent females' entry into the juvenile justice system differ from adolescent males. Studies estimate over 90 percent of girls entering the legal system are victims of crime and trauma, primarily within their homes, through physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse, or as witnesses to violence.<sup>vii, viii, ix</sup> Traumatic stress results in altered neurobiological processes and altered structural development in the human brain, including overdevelopment of the limbic and nonverbal systems, and underdevelopment of the higher order cognitive structures such as the neo-cortex that focuses on words and abstract thought.<sup>x</sup> Hence, by incorporating a trauma-responsive component in its programming, educational and training institutions and youth development programs are better equipped to achieve program objectives.

Girls Circle is a trauma-responsive model. The curricula is not intended to replace mental health treatment of trauma survivors, but rather to provide science-based strategies to reduce stress in traumatized or chronically stressed girls and young women, i.e. predictability, caring and supportive social relationships, shared decision making, and gender-relevant topics and environments.<sup>xi</sup> These strategies promote regulation of neurobiological processes that increase the potential for girls under stress or impacted by trauma to engage in broader cognitive processes such as critical thinking and decision making and social-emotional processes.<sup>xii</sup>

Finally, participants and providers of Girls Circle programs report high satisfaction with the program. When girls want to attend programs and are engaged, program objectives are more easily achieved.

In conclusion, Girls Circle offers a model that is designed in the evidence based principles of Strengths-Based and Motivational Interviewing approaches, and additionally brings cultural responsivity and science-based trauma responsive strategies to promote female adolescent development that enhance and compliment other core programming goals of organizations serving girls and young women.

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<sup>ii</sup> Sonoma County Probation Department: [http://www.sonoma-county.org/probation/juvenile\\_services/special\\_services.htm](http://www.sonoma-county.org/probation/juvenile_services/special_services.htm)

<sup>iii</sup> 2006. Steese, S., Dollette, M., Phillips, W. Hossfeld, B., & Taormina, G.. Understanding Girls' Circle as an Intervention on Perceived Social Support, Body Image, Self-Efficacy, Locus of Control and Self-Esteem. *Adolescence*, Vol. 41, No. 161, Spring

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<sup>iv</sup> 2008. Kids Count Database Online. Variations in Child Well Being by Race and Ethnicity. [www.datacenter.kidscount.org](http://www.datacenter.kidscount.org); Annie E. Casey Foundation

<sup>v</sup> 1999. Siegel, D. *The Developing Mind: Toward a Neurobiology of Interpersonal Experience*. New York, NY: Guilford Press

<sup>vi</sup> 1998. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. *Guiding Principles for Promising Female Programming. An Inventory of Best Practices*. Washington D.C.: Author.

<sup>vii</sup> 1999. Acoca, L. Investing In Girls: A 21st Century Strategy. *Juvenile Justice* (Volume VI: 1, pp. 3 - 13). Washington D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

<sup>viii</sup> 2004. Chesney-Lind, M., & Pasko, L. *The Female Offender: Girls, Women, and Crime* (Second Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

<sup>ix</sup> 2006. Schaffner, L. *Girls in Trouble with the Law*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

<sup>x</sup> Perry, B. Violence and Childhood, How Persisting Fear Can Alter the Developing Child's Brain. [www.childtrauma.org/ctamaterials/Vio\\_chid.asp](http://www.childtrauma.org/ctamaterials/Vio_chid.asp); Child Trauma Academy

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<sup>xi</sup> Vance, J. E., 2001. Neurobiological Mechanisms of Psychosocial Resiliency. In Richman, J.M., and Fruser, M.W., (Eds.) *The Context of Youth Violence: Resilience, Risk, and Protection* (electronic resource) (pp. 43-20). Westport, CT: Praeger

<sup>xii</sup> 1997, Perry, B.D., *Incubated in Terror: Neurodevelopmental Factors in the Cycle of Violence*. In *Children, Youth and Violence: The Search for Solutions* (J Osofsky, Ed.) Guildford Press: New York