

# Exploring Girls' Leadership



Research Review



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Acknowledgment is made to the following individuals at GSUSA for their contributions to this research review: Harriet S. Mosatche, Ph.D., Vice President, Program Collaborations and Initiatives; Eileen Doyle,

Vice President, Program Development; Katie Ferrier, Director, Public Policy; Tralonne Shorter, Director, Advocacy; Ann Redpath, Director, Girl Leadership Program Development (Elementary); Monica Shah, Director, Girl Leadership Development (Middle/High School); and Maja Ninkovic, Program Manager, Girl Leadership Curricula and Outcomes. Special thanks as well to Wendy Wheeler, President

of the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, and Nicole Yaholem, Program Director, Forum for Youth Investment.

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# Introduction

From the inception of Girl Scouting in the United States in 1912, founder Juliette Gordon Low recognized that developing girls' leadership abilities was a critical factor for ensuring that they would be the change-makers of the future. One way for girls to create change for themselves and others is to assume leadership roles. The Girl Scout Research Institute has embarked on a body of work to explore how girls understand leadership and what it means to be a leader, and to further the mission of Girl Scouts of the USA: *Girl Scouting builds girls of courage, confidence and character, who make the world a better place.*

Say the word "leadership" and people often think of individuals in hierarchically defined positions such as a CEO of a public company. This conventional style, often described as a male model, is characterized by a task-oriented managerial approach. In contrast, female leadership styles often are distinguished by empathy, consensus, and communication (Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

The dialogue in the leadership field now has moved beyond these two orientations to embrace a framework that is more holistic, emphasizing connectivity, teamwork, community involvement, civic engagement, personal and group development, and social change. Rather than seeing leadership potential as predetermined, it is also widely agreed that leadership skills can be developed at any age.

Similarly, the youth leadership field is moving from the idea of one individual leader to a more participatory and inclusive approach with a focus on a commitment to changing communities, neighborhoods and the world at large. This

more empowering approach encourages youth to take on increasing responsibility; treats them as involved participants in designing and implementing activities; and explores how they can have an impact today, not just as adults tomorrow. Initial research also shows that for girls leadership is about the qualities one has, rather than about a specific role or function, and is often viewed as a clear means toward an end – to make a difference in the world.

However, in current co-ed youth leadership programming, there is little account for how girls develop leadership skills, whether leadership is different for them compared to boys, and what contexts are necessary for girls to develop their strengths. What is known is that there are certain conditions that support girls' growth and development that, while not always fostered in conventional youth programs, are increasingly addressed in single-sex learning environments. Although girls today certainly have greater leadership opportunities, they still face pressure from society to conform to conventional notions of what it means to be a girl (Girl Scout Research Institute, 2002; Girls Inc., 2006).

*Exploring Girls' Leadership* reviews highlights from the general youth development and youth leadership fields (in this review, youth refers to ages 8 to 18) with an emphasis on girls. It includes a brief literature review, a summary of focus groups on leadership issues conducted with girls around the country, findings from a small Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI) pilot quantitative survey with a nationally representative sample of girls, and ideas for future research.



## What Is a Youth Leadership Approach?

The goal of this publication is for youth development organizations to better understand the state of the leadership field and translate theory into action.

A youth leadership approach advocates for youth to become active participants and learners with a focus on the positive skills, attitudes, and behaviors centered on civic involvement and personal goal setting. Leadership development, a necessary component of positive youth development, represents an important shift regarding the way adults view, work with, and help young people achieve their potential. While programs traditionally have sought to “serve” youth as passive recipients, young people are now taking an active role in their personal and leadership development with the help of supportive adults and youth-serving organizations.

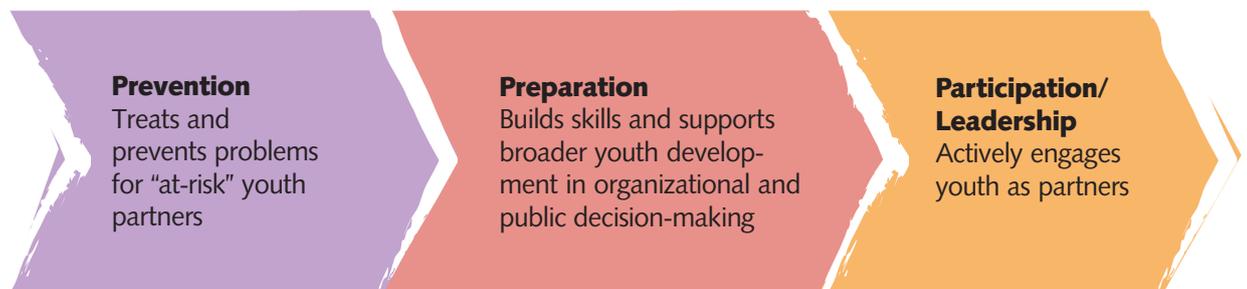
Instead of seeking to help “at-risk” youth by intervening after problems have occurred or by trying to prevent negative behavior, positive youth development focuses on preparing youth for the future. Attention is now increasingly focused on asset development rather than on deficits, an

approach that includes defining and promoting the development of a core set of competencies. The Search Institute (1997) has identified internal and external factors that support or prohibit healthy youth development. (Information on these factors can be found on the Internet at [www.searchinstitute.org](http://www.searchinstitute.org).)

The youth development field is now moving toward making youth participants in their own development by:

- empowering them to take on increasing respon-

### Continuum of Broad Approaches to Youth Development



sibility through active participation in decision-making and civic involvement;

- considering them involved participants in designing and implementing activities; and
- looking at the impact they have today, not just as adults tomorrow.

A variety of phrases are used to describe the core elements of youth leadership, including *youth engagement, youth-driven, youth participation, youth voice, and youth action*. For example, youth participation is defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as the freedom of expression on issues affecting young people. Youth voice is described as the many ways in which youth have opportunities to participate in decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers, and youth-driven activities are those where youth exercise significant control over daily activities with adults playing a supportive role as mentors and facilitators. In this review, such phrases are used interchangeably to describe the principles of youth leadership.

## Common Misperceptions About Youth Leadership

Many adults hold biases about youth taking leadership roles and what youth leadership really means. Following is a synopsis of commonly held misperceptions from youth development experts:

**Misperception:** Adults are open to youth participation.

**Reality:** Many adults harbor misgivings and negative biases about youth in general, and specifically about their commitment or ability to make a significant impact.

This bias can be so strong that success stories of young people making a difference—particularly if they involve young people of color—tend to be

discounted (Bales, 2000).

For adults to be open to youth participation, they often need to change the lens through which they view youth and their potential. One way to bridge this gap is for adults to work closely with youth in leadership opportunities to see firsthand the good things they accomplish.

**Misperception:** Young people aren't motivated or skilled enough to get involved in community action.

**Reality:** Studies show that young people have a strong interest in political and community issues, especially when they believe they can make a difference.

According to Joel Tolman and his colleagues with the Forum for Youth Investment (2001), 72 percent of young people participate in community activities through organized groups or associations, and 64 percent agree that “feeling as though you give back to your community” is extremely important to them. Research published by the Corporation for National and Community Service (2005) also reveals that *15.5 million teenagers* volunteered during 2004, translating into *1.3 billion hours of service*. This is a 55 percent volunteer rate, compared with a 29 percent volunteer rate among adults in the same period.

Youth and organizations committed to working with them believe that young people do possess the necessary skills to make an impact. Almost three-quarters (73 percent) of young people believe they can have a big or moderate impact on making their community a better place to live, and 78 percent of community organizations disagree that young people do not have the necessary skills to be volunteers (Tolman et al., 2001).

Additional research by the Corporation for National and Community Service (2006) shows that

students who experience high-quality service learning opportunities are almost three times as likely, as those who do not, to believe that they can make a significant difference in their community.

**Misperception:** Effectively engaging youth means asking a few to participate.

**Reality:** Even when youth-serving organizations and adults mean well, sometimes their efforts to promote authentic youth engagement and leadership opportunities fall short. Although placing a few youth on an adult board or planning committee looks like youth participation is being promoted, experts argue that it oftentimes is token representation.

Merely inserting a small number of youth into an already established adult process does not give them a full chance to contribute to decision-making. It also guarantees a level of exclusiveness since relatively few can take part and those who are selected are generally hand-picked from a narrow pool of applicants. Opportunities for decision-making are needed at *all levels* to ensure that the greatest number of diverse young people can actively participate.

Research conducted by the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development (2003) demonstrates that meaningful engagement of youth in governance (e.g., serving on boards) when supported by appropriate systems, structures, and competent adults, leads to positive youth, adult, and organizational outcomes.

**Misperception:** Youth leadership requires little adult involvement.

**Reality:** Adults play an important role in youth leadership programs.

Adults are needed to guide and connect youth to their community, especially in projects that require political activism or civic involvement. A youth-adult partnership in decision-making, which will be discussed later in this review, has been shown to have particularly strong positive outcomes. Many youth do not naturally assume leadership roles and need to be coached along the way. Such coaching might include trainings, workshops, and other opportunities to expand their skill sets.

## Ingredients for Youth Leadership

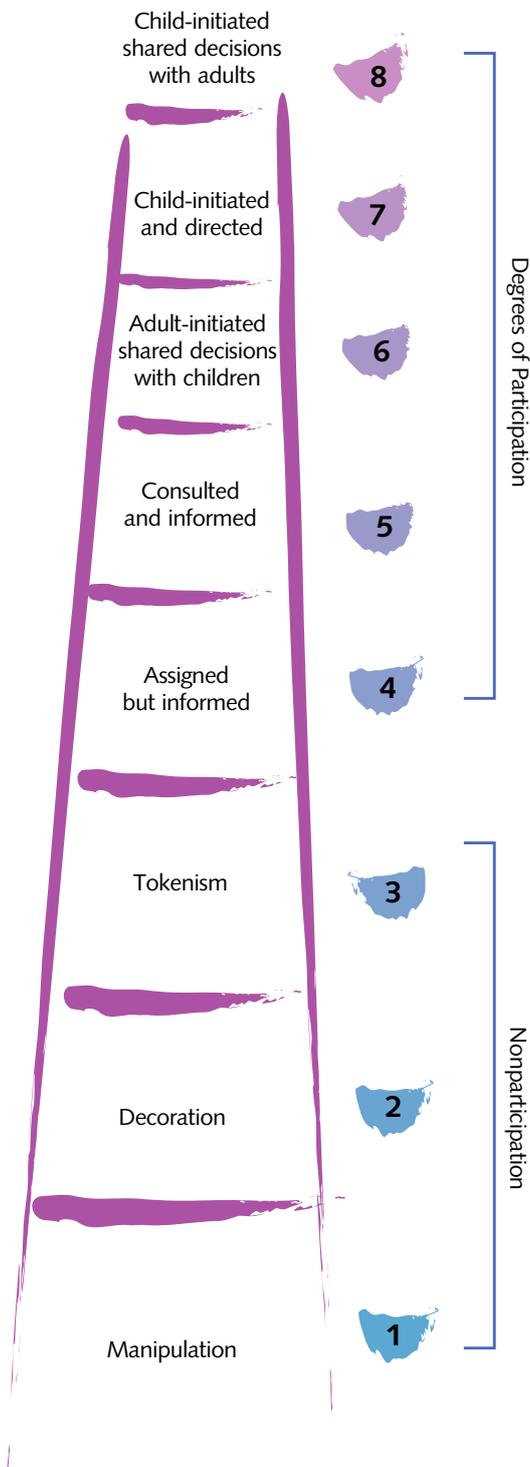
A combination of programming features is necessary for youth leadership development. Some that have been proven to enhance *overall* positive youth development include those identified by The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002):

- appropriate structure
- opportunities for skill building
- opportunities to belong
- physical and psychological safety
- positive social norms
- supportive relationships
- the integration of family, school, and community efforts

Researchers agree that there are also specific processes that contribute to positive youth participation and leadership. Through extensive literature scans and fieldwork, Merita Irby and her colleagues with the Forum for Youth Investment (2001) have identified three core elements of successful youth action efforts:

- fostering *motivation* – building of awareness of the root causes of issues and a deepening

## Ladder of Participation



Source: Adapted from *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*, by Roger A. Hart, 1992

commitment to, and sense of responsibility for, solving them

- increasing *capacity* – youth leadership and action skills and the development of knowledge related to systems and strategies
- creating *opportunity* – a range of chances to work on skills and act on passions in a way that generates demonstrable outcomes

### Youth Need Meaningful Participation Opportunities

Many researchers view youth leadership as a linear process from least to greatest involvement. To reach the most advanced stages of any of these processes, youth need support from adults and organizations. One seminal example is Roger Hart's (1992) "ladder of participation" where, through concerted effort and understanding, youth and adults work together to af-

### Pyramid of Student Voice



Source: Adapted from "Increasing Student Voice and Moving Toward Youth Leadership," by Dana Mitra. *The Prevention Researcher*, 13(1), February

fect their own lives and communities. According to Hart, only then can authentic youth participation occur.

Another model is Dana Mitra's "pyramid of student voice" (2006), a process in which students find their voice. The pyramid moves from the most common form of youth input ("being

heard”), to collaborating with adults in ways that more fully influence issues that affect them, to the top level of capacity building for youth leadership (the least common form of youth participation). This last stage includes an explicit focus on enabling youth to share in leadership with adults or fully take on leadership roles on their own.

### **Youth Need Meaningful Youth-Adult Partnerships**

Strong intergenerational relationships, which are transformative in nature, promote knowledge, competency, and initiative. Increasingly, the youth-adult partnership (Y-AP), in which adults and youth address critical issues over time, is becoming a key strategy. While a strong youth-adult relationship is significant in any youth development activity, Y-AP is a specific type of dynamic relationship that evolves as the young person develops, thus allowing for a greater expression of skills and opportunities to “try leadership on.”

Girl Scouts has long embraced this principle; its girl-adult partnership framework is grounded in the understanding that girls need adult partners in decision-making and opportunities to take on increasing responsibilities as they grow older and their skill sets expand. Engaged adults committed to youth leadership principles, who work with youth and view young people as effective decision makers, are needed to make this happen.

It is also important for program staff to carefully consider the benefits and liabilities of how much input, decision-making, and authority should be given to adults versus youth in any one program, and to clearly articulate the roles of both. For instance, a body of research suggests that programs with youth leadership goals are best served by employing a youth-directed approach, one that emphasizes empowerment, planning, and the organization skills necessary for leadership development (Walker & Larson, 2006).

### **Youth Need Organizations Committed to Youth Leadership Principles**

With specific structures and processes in place, it is more likely that young people will participate on a regular basis. Shephard Zeldin and his colleagues at the Innovation Center (2000) suggest explicit preconditions, including:

- a top decision-making body committed to youth leadership principles and, when necessary, to changing the way it operates
- a visionary adult leader to champion change or support existing youth leadership principles
- young people who begin to organize and demand increased participation
- committed adults who believe in the abilities of youth and who work with them toward meaningful outcomes

### **Youth Need Community Support**

A cyclical, interrelated, and necessary precursor to change occurs when communities support young people and young people contribute to communities. The Forum for Youth Investment graphic (p.11), which emphasizes the power of youth to make a difference in many spheres of community life, details ten community assets across a range of community development contexts. In all of these, it is important that youth services be coordinated and contributions of youth valued.

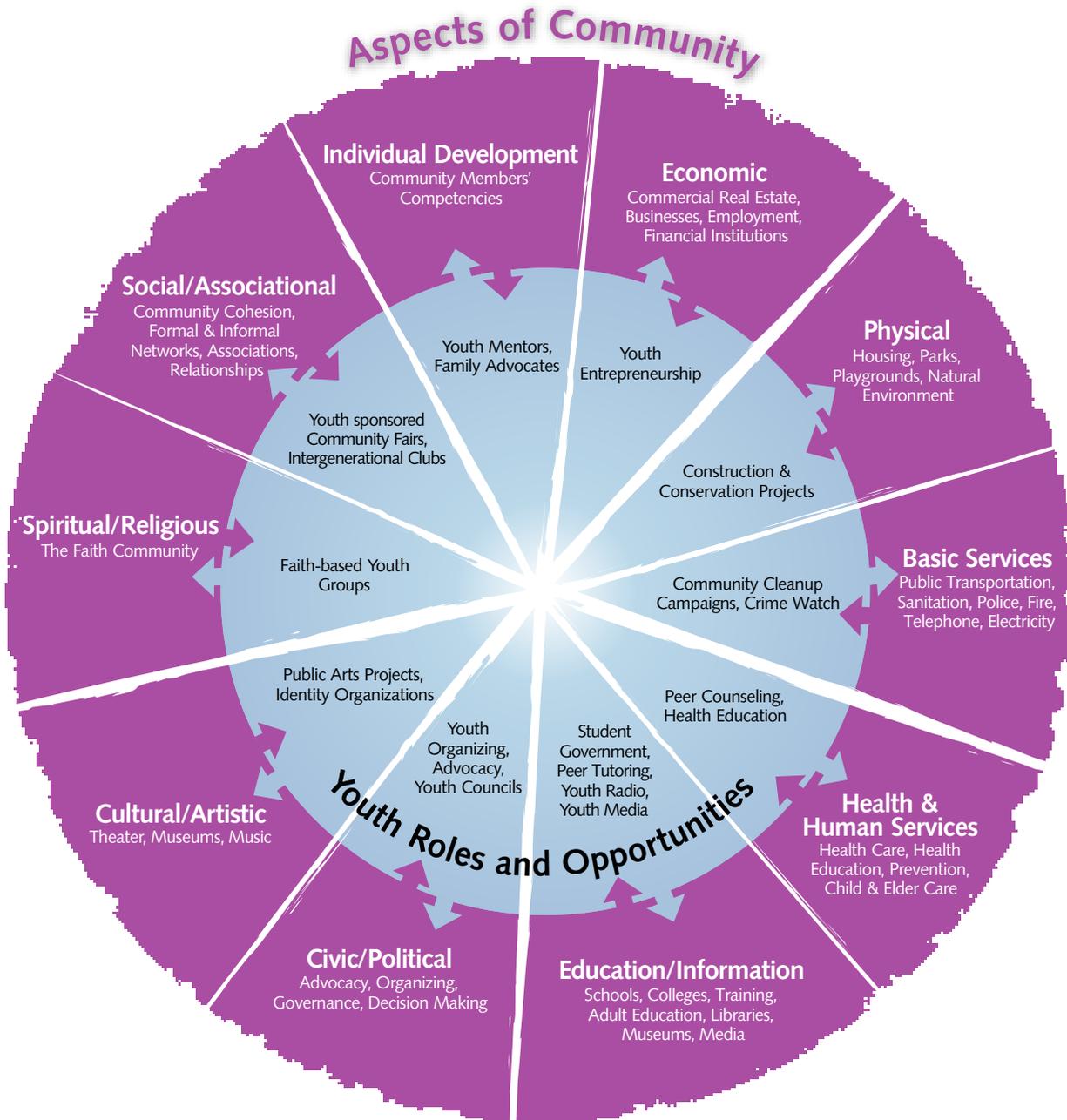
## **Youth Leadership Outcomes**

Research strongly suggests that an approach focusing on youth participation is an effective way for them to achieve personal growth and gain leadership skills. This is particularly true for older and more disenfranchised youth, who may be harder to engage due to a lack of programs in their community that target their needs.

### **Benefits to Youth**

The benefits of a youth leadership approach are

## Communities Supporting Young People, Young People Contributing to Communities



➤ **Aspects of Community**

➤ **Youth Roles & Opportunities**

Source: Adapted from *Pathways for Youth and Community Development*, by The Forum for Youth Investment, 1998.

well documented, and the positive outcomes and opportunities are even more pronounced for those who are not reached by more conventional youth development programs. As reported by the Forum for Youth Investment (2002), the impact of youth action:

- becomes a gateway to future civic action
- improves attitudes related to school and work, including academic achievement
- has a positive effect on interpersonal skills and social development
- decreases the likelihood of participation in risky behaviors

Specific examples of the benefits of youth action include:

- Involving young people in decision-making provides them with essential opportunities and supports such as challenge, relevancy, voice, cause-based action, skill building, and affirmation (Zeldin et al., 2000).
- Youth who engage in collective decision-making and action in a family, school, youth organization, or community context expand their sense of self by exploring their unique identities; hone their critical thinking faculties; and enhance their organization, teamwork, and communication skills (Zeldin & Petrokubi, 2006).
- For older and more “challenged” youth (those residing in group homes, foster care, or sent by the courts), civic activism provides opportunities for them to reflect on their personal and community situations, cultures, and backgrounds, and also offers vocational and leadership opportunities (Innovation Center, 2003).

- Older high school students become engaged in decision-making and planning within youth organizations they would otherwise typically avoid (O’Donoghue, Kirshner & McLaughlin, 2006).

High-quality relationships with adults provide youth with a sense of belonging and commitment to community. According to research conducted through the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development on the Youth Leadership for Development Initiative in 2003, organizations with a more youth-driven approach reported higher level relationships with adults (69 percent) than those that did not have a youth driven approach (35–40 percent).

#### **Benefits to Adults Working with Youth**

Research also shows positive outcomes for adults in youth leadership environments who collaborate with youth for an extended time, working toward a common goal. For instance, adult attitudes about youth ability can change as a direct result of working with young people who perform well in settings that are considered “adult turf” (e.g., a boardroom or political environment). Seeing young people engaged in community action with real benefits to community residents is one way to prove to adults what youth can do (Zeldin et al., 2000).

Other outcomes for adults include:

- deeper understanding of the needs, concerns, and issues affecting youth today
- the development of new strategies for reaching out to diverse populations
- renewed commitment to the organization
- enhanced confidence in their ability to work with youth

#### **Benefits to Organizations**

According to the Innovation Center (2003), orga-

nizations that support youth development have been more successful in:

- recruiting and retaining older and more “challenged” youth
- providing support for young people at the same or greater level than traditional youth-serving organizations

Additional positive outcomes are (Zeldin et al., 2000):

- embedding of principles and practices of youth involvement and voice in the organization's structure
- more clarity about the organization's mission
- better organizational and adult connection and responsiveness to youth in the community
- more diverse methods of outreach
- greater value placed on inclusiveness and diverse representation in decision-making processes
- increased legitimacy to funding agencies' commitment to promoting youth development

### **Benefits to the Community**

Although the successes sometimes are not sufficiently recorded, widely shared, or well understood, evidence exists that youth make a significant community impact (Irby et al., 2001; Forum



## What Leadership Means to Girls

for Youth Investment, 2002). Three examples include:

- *Youth Force* in New York City mobilized hundreds of tenants to form tenant associations and demand needed building repairs
- *The Philadelphia Student Union* addressed inequities in the education system by getting up-to-date textbooks, among other things
- *The Colorado Progressive Coalition's Students for Justice Initiative* helped effect change in the Denver schools by fueling community interest and awareness of critical education concerns

However, there is a real need to better record and identify positive community outcomes. When this documentation is widely available, the contributions young people have made will be more widely acknowledged.

Though current research demonstrates little gender analysis on how girls and boys define, conceptualize, experience, and aspire to leadership, it is known that specific conditions promote girls' growth and positive development that are not always met in conventional youth programs (Ms. Foundation for Women, 2001). For girls, these conditions include:

- a safe and supportive space to develop their voice and values
- opportunities to develop critical thinking skills to

analyze the world around them

- opportunities to connect with other girls, young women, and adults on issues that are important to them

The research also suggests that girls' views on leadership often conflict and are impacted by age, relationships with peers, role models and future aspirations. Furthermore, when women's and girls' leadership is discussed, it is more often in terms of traditional leadership and the role that is fulfilled, rather than leadership that organically occurs in group settings or communities.

### Single-Sex Environments

Girls say time and time again that they value girls-only "safe spaces" where they can confide in trusting adults and other girls. In girls-only settings, they feel safe to talk about issues they wouldn't necessarily talk about with boys, try out new

activities without a fear of failure, and experience less pressure to look or act a certain way (Girl Scout Research Institute, 2002; 2003).

Research with alumnae from the National Coalition of Girls' Schools (2005) has shown that girls-only settings promote:

- a greater "can do" attitude
- a greater impact on young women's social self-confidence

## Leadership and Girls' Voices

Leaders not only make a difference for themselves, but also for the rest of the world.

*"Harriet Tubman stood up for herself and changed the way things were done."*

Leaders are an example and an inspiration, often in the face of adversity. They are resilient.

*"My aunt survived cancer—she never gave up and was*

*always smiling."*

Leaders have good character traits (even though they are not perfect).

*"My mom... she's got good character, even*

*though she makes mistakes."*

Leaders can be in the spotlight or behind the scenes.

*"Leaders know how to plan and orga-*

Source: The above quotes from focus groups with girls conducted by the Girl Scout Research Institute in 2006.

- more effective environments for personal development
- more encouragement to pursue science, math, and technology
- more leadership opportunities

For the most part, however, girls spend most of their time in co-educational settings, giving them less access to supportive single-sex environments where leadership development is more likely to blossom.

### Girls' Voices on Leadership

From 2004 to 2006, the GSRI learned what hundreds of girls had to say about leadership through national focus group research and an exploratory online pilot survey. Many girls have ideas about leadership that differ from the traditional hierarchal (or "top-down") model so prevalent in the culture today. To many girls, the leadership they see is "positional," which they describe as "boy" leadership, inherently different from the qualities they associate with "girl" leadership. The former involves authority, control, and ego, while the latter is about being a good listener, building consensus, and ensuring happiness for others.

In other words, leadership is about the *qualities* one has as well as about one's *actions*. Girls also describe a model of leadership and the acquisition of leadership skills that are a blend of what they want for themselves (what they are going to get) and what they give to others (to make a differ-

ence in the world).

The following quotes from girls reflect how their leadership development is steeped in their desire to help others:

- "Leaders help others to achieve their dreams..."
- "I'll know I've touched people's lives in a good way..."
- "People will think I'm admirable..."
- "I will do something memorable..."
- "People will say I inspired them."

Research conducted by the Ms. Foundation for Women, *The New Girls Movement: Charting the Path* (2000), on girls' leadership within community-based organizations also offers a gendered analysis of leadership that departs from the traditional notion prevalent in the culture at large. For girls, leadership is "more than the superlative—the first, the strongest, the most vocal." Leadership is not just about "taking charge"; rather, it is seen as being "charged with taking a stand and having a vision."

Focus groups conducted by the GSRI show that girls have a unique definition of leadership that emphasizes developing personal strength and interpersonal skills. Among the leadership **qualities** girls rate highly are:

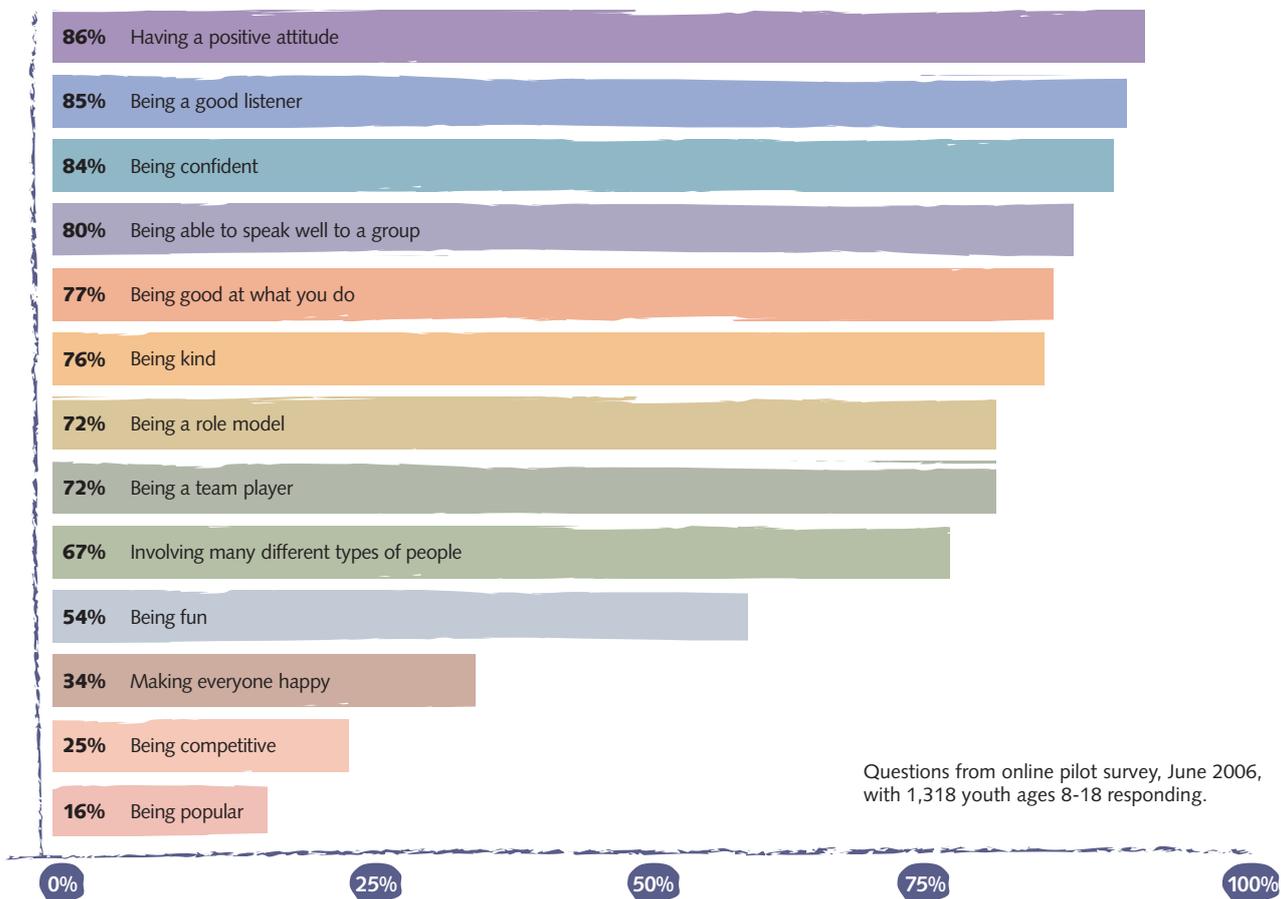
- having a positive outlook and a good attitude
- ability to be a good follower
- ability to have fun
- being flexible
- considerateness
- coolness
- creativity
- integrity
- kindness

According to girls, the **actions** a good leader takes are:

- getting consensus
- making decisions
- listening well
- preparing and organizing
- resolving conflicts
- speaking in front of others
- taking charge
- taking responsibility
- teaching others
- serving as a good example or role model

Based on data from a GSRI pilot online survey,<sup>1</sup>

## Being a Good Leader—What Girls Think



<sup>1</sup>Pilot survey results come from a nationally representative online sample of 1,318 youth between the ages of 8-18 commissioned by the Girl Scout Research Institute in June of 2006. Harris Interactive conducted the survey.

girls believe three qualities are needed to be a good leader:

- a positive attitude (86 percent)
- the ability to listen (85 percent)
- confidence (84 percent)

These qualities will undoubtedly help girls navigate and cope with a range of personal and social situations. As one girl in the focus group said, being a good leader meant she “would be comfortable to be [her]self in any situation.”

## Girls, Leadership, and Relationships

Leadership that resonates with girls must be framed by their desire to use their own skills toward the greater goal of impacting others and the world around them. However other forces that shape girls’ desires for leadership, namely the complex role of relationships in their development, are at work. As research on girls’ development has demonstrated (Brown & Gilligan, 1992), girls will often sacrifice their own voice for the sake of “saving” relationships with their friends. Research also demonstrates that on a daily basis many girls fear more for their emotional safety (being teased or bullied, speaking up in class, or trying new things) than for their physical safety (Girl Scout Research Institute, 2003).

Recent research conducted with girls at a private all-girls’ high school in Pittsfield, Massachusetts (Jackson, 2005) also suggests that there are barriers to girls asserting themselves and using their own authority for leadership. Many girls choose not to become leaders because they fear making decisions, having ideas different from their friends, or appearing too achievement-oriented. In the Girl Scout pilot study, 64 percent of girls say that it is extremely or very likely that they will

have to make decisions that people might not like if they were leaders, and 23 percent say that it is extremely or very likely that they might lose some of their friends if they were leaders. Additional research suggests that girls feel pressured to choose between relationships and leadership. The pilot study supports this notion, as fully 33 percent of all girls say that if they were a leader, it is extremely or very likely that “people might not like me.”

And though many girls stress that leaders have to inspire others and lead with values and integrity, the idea of having to be “the perfect leader” still looms large for them. In *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (2002) by Rachel Simmons, teen girls in a leadership workshop revealed that their worst fear about being a leader was “getting judged” by their peers, that people would not like them and would not want to be their friends because of what they said or did. Simmons concludes that girls’ fears about leadership are the same fears that they have about personal conflict in general. She goes on to report that girls in this group described a good leader with caring words (loving, dedicated, sensitive, helpful, good listener, cooperative, patient, etc.) and equated a “good leader” with being a “good girl.”

## Lessons in Leadership from Girls

In general, girls say that there are no differences in a male or female’s inherent ability to be a good leader. According to the GSRI pilot survey, 80 percent of girls say that “boys and girls are just as good at being leaders,” and 18 percent say that “girls are better leaders than boys.” Despite lacking a critical mass of women

## Ten Tips for Good Leadership from Girls

In January 2006, students from the National Coalition of Girls' Schools attended the Student Leadership Conference in Australia. Following are ten leadership tips they developed:

### A good leader:

1. Knows when and how to be a good follower.
2. Aims to earn and keep her follower's trust, because she will need it to be successful and to make a difference.
3. Keeps it honest and respectful when giving feedback. A good leader keeps in mind that criticism is not always a bad thing, and so is willing to actively listen to it.
4. Knows the difference between directing and delegating. When leading a project or group, a good leader delegates things to the other members, and offers direction when it gets off course.
5. Keeps a balanced lifestyle to make work time more productive and avoid procrastination.
6. Recognizes that she is never alone. Similar issues occur within schools and communities, no matter where the leader is from. If a leader is having trouble, she can reach out for help and ideas to those who can offer further insight.
7. Understands that a key to a good presentation is being able to read the audience. A good leader adjusts her demeanor to keep her audience receptive and interested.
8. Creates an effective and unique leadership environment by being tolerant and open to other members' ideas.
9. Is able to manage her time and balance her activities by identifying what is urgent versus what is important.
10. Is aware of her emotions and personal obligations.

Source: Adapted from National Coalition of Girls' Schools  
<http://www.ncgs.org/>

role models in "traditional" leadership positions, many girls do have positive female role models in their lives; the same data shows that 52 percent of girls admire "the same number of men and women" for being a good leader, and 28 percent of girls admire "mostly women" for being a good leader (only 8 percent of girls admire "mostly men").

However, girls have concerns about leadership including:

- being in charge all of the time (61%)
- getting a lot of attention (51%)
- having a lot of power and authority (45%)
- having a lot of responsibility (36%)

### ELEMENTARY SCHOOL – Girls Lead With Action

*If I help my friend, she will feel better and I will, too.*

- "Helping younger kids"
- "Being a good friend"
- "Being a good role model"
- "Teaching other kids things I know"
- "How to take care of my family"

### MIDDLE SCHOOL – Girls Lead With Voice

*If I were my best self, I'd be a public speaker.*

- "Having good communication skills"
- "Speaking up for myself"
- "How to resolve conflicts"
- "Being a good role model"
- "Influencing others"
- "How to take care of my family"

### HIGH SCHOOL – Girls Lead With Vision

*Leaders make the world better for themselves and others around them.*

- "How to resolve conflicts"
- "Being clear on my values/actions"
- "Being comfortable making decisions"
- "Communicating with others"
- "Planning and organizing"
- "Having a sense of purpose"
- "Having a positive attitude toward change"

Nevertheless, survey results confirm that girls overwhelmingly admire the “helping” and relational aspects of leadership:

- being able to help others (91%)
- being able to solve problems (79%)
- motivating others (75%)

These findings reveal the need for support systems so that girls in leadership roles can learn how to overcome some of the stresses they associate with leadership and participate in the types of leadership activities that most appeal to them.

## Leadership Changes with Age

Girls' definitions of leadership also differ with age (see the chart below). The GSRI focus groups reveal that as girls grow and develop new skills and ideas about the world, leading moves from a more singular approach with elementary school-age girls (girls lead with action—what I can do) to influencing others at the middle school level (girls lead with voice—how I can impact others). As girls enter high school their ideas about leadership become inner-directed again with an emphasis

## Leadership Development Approaches

on confidence (girls lead with vision—who I am as a leader) as they seek to validate their own ideas and become comfortable acting on them.

One of the most encouraging findings in the pilot survey is that 69 percent of girls currently think of themselves as leaders, the same percentage as for boys in the study. Girls reported that they are predominantly leaders in three arenas:

- leaders at school (66 percent)
- leaders at home (44 percent)
- leaders in after-school groups or activities (29 percent)

But a disconnect occurs as girls move to envisioning themselves as leaders later in life. *Only slightly more than a third of girls (36 percent) are interested in being a leader when they are older.*

As research from Girls Inc. (2006) reveals, females in this country are still dogged by gendered expectations that cause stress and confusion. Seventy-four percent of girls in this study report that they are under a lot of pressure to please everyone, and 84 percent believe that girls are “supposed to be kind and caring.” Both of these findings are in contrast to

<b>Voice/culture</b> Ideology: Cultural/Feminist	<b>Action/Social Change</b> Ideology: Collective Power	<b>Comportment/Achievement</b> Ideology: Tradition/Achievement
<b>Strategies:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reclaiming voice/tradition</li> <li>• Politicizing perspective on dominant culture</li> <li>• Opportunity</li> <li>• Leadership skills</li> <li>• Protective staff</li> </ul>	<b>Strategies:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activism</li> <li>• Development of social consciousness</li> <li>• Creative expression</li> <li>• Opportunity</li> <li>• Power sharing with staff; group coherence</li> </ul>	<b>Strategies:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literacy development</li> <li>• Opportunity</li> <li>• Working within the institution/system</li> <li>• New experiences</li> <li>• Strong connection/role models in staff</li> </ul>
<b>Outcomes:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-empowerment, self-esteem</li> <li>• Sense of possibility</li> <li>• Personal development</li> <li>• Community leadership</li> <li>• Protective staff</li> <li>• Reclamation of culture/society</li> </ul>	<b>Outcomes:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survival</li> <li>• Transforming status quo</li> <li>• Personal development</li> <li>• Creating community leadership and connection</li> </ul>	<b>Outcomes:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual achievement</li> <li>• Careers</li> <li>• Pride in self</li> <li>• Individual leadership and enhancement of contribution to community</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from *The New Girls' Movement: Charting the Path*: Collaborative Fund for Healthy Girls/Healthy Women by the Ms. Foundation for Women, 2000

what “traditional” models of leadership represent.

## Girls’ Leadership Approaches

There are two major approaches to leadership development in girls’ programming, the individual (i.e., “being in charge”) and the collective (collaborative activity), (Benjamin 2006). Research by the Ms. Foundation for Women (2000) with girls in community-based organizations (part of the Collaborative Fund for Healthy Girls/Healthy Women Initiative) acknowledges the need for

both approaches in working with girls—that one approach does not exclude the other and each can emphasize a different aspect of a girl’s experience. The Ms. Foundation research identified three strategies that reflect aspects of the individual and collective approaches:

- **Leadership through Voice and Culture**  
Building girls’ ability to use their voices in celebrating their culture
- **Leadership through Social Action/Change**  
Community change that affects the environments girls participate in
- **Leadership through Traditional Achievement**  
Building girls’ competencies, skills and qualities so that they can advance in the world

These strategies suggest that programs that encourage girls to be engaged in the community by acting as agents of change may also enable girls to internalize individual qualities and assets that they can use for their own benefit in the



## Ideas for Future Research

future. By exercising their voice on issues they care about and taking action in the community, girls are exercising their personal power and amassing skill sets that enrich their individual competencies (Ms. Foundation for Women, 2000).

Through their funded projects the Ms. Foundation for Women identified leadership as more than the traditional model of being first, strongest, and most vocal. Girls and program staff presented a gendered analysis of leadership—not necessarily as taking charge, but as a fluid process with ups and downs.

The foundation's work (2001) also identified five leadership typologies describing how girls' leadership is manifested in informal single-gender settings. Since research is scant on this issue, these typologies make an important contribution to the field:

- Cascading—Older girls act as supporters and role models for younger girls
- Collectivity—Built on the concept of the development of the power of the group
- Survival—Utilizing skills developed in response to adversity as tools for developing leadership
- Culture—Reclaiming values and customs to help girls claim their place in the world
- Roving—Leadership that is grasped intermittently and organically by girls informally in group settings

These typologies are flexible. Girls will engage with different approaches depending on a number of variables, including activities, age, and the composition of the group.

Research on girls' leadership in a group setting is still in its inception. Based on a review of research in the field of youth development and leadership of girls and single-sex education, there is clearly a need for additional research on the factors that contribute to girls' developing leadership skills today and in the future. Potential areas for further exploration include:

**The aspirational gap.** There is a disconnect between girls who see themselves as leaders today and their future leadership aspirations. The individual and societal factors influencing this falloff are yet to be known. How are the aspirations for leadership of this generation of girls impacted by the role modeling of their parents' generation? How do gender expectations impact girls' desires to become leaders when they are older? Are there defining characteristics of this generation that impact their motivations to become future leaders?

**Broadening the definitions of leadership.** While many girls do not relate to a hierarchical ladder they must climb to assume a leadership role, they are interested in many of the qualities associated with developing leadership skills—building teams, developing empathy, public speaking, and motivating others. Many girls also are interested

in how leadership can make a difference in the lives of others.

**“Healthy leadership” and balance.** Many girls see their mothers and other female role models as having a hard time managing work and family. Research reveals that girls are also more “stressed out” than they have been in the past. *The New Normal: What Girls Say About Healthy Living* (2006), a GSRI study on girls’ health, reports that girls worry more than boys about almost every issue in their lives such as doing well in school, their relationships with friends, and how they look. Girls say that their health is about a balance between physical and emotional health, but they do not see the culture valuing each equally. What would concepts of “healthy leadership” look like, in which girls imagine a future where leadership didn’t conflict with balance?

**“Defining moments” in leadership.** For the most part, girls in school are participating in sports and other skill-building extracurricular activities at higher rates than they were several decades ago. Additionally, informal education programs have flourished and these programs have afforded girls greater opportunities to develop skills. However, how likely is it that these successes will translate into leadership opportunities in adulthood? Are there experiences or “defining moments” that shape girls’ decisions to pursue leadership opportunities?

**Relationships and leadership.** One of the central organizing features of girls’ development is relationships, including those with their peers as well as with adults. While some girls are quick to say that leaders don’t have to be perfect, others reveal that needing to be accepted and seen as the “good girl” limits their aspirations for leadership. Exploring the relational aspect of girls’

leadership will uncover their motivations to pursue leadership opportunities.

**Leadership in single-sex groups.** Research on leadership and small group interaction has historically focused on examining leadership styles in co-ed groups of adults. Most of this research has been conducted in settings where leadership roles are clear and positional (business and the military), with little attention paid to the development of naturally emerging leadership in social groups of youth or leadership in a single-sex setting. How does leadership occur in a small group setting, where girls assume leadership responsibilities informally rather than being elected or appointed to the position or roles?

**Race/ethnicity and culture and leadership.** Girls of diverse backgrounds have different ideas of leadership based on the role models in their families, communities, and the social networks they participate in. Race and gender-biased images in the media also often portray a narrow view of women and girls of diverse backgrounds in leadership roles. Does conventional leadership resonate with girls of color, who may feel their communities have been excluded from the existing systems or those traditionally dominated by men or Caucasian women? What impact do race, ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic background play in girls’ and boys’ conceptions of leader-



## Conclusion

ship? What picture emerges when comparisons are made cross-culturally and youth leadership is explored in a global context?

**The leadership process.** While youth leadership programs have measured outcomes for participants, there is little information on how leadership “happens” for youth. Much of the “how” relies on the adults working with girls and youth to build leadership skills. What kind of training do adults have who work with girls on these issues? What skills and qualities do women need to support girls’ leadership development? Measuring the “hows” of programming, including the processes by which girls interact with each other and partner with adults, needs exploration. This information will also help explain the quality of the experience for girls and adults so that outcomes exist within a larger context of relationships and partnerships.

**Young women, career paths, and derailment.** Some girls and young women today have seen their mothers and other women in their lives reach high levels of educational and career success and then “opt out” or get “pushed out” of the workforce when it comes time to raise a family. What are the career aspirations for these girls,

and how does seeing women in their lives who have emphasized family and career impact their desire for leadership?

**The positive effects of youth leadership.** Though ample evidence documents the positive effects a youth leadership approach confers on its participants and organizations, there is still a need to more formally and aggressively study these effects, especially in regard to community impact. Further studies will not only better serve youth who participate in such programs but will also inform a wider audience about the positive things youth can do. Such work will support the attitude shift already underway from regarding youth as having things happen to them toward youth making things happen.

Much research exists on youth leadership programs, as well as on how youth leadership departs from traditional styles, but there is considerably less information on how girls are impacted by and experience leadership development.

With ongoing research and a renewed leadership development program for girls, Girl Scouts is capitalizing on the opportunity that exists in the youth and girl development field to promote the kinds of programs and opportunities that

## References and Resources

speak specifically to girls on issues of personal growth and leadership development.

### What's Next

The Girl Scout Research Institute is conducting an original national research study with girls in and outside of Girl Scouting, with mothers, and with boys. This research project explores girls' and boys' definitions of leadership, their perceptions and attitudes about leadership and leadership behaviors, and what they need to see themselves as leaders today and in the future. Results of the GSRI study will help Girl Scouts of the USA develop program and policy, and contribute to the dialogue about what it takes to grow and sustain girls' and boys' leadership aspirations through adulthood.

Research questions to be explored include:

- How does this generation of girls and boys define and develop their beliefs about leadership?
- Do girls and boys have different leadership goals? How do their leadership aspirations compare?
- What are the opportunities and challenges for girls and boys to develop leadership skills today and in the future?
- What roles are played in the lives of youth by relationships with peers, parents/caregivers and other adults?
- How do gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic background, geography, media, and cultural iconography influence girls' attitudes and actions related to leadership?
- How do girls' and boys' concepts of leadership change as they move from preteen to teen years?

Findings from this study, to be published in 2008

and disseminated among practitioners, policy-makers, and educators throughout the youth development community, will also help shape and fine-tune the implementation of the renewed Girl Scout leadership development program. Also scheduled for delivery in 2008, this program has been designed to provide expanded opportunities to girls to develop to their fullest potential, make an impact on the world, and be the change-makers of the future.

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\$6.95

ISBN: 978-0-88441-707-1

