

Helping Girls Thrive

Benchmarking Workbook

Fall 2026

INVESTING IN GIRLS
ALLIANCE

A Message from The Fred Harris Daniels Foundation, who make this work possible:

The Daniels Foundation has been a proud partner of IIGA since its inception in 2004, along with the many agencies that have joined us in impacting GIRLS across the greater Worcester area.

Our mission is to support…" sustainable, creative solutions to Worcester's most pressing social challenges and needs". When it comes to middle school age girls our belief is simple: ***When Girls Thrive, Worcester Thrives****. Our funding model requires that our grantmaking will have a profound IMPACT and make a difference.*

The Helping Girls Thrive Workbook *is a very important resource that assists girl serving organizations and programs to design and implement effective gender responsive programs and strategies, particularly for middle school aged girls. Every year IIGA collects data through the Youth Behavior Risk Survey (administered in partnership with the Worcester School District). The Benchmarks, developed in collaboration with IIGA and girl serving organizations throughout Worcester, have had measurable impact. As well as showing the power of the programs, the data collected proves that these programs are helping our middle school girls thrive.*
These Benchmarks have been updated, and another Benchmark is being added to keep our data collecting tool as close to today's current world issues as well as the girls' reality.
The data that we have been collecting demonstrates that girls that are involved with a girl serving organization truly do better than girls that are not. The goal of the Foundation and the IIGA collaboration is to increase the overall community, corporate and philanthropic investment for girls and to give the girls the tools they need to thrive today and every day in their own unique way. Impact and Collaboration are key to helping our girls thrive!

Thank you for all you do to impact the future for all middle school age GIRLS!

Fred H. Daniels II
President, FHD Foundation
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Wendy W. Andrews
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INTRODUCTION

The mission of the Investing in Girls Alliance (IIGA) is to improve services for middle school girls in central Massachusetts through research, education, advocacy, and collaboration.

The Investing in Girls Alliance works within three priority areas central to the well-being of middle school aged girls:

- Health and healthy relationships; addressing physical, behavioral and sexual health.
- Economic empowerment; addressing career readiness and financial literacy.
- Violence and safety; addressing relationship and community violence and promoting safe behaviors and environments for girls.

Research shows that critical needs as well as the greatest potential for lifelong impact lie in the middle school years with girls aged 11-14.

Since 2007 IIGA has sought to challenge the philanthropy gap for women and girls. Just 1.3% of local philanthropic giving in Massachusetts directly supports women's and girls' nonprofits, trailing the national average of 1.9%. This makes targeted state and foundation investments critical (Women's Foundation of MA, 2025). A key strategy is to show the impact that girl serving programs have on girls through the **Helping Girls Thrive Benchmarks** used by those directly working with girls in girl serving programs. The first iteration of the benchmarks, related indicators and surveys were unveiled in 2022. Since then, more than 200 girl serving programs and organizations have begun using the benchmarks to inform program development and gather data from the girls in these programs using surveys that track the related indicators or Benchmark Builders. By comparing regional youth health survey data, disaggregated by gender, the data reveals that the middle school girls receiving girl specific programming aligned with these benchmarks do better than middle school girls at large in IIGA key focus areas.

This work takes place in the intersection of these three stakeholder groups-

- Girl serving programs want to see how their efforts contribute to developing girls who thrive over a lifetime
- Funders want to see how girl serving programs are making a difference
- Policy makers want to understand how policy and funding can ensure girls have what they need to thrive

Investing In Girls Alliance Status of Girls Fall 2026 Report
can be found HERE

https://qrto.org/zCii2B

SCAN ME

Therefore, the work follows this cyclical process:



CAPTURING COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Each girl serving program and/or organization can choose which and how many benchmarks to integrate into the delivery of their programs. Girls engaged in one program benefit from those benchmark outcomes. Research has shown that many girls participate in more than one girls only experience, across multiple organizations. Thus, girls benefit from the collective impact of their experiences across multiple benchmarks.

Collective data from organizations using the IIGA Thrive Benchmarks strengthens the field's ability to demonstrate impact to funders, policymakers, and community stakeholders. Aggregated benchmark data provides evidence of outcomes across programs and supports broader advocacy efforts on behalf of girls. The aggregated data is compared to the larger population of girls by using a population based data set such as the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Using combined data from all IIGA members shows the collective impact of all programs serving middle school girls. This collective impact data is shared through the Status of Girls report and is available to all organizations.

The Status of Girls report validates a more powerful voice – to funders, media, policy makers – about the current and long-term investment in middle school girls. Moving from program to funding to policy requires a broad investment in many girl serving organizations. This is especially true for those collaborating to serve girls in multiple ways, serving girls via organizations who aspire to the Helping Girls Thrive benchmarks.

Girl serving organization participation in this process is key to building collective impact!

THE PRIORITY/BENCHMARK MATRIX

Girls' development is integrated and multifaceted. IIGA's three Priority Areas of Health, Economic Empowerment and Violence and Safety, are meant to encompass all essential areas for helping girls thrive. Many benchmark builders contribute to multiple benchmarks, reflecting the interconnected nature of girls' development. The below matrix identifies where the benchmark builders can be found in more than one benchmarks, signifying the deepening impact possible when programs work to build those specific skills.

Investing in Girls Benchmarks	Investing In Girls Three Priority Areas			
		Health	Economic Empowerment	Violence and Safety
	Civic Engagement	✚	✚	★
	Career Opportunities		★	✚
	Economic Empowerment		★	✚
	Physical Health	★		✚
	Mental Health	★		✚
	Sexual Health	★	✚	✚
	Conflict Resolution	✚	✚	★
	Healthy Risk Taking		✚	★

★ signifies the primary connection of the benchmarks to the priority areas

✚ signifies where benchmark builders support more than one priority area

WHY GIRL SERVING ORGANIZATIONS ARE ESSENTIAL TO HELPING GIRLS THRIVE

Women and men are socialized differently and held to different standards of behavior by society. This requires programs and organizations to incorporate gender in program design, implementation and leadership to be fully effective. The following categories provide specific examples of the different ways gender "matters."

For programs and organizations that serve a co-ed population, these considerations are key:

Disproportionate impact of specific public problems. In some instances, because of their social roles, women and girls are more affected by a specific problem or issue than are men or boys. For example, it is well-documented that there are significantly more women than men living in poverty. A program concerned with issues of poverty or works with poor people then needs to do a gender analysis to verify that it is effectively reaching the group most affected.

Differential impact. Women and girls also can be impacted differently [than men and boys] by a problem. For example, the opportunistic infections which women typically manifest when they have full-blown AIDS are different from the opportunistic infections that men manifest. Programs designed specifically for women with AIDS were at the forefront in advocating for the needs of women with AIDS, pushing the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to change its definition of AIDS, so that women could receive the federal and state services that accompany an AIDS diagnosis.

The different social roles that women and girls occupy (e.g., raising children) also argue for differences in program design. Labor-market segregation, resulting in lower wages for women compared to men, needs to be addressed in job-training programs for women. Additionally, if they expect women to participate in such programs as substance-abuse treatment, programs must take into account the childcare responsibilities that many women hold.

The different socialization of women and girls should also result in the need for appropriately designed programs. In general, women and girls are socialized to play a caretaking role and to be subservient to men and boys. Thus, when women and girls are in mixed-gender groups, they may talk less, may venture fewer opinions, and may be reluctant to engage in verbal conflicts. All these behaviors will influence the success of a program. In a co-ed leadership program, for example, girls may be less willing to engage in behaviors that are traditionally associated with leadership. Such a program will need to design specific approaches to counter this socialization if it expects to work as well for girls as for boys.

Gender socialization can also result in different opportunities available to women and girls. Despite little difference in inherent mathematical ability, for example, girls take fewer advanced math and science courses than boys. This significantly constrains future career choices. Persistent gender disparities continue to be present in both internet usage and technology focused employment. A program designed to take advantage of the information superhighway will need to pay specific attention to this gender gap or run the risk of perpetuating it.

Gender specific or girls only programs can help address these concerns:

Avoiding feeling like the "other." There is considerable evidence that, in many ways, men and boys are viewed as "normal" and women and girls are viewed as "other." All too often, girls and women are compared to boys and men and found wanting. In a program in which every participant is female, the issue of being “other” recedes into the background, and participants can concentrate more on being themselves, working to develop their unique capacities and identities. It is ironic yet true that in a single-sex program, the issue of gender can become a non-issue, and other concerns can then take precedence.

Feeling safe and being safe. Another reason to provide programs for women and girls is that they can feel more comfortable and safer in an all-female environment. The issue of safety is hardly trivial. Women and girls are less safe in their homes than they are in public places, and they are used to feeling unsafe in environments that men and boys perceive as safe. For too many women and girls, unfortunately, men and boys are the greatest threat to their safety, and too often this includes men and boys enrolled in universal programs. Women who are homeless, for example, often report that a homeless shelter is the choice of last resort because of the frequent sexual violence occurring there. Girls in coed-youth programs report high levels of sexual harassment by the boys in those programs. Sometimes the location itself of a universal program is so unsafe that it presents an overwhelming barrier for women and girls.

Women and girls are in charge. Typically, women and girls run single-sex programs for women and girls. In research on nonprofit programs in Greater Boston, this researcher found that every program for women and girls is run by a woman director, and 97 % of these programs have a female majority on their board (Mead, 1994). This means two things: (1) programs for women and girls are controlled by women and girls; and (2) programs for women and girls are also an arena for women and girls to develop and exercise their leadership abilities.

Resources:

Gender Matters: Funding Effective Programs for Women and Girls
M Mead - 2001 - scholar.archive.org

HOW GIRL SERVING ORGANIZATIONS THRIVE

To help organizations and programs assess their gender responsiveness, these organizational benchmarks and indicators are offered. These can be used by organization and program leaders, executive boards and advisory councils to ensure they are integrating best practices in gender responsiveness.

Benchmark: Girl serving organizations intentionally and regularly engage in programs and services uniquely designed for girls, informed by ongoing research and built on promising practices.		
Benchmark Builders	**Program or Policy**	**Measured by**
Women are in leadership positions; represented on the board and in decision making roles throughout the organization. *Recruit women representative of communities you serve.*		
Incorporate the most recent research both nationally and locally in developing girl serving programming.		
Engage girls in needs assessment and evaluation of all programs and policies that impact them through participatory research methods.		
Collaborate with other girl serving organizations to share best practices and build capacity together.		
Share data from girl serving programs to build a current and comprehensive understanding of priority issues impacting girls.		
Understand how intersectionality factors create a higher risk of unhealthy environments and behaviors resulting in violence, economic and educational instability for some girls		

Benchmark: Girl serving organizations act on data to identify and respond to the current critical and specific needs of girls in their programs.		
Benchmark Builders	**Program or Policy**	**Measured by**
Promote and practice gender responsive programming for girls across our programs and services.		
Maintain an active and accurate slate of social emotional and mental health supports to provide for girls in our programs across the continuum of prevention, intervention and treatment.		
Keep up to date on the impact of social media on girls and how to provide support and interventions for girls impacted negatively.		

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HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

Each Helping Girls Thrive Benchmark can stand alone and is relevant to middle school girls (age 10 to 14). Organizations can choose one or more benchmarks to incorporate into program delivery.

When selecting benchmarks, begin by reviewing existing girls only programming.

Identify the primary content areas currently addressed within the program. It is likely there is a benchmark that already relates well to the content of the program, and some benchmark builders are already being addressed by that program.

Consider if additional content would deepen impact.
Some organizations also choose to focus on a benchmark such as Conflict Resolution or Risk Taking that deepens the content delivery that is already in place.

Choose the benchmark(s) that best match program content.

- ✓ Assess the program - how does it already meet or partly meet the benchmark builders.
- ✓ Assess for additional benchmark builders that would strengthen program delivery.
- ✓ Develop program curriculum with these benchmark builders in mind.

Concurrently, assess program delivery

- ✓ How many girls, at what ages are served in this program?
- ✓ Assess any gaps – for example, is the program only serving 11-12 year olds?
- ✓ How is the program being delivered? Virtual? In person?
- ✓ Is the program one day? Once a week for 6 weeks?
- ✓ Document the delivery design.

Ensure program delivery includes ways to measure program impact

- ✓ At the end of the program, or at intervals in the program, use the survey link to have girls share their experience in the program. These are combined and shared back to organizations at the IIGA monthly meetings.
- ✓ Use the IIGA impact reports and the research based talking points to share impact on girls who thrive.

Use program impact influence funders, stakeholders, and engage policy makers in investing in girls only programs

- ✓ Each benchmark offers the research and resources about the impact of this benchmark on girls
- ✓ The data is shared in the Status of Girls to be used by all girl serving organizations using the benchmarks
- ✓ Data information can be utilized to support GSOs and professional development with staff and volunteers.
- ✓ Data can be integrated into talking points for funding and advocacy efforts to illustrate ways in which this work is essential to girls' wellbeing.

THE BENCHMARKS

THE HELPING GIRLS THRIVE BENCHMARKS

What is a Benchmark?

Benchmarks are standards against which organizations measure their impact. They are measurable, and in this case, flexible enough to be applicable to any girl, and to any organization.

Benchmarks are considered the gold standard of organizational self-review; they promote agreed-upon best practices; are standards which organizations aspire to reach, and are proactively applied, as opposed to applied as the result of a crisis.

The creation of the benchmarks for thriving girls will improve all IIGA member organizations, ensure positive impact and unite IIGA organizations in a common goal; to help girls thrive. It will also be a valuable tool for funders and policy makers who seek to positively impact girls' lives.
The following considerations informed the creation of the benchmarks and benchmark builders:

- Is the benchmark flexible enough to apply to every girl/organization?
- Does it reflect a best practice for girls?
- Is it something an organization would aspire to deliver to girls?
- Will it ensure positive impact?
- How is it measurable?

Girls Thrive through Civic Engagement:

It is well documented that young people of voting age continue to face a series of structural, informational, and motivational barriers to voting[1].

In the 2024 election, when asked about their motivations for casting a ballot, 19% of young voters chose expressing their support for a candidate as a top three reason, and 21% said they voted to express their opposition to a candidate. Forty percent of youth who voted said they did so because they consider it their duty as a citizen[1].

While it is widely believed that social media influencers dominate the news that is consumed by youth, even in the 2024 election cycle which focused on the potential role of influencers and celebrities to engage young voters, less than 1% of young people said that motivation from an influencer had been one of their top three motivations to cast a ballot[1].

In general, when compared boys, girls gave less priority to standard political involvement. However, girls prioritize community service more than boys, and girls score higher on measures of prosocial reasoning than boys (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006); this could lead girls to prioritize community service and creating positive change as a path to civic engagement. Walker (2000, 2002) has pointed

out that patterns of civic learning that highlighted service or volunteering and not political resolutions to social problems were often stressed for adolescent girls as alternatives to active political engagement[2]. Girl serving organizations are uniquely positioned to bridge the gap from girls in service to girls creating solutions and positive change in communities through civic engagement.

While these data points are based on youth who are of age to vote, building civically engaged middle schoolers is the place of highest impact for future civic engagement and advocacy for community and national influence. Currently, New Hampshire remains the only state that allocates dedicated instructional time for civics in elementary school. Programs can build on girls' interest in service by introducing opportunities for advocacy, civic leadership, and systems-level change.

Sources:

[1]CIRCLE: Center for Education and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement **Young People and the 2024 Election: Struggling, Disconnected, and Dissatisfied** (2025) https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/2024-poll-barriers-issues-economy

[2]Metzger, A & Smetana, J **Adolescent Civic and Political Engagement: Associations Between Domain-Specific Judgments and Behavior** *Child Development*, Volume 80, Issue 2, March/April 2009, Pages 433–441 https://academic.oup.com/chidev/article/80/2/433/8274736?login=false

[3]Freeman, Tee, **Voices of the Girls Summer Project 2025**, unpublished, funded by the Greater Worcester Community Foundation.

Additional Resources:

PewResearch.org (2013) Civic Engagement Tracking
Youthrex.com (Civic Engagement Scale)
Civicsurvey.org

Civic Engagement Benchmarks and Benchmark Builders

Benchmark: Girls advocate for and take action to improve their communities and shape their future		
Benchmark Builders	**Practice in Program/Service**	**Measurement**
Engage in broad experiences within their community, including service to and with the community		
Connect their experiences and the lived experiences of others to issues they care about, and acknowledge the vulnerability involved when deciding to share those experiences		
Identify issue(s) they care about and seek out peers and community members to create a collective agreement that encompasses their plans for change		
Pursue a broad understanding and perspective on issues, and gain knowledge and gather insights to inform factors that contribute to their issue and ideas for solutions		
Develop media and information criticality as they seek to be informed citizens about issues that impact them		
Experience and practice venues for advocacy or activism – art, poetry, letters, performance, written expression, social media		

Benchmark: Girls are active participants and influencers in their local communities, their state, and beyond		
Benchmark Builders	**Practice in Program/Service**	**Measurement**
Build networks in their community to include mentors and leaders of the community		
Process community connections through personal experience and examples of lived experiences		
Informed through school committee, city council, and other public forums, and identify issues that they care about or want to change		
Participate in public forums as speakers, advocates, petitioners, and/or organizers, and use their voice to support change		
Connect with changemakers in their community, including elected officials, policy advocates, and other members of city and state leadership		
Identify the best audiences for advocating on issues of importance to them and connect with community leaders who have a similar platform		
Understand the processes of lawmaking, policy development, voting, and advocacy at the community and state level		

Civic Engagement Survey Online: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/THRIVE_CE

QR code:

For paper survey version, please contact info@investingingirls.org

Girls Thrive through Career Opportunities and Economic Empowerment

In addition to the continual gender based messaging around their future career choices, adolescent girls are among the most economically vulnerable groups—significantly more so than adult women, men, or adolescent boys. Across all socioeconomic groups, women live worldwide under the constant threat of gender based violence: physical, psychological and emotional abuse. But we know that girls can be a powerful economic and societal force.

In the multi-phase study, "Dreaming Big: What's Gender Got to Do with It?" researchers found that middle school girls are ambitious in their future career expectations, but also surrounded by a gendered landscape that promotes stereotypic messages about what girls can and should do or not do. As a result, they may make career choices that reflect those gendered messages.[1] The most significant impact on widening their anticipated career choices and choosing future careers that held more economic promise was participating in girls-only experiences. Girls who participated in these experiences had more overall confidence and self-efficacy, and girls who participated in two or more girl serving organizations, whether over time or at the same time, have the highest confidence.[2] This created girls who were insulated from the persistent gendered messages around future career goals, and while all middle school girls need guidance relating to future career options, girls in girls only organizations were less likely to report that the guidance they received was "be happy" and more specific around work life balance, balancing family and career, and having broader opportunities to explore careers and education opportunities.[2]

Financial education (instruction and/or materials designed to increase financial knowledge and skills) have been offered to middle school girls, but the way it is offered is not the most effective. Traditional financial literacy may not include access to appropriate, quality, and affordable financial services; and may not address financial empowerment - the sense of confidence and efficacy experienced through controlling their own lives, claiming their rights, and having empathy toward others. To be financially capable, people must have financial knowledge and skills as well as access to appropriate financial services to enhance social and economic well-being.[3]

Empowering girls with formal financial education alone is not as effective as combining programs with (some form of) social or life skills education, which has shown to generate awareness of consequences of financial decisions and access to employment. Multidimensional, integrated and alternative programs need to be adapted to the specific situations of young girls, to address their specific needs, and ultimately to empower them to earn a living for themselves and their families.[3] Girl serving organizations are uniquely positioned to provide experiences to girls at the middle school level to impact their future as women in society.

Sources:
[1]Dreaming Big: What's Gender Got to Do with It? The Impact of Gender Stereotypes on Career Aspirations of Middle Schoolers, Copyright 2012, Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management
[2]Dreaming Big: What Have Gender and Race Got to Do with It? Simmons School of Management 2014
[3]Why Girls Matter – Integrated Programs for the Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls

Resources:

8 Ways to Help Middle Schoolers Imagine Their Future Careers
https://www.edutopia.org/article/8-ways-to-help-middle-schoolers-imagine-their-future-careers/
Elomari, Raed The impact of Financial Literacy in Gig Worker's Economic Resilience on Saving and Investment: A Correlation Study; Scholarly Summit; Interdisciplinary Social Research, Vol1 Issue 1

Jobs of the Future, Scholastic Magazine
https://www.scholastic.com/apprenticeship/pdfs/JobsoftheFuture/StudentMagazine.pdf

Benchmarks and Benchmark Builders for Career Opportunities and Economic Empowerment

Benchmark: Girls consider a wide range of career options and can map out pathways to a variety of future careers.		
Benchmark Builders	**Practice in Program/Service**	**Measurement**
Engage in career interest inventories that help them identify career pathways that will be a good fit for them		
Identify and learn to highlight their unique skills and talents that will support them in the workplace		
Practice evaluating future careers using wages, hours, and other work-life balance inputs that matter to them		
Explore a variety of careers through opportunities (job shadowing, take your daughter to work, career fairs, influencers) and identify skill sets for types of careers		
Develop job readiness and positive work relationship skills (managing job expectations, being on time, dress codes, virtual platform and phone etiquette, ai protocols, mailing/email protocols, job application processes)		
Identify and engage with educational advisors and resources which help them select classes to support their intended pathways		
Hear from women about their career journeys, struggles, and successes		
Access opportunities for learning that they don't receive in other ways (apprenticeships, STEM programming, career explorations, sponsorships)		

Career Opportunities and Economic Empowerment Continued

Benchmark: Girls can envision a realistic future economic state for themselves, the steps to get there, and the economic factors (bills, costs, life decisions) that will impact that future economic state.		
Benchmark Builders	**Practice in Program/Service**	**Measurement**
Practice budgeting skills, planning expenses and can identify the difference between wants and needs		
Can create a realistic budget that builds economic resilience and explores flexible earnings, unpredictable income, minimum wage laws, and taxes		
Use a decision-making model to determine short and long term financial decisions		
Learn basic concepts of credit, debt, and savings; understanding the technologies that support paying bills and receiving money (checking accounts, virtual pay apps, long term savings)		
Consider options and plan ahead for large purchases (technology, college/career training, family expenses)		
Investigate factors that reinforce women being paid less than men and envision possible changes		
Understand the field of philanthropy and volunteerism; and how to evaluate choices for charitable donations		

Career Opportunities Survey Online: https://surveymonkey.com/r/THRIVE_CO

QR code:

Economic Empowerment Survey Online: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/THRIVE_EE

QR code:

For paper survey version, please contact info@investingingirls.org

Girls Thrive through Physical and Mental Health

Regular physical exercise enhances neuroplasticity — the brain's ability to adapt and form new neural connections. This is crucial for absorbing new knowledge, improving memory, and enhancing problem-solving skills[1]. Physical activity helps reduce stress, improving a child's overall emotional well-being, producing endorphins within the body, which help manage anxiety and tension[1]. Being physically active is not just a way to maintain health, it is a crucial tool for children's mental and psychological development.

In contrast to the benefits, 6 to 20% of adolescents are physically inactive; 17% of children and adolescents are overweight; and as many as 75% of overweight youths become obese adults[2]. Children, especially girls, become less physically active starting in middle school. Interventions that promote physical activity during out of school time (through community organizations, girl-serving organizations) have had shown positive impact, while those focused entirely on school-time have failed.

Specifically, successful interventions establish more opportunities for physical activity, improve social support and norms around activity, and increase self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and behavioral skills to foster greater physical activity[2]. The most successful programs used a social marketing approach to promote awareness of and participation in activities through media, social media, and promotional events. The most impact was found after a sustained activity period which was also saturated with messages about the value of being active and with concentrated efforts to create a social norm for girls to be active[2].

Mental wellness and physical wellness are linked in the context of social support. In defining positive mental wellness among adolescents, there is a relationship between the number of sources of support and low mental wellbeing; with peer support being particularly important[3]. And while among the three protective factors of support ((family/home environment support) and adult (school/adults)), the third - peer support - was found to have an equivalent impact to family and adult support combined[3].

The inverse of the impact of these support systems is also measurable; when protective factors are reduced from all three to two, the prevalence of low mental wellbeing tripled; and doubled again when only one protective factor was present. Of the protective factors, the most important against low mental wellbeing was peer support; adolescents with low peer support were over six times more likely to experience low mental wellbeing[3]. The value of a girls-only space, and a girl serving organization in actively working to build strong peer relationships is pivotal to mental wellbeing in our girls and may impact physical wellbeing as well.

In adolescence, building of protective factors for mental health and wellbeing is of particular importance. These protective factors help build resilience, and include individual social and emotional skills, positive social interactions, access to quality education, safe neighborhoods and strong community ties[4]. Girl serving organizations continue to build these protective factors for girls engaged in programs, and the positive impact is cumulative over time and experiences.

Sources:

[1]**How Physical Activity Enhances Children's Cognitive Abilities** (2024) https://school-sport-foundation.com/blog/how-physical-activity-enhances-childrens-cognitive-abilities/?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=21867113198&gbraid=0AAAAA9kR29alzWDz1Vfv_LwllP3wXYOPJ&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIh46v15eYkgMVejcIBR0tWycGEAMYASAAEgJMwvD_BwE School Sport Foundation

[2]Webber, L, et al (2008) **Promoting Physical Activity in Middle School Girls: Trial of Activity for Adolescent Girls** https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2275165/ NIH National Library of Medicine

[3] School Mental Health (2022) 14:776–788 https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-022-09502-9 1 3 ORIGINAL PAPER **The Contributing Role of Family, School, and Peer Supportive Relationships in Protecting the Mental Wellbeing of Children and Adolescents** Nadia Butler1 · Zara Quigg1 · Rebecca Bates1 · Lisa Jones1 · Emma Ashworth2 · Steve Gowland3 · Margaret Jones3 Accepted: 10 January 2022 / Published online: 6 February 2022 © The Author(s) 2022 https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35154501/

[4]Mental Health, October 2025. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response

Resources:

Davis, Ashlee, et al (2025) Using an Out-of-School Time Initiative to Increase Access and Enjoyment of Physical Activity Opportunities for Adolescent Girls: A RE-AIM Evaluation https://journals.humankinetics.com/view/journals/wspaj/33/1/article-wspaj.2025-0030.xml *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal*

National Institute of Mental Health https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/caring-for-your-mental-health

The Benchmarks and Benchmark Builders for Physical and Mental Health

Physical Health Benchmark: Girls have healthy lifestyle habits that support their overall physical growth and development.		
Benchmark Builders	**Practice in Program/Service**	**Measurement**
Have access to healthy nutritious food, and education and practice to support healthy eating habits		
Explore lifestyle impacts such as cultural norms regarding buying and preparing food, food diversity, access to food, food shame, and food as community		
Engage in physical activity that builds strength and confidence		
Interact with positive role models and youth workers to support physical activity in community		
Apply a media literate lens to their body image when interacting with social and traditional media		
Have a realistic and positive view of their weight, body and physical abilities		
Prioritize and practice good sleep, and understand the importance of sleep for wellness		

Mental Health Benchmark: Girls have access to environments that promote positive mental health; promote self-regulation and positive self-regard and teach positive coping skills and strategies for managing stress.		
Benchmark Builders	**Practice in Program/Service**	**Measurement**
Understand and practice the components of positive mental health		
Understand and practice self-regulation and stress management skills and strategies		
Have multiple trusted adults to help them identify/understand (unpack) their feelings		
Have trusted adults who offer regular, non-stigmatizing check ins		
Learn and use a common language to talk about what they need and what would help		
Engage in peer networks and report having real supportive conversations		
Find safe spaces and trauma informed environments and trained adults when they have experienced trauma or are in crisis		

ADDITIONAL Adult Benchmark and Benchmark Builders for Mental Health

Because of the inherent need for adults to be intentionally well trained to manage specific mental health developmental needs for girls in their programs and have a network of expert mental health resources when required, the below Adult Benchmark for Program Leaders and Implementers are included.

Mental Health Benchmark – FOR ADULTS **Adults in girls serving programs are well trained in specific developmental needs regarding mental health for girls; have access to appropriate resources and navigation support including expert mental health consultation and mental health services when needed.**		
Adult Benchmark Builders	**Practice in Program/Service**	**Measurement**
Understand basic components of how to support positive mental health in girls 10-14 yrs.		
Complete basic mental health training and professional development in Social Emotional Learning (MHFA or other trainings)		
Access to timely clinical consultation when needed		
Create, build and maintain a network of related support and treatment services and useful navigation support		
Understand the significance of the relationship between a girl's mental health and media, AI, social media, and/or current events; and have tools/strategies to engage girls around their impact		

Physical Health Survey Online: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/THRIVE_PH

QR code:

Mental Health Survey Online: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/THRIVE_MH

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Girls Thrive through Sexual Health

Girls in middle school, ages 11-14, are at the age of greatest vulnerability for sexual violence. By the age of 11, nearly half of all girls have already experienced some form of trauma; and by age 16, 2/3 will be living with trauma[1]. Middle school girls are more able to recognize social aspects of gender that disable and/or create barriers for men and women than their male peers[2].

By high school, 18% of high school girls report being 'forced by anyone to do sexual things (including kissing, touching, or being physically forced to have sexual intercourse) when they did not want to during the past year'. (Source: CDC, YRBS, 2021)[3]

Known builders of protective factors against sexual violence include:

- promoting supportive youth-adult relationships; including strengthening parent/guardian and girl connection
- community connection opportunities for youth in middle and high school
- updated and effective anti-harassment policies that are equitably enforced
- access to health education based on science, medically accurate, developmentally appropriate, culturally inclusive, and LGBTQ+ inclusive, and which includes sexual consent and communication adults with relationships with local service programs and resources available to all girls
- learning opportunities for adults on social and emotional learning and creating inclusive spaces where girls can practice critical thinking and boundary setting

Sources:

[1]Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2023, https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/trauma-violence/child-trauma

[2]Trauner, M.N., Hoffman, J. and Borland, E. (2022) Periods, Penises, and Patriarchy: Perspective Taking and Attitudes about Gender among Middle School, High School, and College Students
Retrieved from: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/23780231221100378

[3]National Sexual Violence Resource Center
https://www.nsvrc.org/blog_post/new-data-cdc-shows-increased-violence-and-trauma-teens-and-how-schools-can-be-lifeline/ Based on 2021 CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) Data

Program and Organizational Resources

Safe Exit Initiative (SEI)
Creating safe and sustainable exits from exploitation and the sex trade through quality programming, strategic partnerships and comprehensive legislative initiatives**.**
https://safeexitinitiative.org/

Her Way Home
Survivor lead direct street outreach and advocacy, shelter, education & system change, and peer mentoring

https://herwayhomeworcester.org

My Life My Choice
https://www.mylifemychoice.org/
Annual Report:
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/615331b7e0e9e73cd8c471ac/t/672e2af0afb372525cced65a/1731078897532/FY24ImpactReport_11.8.24.pdf
Impact report:
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/615331b7e0e9e73cd8c471ac/t/61b3d6fc2614d25644c7acd8/1639175946445/web-evaluation+study.pdf

Planned Parenthood of CM, Teen Resources
https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/teens

The Benchmarks and Benchmark Builders for Sexual Health

Benchmark: Girls are confident to set boundaries and communicate their needs/wants for themselves and respect those of others		
Benchmark Builders	**Practice in Program/Service**	**Measurement**
Practice talking about consent		
Participate in sexual health education that is inclusive of diverse gender identities, expressions, and sexual orientations, cultural humility and responsiveness		
Express their own clear values in regard to their personal sexual and relationship behaviors		
Apply a media literate lens that aligns with their values in their interactions with social and traditional media		
Understand the impact of their choices and the related challenges of their choices		

Benchmark: Girls receive age appropriate medically accurate sexual health information throughout their adolescent development		
Benchmark Builders	**Practice in Program/Service**	**Measurement**
Understand anatomy and physiology involved in sexual health		
Participate in sexual health education that is inclusive of diverse gender identities, expressions, and sexual orientations, cultural humility and responsiveness		
Know how to obtain and use protection for prevention of pregnancy and STIs		
Access or know how to access reliable, trusted, “askable” adults who can provide information and access to needed resources		
Have annual age appropriate physical exams		

Benchmark: Girls assemble knowledge, skills, and behaviors that construct protective factors against sexual exploitation.		
Benchmark Builders	**Practice in Program/Service**	**Measurement**
Develop self sufficiency and self preservation skills for protection		
Participate in conversations with appropriate trusted adults and role models for self-protection skills, including 'code-switching'		
Engage in practice scenarios with adults and peers about the impact of familial, social, cultural, and religious norms and their safety		
Develop and use a trauma informed vocabulary to identify and name misogyny and other dangers		
Assemble a peer network of strong, supportive connections and spaces for open communication		
Understand believing the survivor and reveal victim blaming vocabulary and practices		
Access to adults and resources to address traumatic experiences		

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Girls Thrive through Conflict Resolution and Healthy Risk

It has long been accepted that teaching youth how to manage conflict can reduce juvenile violence in juvenile facilities, schools, and communities, while providing lifelong decision making skills.[3] However, conflict resolution is complex and consists of multiple styles and a measure of emotional risk taking.

Kurdek's Conflict Resolution Style Inventory (CRSI) identifies four distinct conflict resolution styles - positive problem solving, conflict engagement, withdrawal, and compliance. Withdrawal and compliance are passive responses; problem solving and conflict engagement are active responses. Among middle schoolers, the choice of a conflict resolution strategy is related to the potential impact to the peer relationship; passive responses are considered to have less negative potential. Girls therefore consistently use problem-solving strategies more often than conflict engagement, even when the outcome is not what the girls wanted. Girls are also far more likely to use the passive styles, withdrawal and compliance, than boys.[4] Girls engaged in girls only programs have the greatest opportunity to practice and use conflict engagement skills and develop agency in deciding how and when these skills would benefit them most, and then transfer those skills to life experiences.

Adding an additional layer of risk taking to conflict skills is needed to balance the decision making around intervention with conflict skills. Girls need to define and understand their own boundaries, and develop agency to have a voice, express opinions, and participate in advocacy for self and others; all of these involve risk taking skills. Further, effective self-regulation is required, involving both a cognitive and emotional process that includes perception of the situation, expectancies and beliefs that become activated, feelings triggered and experienced, and goals, values and boundaries engaged. Adding complexity, chronic stress and conflict undermine self regulation, and escalate irrational and self-defeating behaviors, especially in adolescents.[1]

And while the idea of *risk-taking behavior* has traditionally been used to refer to health-damaging behaviors such as substance use, precocious or risky sexual behavior, recklessness, homicidal and suicidal behavior, eating disorders, and delinquency, [2] in the context of our work, risk taking behavior must include emotional risk, perceived risks, and the need to address failure; each an integral part of the true life experiences of middle school girls. From uncomfortable situations with friends, to deciding to intervene in conflict between self and friends, to mediating a cyber-bullying attack on a friend, middle school girls need skills in when and how to take risks and engage in conflict resolution.

Ultimately, avoiding conflict has negative results and adds significantly to the prediction of adolescents' negative psychological symptoms. Higher levels of conflict avoidance are significantly related to higher levels of psychological symptoms. Adolescents whose families consistently practice conflict resolution tend to report greater life satisfaction and have fewer predictions for negative psychological outcomes[5], however, not all families practice conflict resolution. Girls in girls only programs are again uniquely positioned to develop, practice, and use conflict and risk taking skills in supportive learning spaces and be able to use the skills they learn in life experiences.

Organizations are encouraged to consider the Strategy Constructiveness Scale[1] in working with girls as they learn to use conflict skills. Practicing these skills and strategies in intentionally added conflict within programs builds skills that are transferrable to in-the-moment, in-real-life situations.

Least effective and most destructive strategies:	Skills that represent working to resolve the conflict; at the beginning stages of conflict skills; and are the beginning of the risk taking and self regulation processes:	Skills that represent skilled conflict resolution behaviors and use of risk taking:
Physical Aggression Verbal Threat Unsatisfactory withdrawal	Tell an adult/person in authority Command/Request Satisfactory withdrawal	Invoke norms Propose alternative Negotiation/Resolution

Sources:

[1]The Handbook of Conflict Resolution Theory and Practice; Peter Deutch; Martin T Coleman, Eric C Marcus, 3rd edition 2014.

[2]Igra, V., Irwin, C.E. (1996). Theories of Adolescent Risk-Taking Behavior. In: DiClemente, R.J., Hansen, W.B., Ponton, L.E. (eds) Handbook of Adolescent Health Risk Behavior. Issues in Clinical Child Psychology. Springer, Boston, MA. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-0203-0_3

[3]Office of Juvenile Justice https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles/fs-9755.pdf 1997

[4]Empathy and Conflict Resolution in Friendship Relations Among Adolescents Minet de Wied, Susan J.T. Branje, and Wim H.J. Meeus Department of Child and Adolescent Studies, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands retrieved from: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/ab.20166 2007

[5]Adolescent Adjustment: The Hazards of Conflict Avoidance and the Benefits of Conflict Resolution
Megan E. Ubinger, Paul J. Handal, Carrie E. Massura
Department of Psychology, Saint Louis University, St. Louis, USA.
Department of Psychology, SSM Cardinal Glennon Children's Medical Center, St. Louis, USA.
DOI: 10.4236/psych.2013.41007 retrieved from:
https://www.scirp.org/pdf/PSYCH_2013012411000418.pdf

The Benchmarks and Benchmark Builders for Conflict Resolution and Healthy Risk

Benchmark: Girls use their skills and experience to manage conflict, identify ways conflict can be constructive, and when to use conflict as a strategy.		
Benchmark Builders	**Practice in Program/Service**	**Measurement**
Practice using their voices for self-advocacy and to express their thoughts and feelings		
Identify and set boundaries for themselves; and practice in holding those boundaries		
Exercise skills in conflict resolution and negotiation in high stakes and low stakes situations		
Rehearse vocabulary for dealing with stages of conflict from uncomfortable situations to conflict that requires adult or professional intervention		
Understand and practice strategies for self-regulation and boundary setting when experiencing conflict		
Identify and engage safe, supportive, well trained adults to help when the conflict is bigger than the skills they have		
Take opportunities to reflect on conflict with guidance to learn, reframe, or rehearse for the growth		

Benchmark: Girls differentiate between healthy and unhealthy risk taking, develop agency and engagement resilience, and manage failure as an avenue for learning		
Benchmark Builders	**Practice in Program/Service**	**Measurement**
Have intentional opportunities to take healthy risks		
Engage in activities where there is perceived risk to evaluate the difference between perceived and actual risk		
Understand and practice self-care skills and strategies to understand their boundaries, and manage feelings		
Have language to intervene, assist, or engage when conflicts occur among friends or within peer groups		
Practice decision making and strategies for when they decide to engage or disengage from a situation		
Can choose when to offer solutions or remain apart from conflict occurring around them		

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Healthy Risk Survey Online: http://www.surveymonkey.com/r/THRIVE_HR

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