

MEETING GIRLS' NEEDS

There is national recognition that support for girls, both individually and in programs, must be grounded in our knowledge of girls' development and must be strengths-based, culturally competent and trauma-informed. Research that has focused specifically on girls' development has concluded that:

- Connection with others is the central organizing feature of development in girls, and their relationship focus creates worries about abandonment and loss of closeness that dominate girls' thinking from elementary through high school.
- Many 11- and 12-year old girls who previously seemed resilient appear to lose their self-confidence, and some girls who once were good at academics, sports and the arts stop excelling to avoid competition or rejection.
- Girls report significantly lower levels of self-worth and satisfaction with their physical appearance and social, academic and athletic achievement than boys.
- Girls are more upset by stressful life events, see themselves as helpless, fear abandonment, and express a greater need for closeness and nurturing than boys do. Additionally, when mothers have been unable to overcome substance abuse or relationship problems, their daughters show similar powerlessness.
- 50% of high school girls are depressed and more girls than boys attempt suicide.
- A variety of endocrine disruptors, including environmental chemical and hormone exposure as well as low birth weight and childhood obesity, account for early physical maturing in some girls; early maturing girls are more likely to enter the juvenile justice system.
- A third of girls report violence in their dating relationships; half of their partners were drunk at the time; most girls do not tell friends or adults about dating violence

WHAT DO GIRLS NEED?

→ To be treated respectfully

Girls say that they are provoked by adults. Because of past trauma, they may be extremely sensitive to the abuse of power by adults and misinterpret limit-setting as victimization.

→ To have some control over what happens to them

Traumatized girls are often more controlling than adults can tolerate. They need to learn how to take charge without being argumentative or aggressive. Each girl must be

involved with her family and professionals in designing fair, consistent methods to address conflict before she escalates.

→ To be supported to make attachments and have them continue

A system of services that encourages continuity of relationships is essential for girls. A girl should not be moved from place to place, which has been found to be disruptive for girls' development. Progress should not result in a move that separates her from the attachments that supported her achievements.

→ To learn self-soothing

Although they often do not recognize it, girls experience high levels of anxiety that may quickly escalate to an emotional explosion. Adults frequently react negatively to the intense emotions and behavior that are driven by the girl's anxiety. Each girl has to learn to recognize how it feels when she is just starting to be anxious and how to calm herself.

→ To learn how to cope with her feelings in the present and the past

Girls often exhibit a pattern of running away or using substances when they feel overwhelmed, particularly in conflict situations. Learning to face feelings from the past and in the present helps a girl change these habits. Adults who remain calm and non-reactive, encourage her to stay safe, and give her recognition for expressing her feelings in words support a girl in this process of making peace with the past.

→ To learn how to react to threat

At an early age these girls learned to constantly scan their environment for possible threats. Small provocations may evoke explosions from a volcano of feelings left over from trauma, or girls may get angry to avoid pain from the past. Adults trying to quiet a loud girl are often misperceived as disliking her or disapproving of her outspokenness, thus antagonizing her more. She may feel she has to seek protection, even from individuals who do not support her positive development. Each girl has to learn what to do with her intense anger or fear when she feels threatened.

→ To learn how to compensate for her disabilities

As many as half of the girls in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems have learning disabilities. While some have been placed in special education for emotional disturbance, they often have not had effective specialized instruction for their learning disabilities. Girls must learn how their processing and comprehension difficulties, attention problems, and organizational deficits affect them both in and out of school.

→ To be physically healthy

Psychological distress and physical health complaints are related in girls, who have higher rates of asthma, migraines, self-mutilation and eating disorders than boys. Girls in juvenile justice and child welfare are vulnerable to numerous sexually transmitted infections. Rates of HIV infection, pelvic inflammatory disease, HPV, pre-cancerous and cancerous lesions and pregnancy rates are higher than in the general population. Girls need access to health care and support to keep themselves healthy.

→ To be praised rather than punished

To develop a stable positive identity, girls have to be good at something. They are talented young women, but for years their negative behavior may have gotten more attention than when they excelled. Instead of ineffective points and levels behavior management systems, an affirmation-oriented behavior motivation approach focusing on relationships, responsibilities, and privileges through teaching rather than punishment is essential.

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A system of services for girls must build on each girl's strengths and meet each girl's unique needs with a developmentally-sound, culturally-sensitive approach that recognizes the role of immaturity, trauma and disabilities in each girl's behavior. Each girl may require a combination of the following services:

- Trauma treatment, including trauma-related substance abuse, with a language of making peace with the past used by all staff working with her.
- Intensive home-based services, wrapping services around families and non-relative homes, including strengths and needs-driven daily coaching for her and guidance for her caretakers.
- A school program that she wants to attend, designed around her unique strengths and needs.
- A wellness approach to teaching her self-care techniques and how to become a skillful health care manager for herself.
- Encouragement for her to speak up for herself and to become self-sufficient.

Most communities do not have this array of gender specific services. When, for example, intensive home-based individual coaching for a girl and support for her family or foster family are not easy to arrange, courts frequently resort to placing girls in residential programs. These are high-needs girls who do not present a risk to the community. But often they are placed in group care because families and foster homes have not had assistance in caring for them and schools and outpatient mental health services are insufficient. Girls run away or otherwise put themselves at risk for a variety of reasons, and instead of looking behind the behavior to the girl's individual needs, adults often respond that she has to be "locked up to be protected from herself." The reliance on group care for girls continues across the country, despite evidence that intensive home-based services are effective interventions for girls and their families, and federal directives to states to shift to integrated, intensive community interventions.

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