

About *Sing it Girls!*

Girls deserve to feel strong and confident, and to feel connected to their peers and community. Self-esteem and self-worth can be nurtured in girls so that they may grow to be confident young women and leaders. This program is designed to intentionally focus on building confidence in the girls that participate, thereby minimizing feelings of anxiety, worry and low self-esteem.

Adolescence

It has been well documented that young women struggle with feelings of anxiety and that this can become problematic as girls enter adolescence. It is essential that skills be taught and nurtured in pre-adolescent girls to help to avoid the negative outcomes of poor self-esteem.

There is a wide body of clinical and empirical literature that describes adolescence as a particularly vulnerable time for females (Marcotte et al., 2002; Manion et al., 1997). Research shows that beginning in early adolescence, girls are more stressed than boys (Colton & Gore, 1991), more depressed (Marcotte et al., 2002; Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994), have lower self-esteem (Chubb et al., 1997), have more eating disorders (Croll et al., 2002), and also more body dissatisfaction (Brumberg, 1997; Harter, 2000). Gilligan et al. (1990) described adolescence as a time when girls “lose their voice,” experiencing a diminished confidence in their ability to express their needs and opinions. Therefore there is consistent evidence that during adolescence girls experience a decline in mental health and well-being that often persists through adulthood.

Universal Programing

A review of prevention and treatment literature pertaining to adolescent girls shows that programs tend to be problem-specific in that they are designed to reduce particular symptoms (e.g. depression, anxiety, etc). Findings from studies examining the effectiveness of these programs indicated mixed results. This has led to a call for programs that target general factors, rather than symptom-specific behaviours (Shisslak & Crago, 2001). For example, Striegel-Moore and Cachelin (1999) state that strong coping skills and self-efficacy can act as protective factors against mental health issues. Additionally, Turner (1995) discusses how self-esteem and self-efficacy may be the most important traits in resilient people. In fact self-esteem has been identified as a buffer against a variety of stressors (Statistics Canada, 2003).

According to the findings of Statistic Canada’s (2003) longitudinal National Population Health Survey, a weak self-concept, as indicated by poor self-esteem and poor sense of mastery, was predictive of depression among girls. Furthermore, having a weak self-concept tended to put girls at risk of poor self-perceived health and obesity. These findings led to the conclusion that a strong self-concept appears to be a key factor in developing good mental and physical health (Statistics Canada, 2003).

Support for Female-Only Group Structure

The use of female-only groups is considered an ideal setting for these programs. Relational theories of women's psychological development emphasize the importance of connections among girls and women (Gilligan, 1982; Brown & Gilligan, 1992). All-girl groups may promote these connections to a degree that mixed-gender groups will not (Chaplin et al., 2006).

Group Singing

Across time, culture, and geography people have sung together. Gregorian monks' chanted, slaves sang spirituals, national anthems begin sporting events, camp fires inspire sing-alongs, religious rituals and ceremonies are rooted in hymns, stadium concerts and even karaoke all stand as examples of group unity through singing. Music has been used in many cultures throughout history as an integral part of traditional healing processes (Gouk, 2000). Research and anecdotal reports indicate that singing has positive effects on perceived emotional states, immunological responses, breathing capacity, muscle tension, body movement, self-identity, interpersonal relationships, responsiveness of the senses, and aural awareness of one's environment (Stacy, Brittain & Kerr, 2002; Gregory, 2007; Young, 2009). Research has shown that clinical populations who participate in organized singing groups feel an increased sense of connection to their community and to each other (Bailey & Davidson, 2003), demonstrate enhanced active coping skills (Kenny & Faunce, 2004), and also report statistically significant improvements in their overall quality of life and emotional well-being (Hillman, 2002; Young, 2009).

Wellness and Social Connection

Today, in the age of handheld entertainment and social media, pre-adolescent girls sing and enjoy singing and dancing in their play and leisure time as much as ever. In addition to intrinsic enjoyment and social connection, a growing body of literature supports the health and wellness benefits of singing (Clift et al., 2009a; Clift et al 2009b; Cox et al., 2010; Cuypers et al., 2011). "Group singing is one of the most positive forms of human activity, supporting physical, mental and social health, as well as individual development in the same areas." (Welch, G. F., Himonides, E., Saunders, J., & Papageorgi, I., 2010) report that singing has physical, psychological, social, musical and educational benefits for children. Psychological benefits were categorised as: (i) inter-personal, (ii) intra-personal and (iii) catharsis. The program called 'Sing Up' was evaluated by Welch et al. (2010), with results showing increased levels of self-concept and social inclusion in children who had participated in Sing Up compared to those who had not (Hinshaw et al., 2015). In addition, research tells us that choir singing in school settings has a positive impact from the perspective of school children's spiritual well-being (Willis, 2011).

Psychological Benefits of Singing

For the purpose of this program we will focus on highlighting the psychological and social benefits of singing. *Psychological benefits* include both intra-personal growth and development of individual identity. Welch (2010) states that giving children and adolescents

greater access to singing education will not only benefit singing ability, but will also increase positive self-identity and social inclusion, eventually being beneficial to society on the whole. A confident and healthy voice is directly linked to positive health concept and communication skills. As well, self-esteem, overall confidence, and self-efficacy are all linked with successful singing. Our voice is integral to who we are as people. It reflects our mood and overall well-being and provides a cathartic outlet for expression of emotions and feelings. Singing is connected to our endocrine system and therefore allows us to feel better about ourselves and the world around us. Healthy singing and vocal techniques give us the tools we need to maximise our potential for optimal communication. Welch (2011).

Social Inclusion and Connection

In addition to the psychological benefits of singing, children and adolescents also experience an enhanced sense of social inclusion. “Singing is important because it builds self-confidence, promotes self-esteem, always engages the emotions, promotes social inclusion, supports social skill development, and enables young people of different ages and abilities to come together successfully to create something special in the arts.” Welch (2011).

Sing it Girls! facilitators must embrace the belief that: “the strong voice, confidence and keen awareness that is witnessed in so many preadolescent girls is representative of their inherent connection to their *still small voice within*,” (Goosby,2005, p. 34). Pre-adolescence girls will benefit from guidance and opportunities to help them strengthen their connections to their inner voices and subjective ways of knowing. Strengthening these channels will help girls mature into more vital women and strong contributors to future generations.

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