

## Training Curriculum – Part 1

# Self-Discovery and Empowerment: The *Voices* Program for Girls

by Stephanie S. Covington\*

*Editor's note: Voices: A Program of Self-Discovery and Empowerment is a new training curriculum for girls. In this issue of WG&CJ, we publish the first of a two-part excerpt from this important new volume. In this issue, California psychologist Stephanie S. Covington, along with co-authors Kate Cahoon and Kary Young, describe the program's purpose, approaches, and content. They also outline the day-to-day realities of girls who can become participants in this program. These realities include such factors as socialization, identity, culture, class, violence, risk, and sexuality. The excerpt in this issue concludes with a description of the key components of gender-specific principles and practices. Voices consists of a 223-page, three-ring binder Facilitator's Guide (\$80), plus an 80-page Participant Journal (\$9.15 each). The full cost of these volumes includes a 10% shipping and handling fee (plus a 7.75% California sales tax where appropriate); these volumes can be purchased from the Center for Gender and Justice Institute for Relational Development, 7946 Ivanhoe Ave., Ste. 201B, La Jolla, CA 92037, (858) 454-8528, (website) www.centerforgenderandjustice.org. The second part of this series of articles will include descriptions of the psychological foundations of this program, plus an overview of the program itself. In this excerpt, some language has been altered slightly from the original and specific references have been deleted (all of these are available in the full document).*

## Why a Program for Girls?

The experience of growing up—of moving from childhood to adulthood—involves a myriad of challenges and struggles. Although adolescence can be a tumultuous time for both girls and boys, it is important to recognize that it is *different* for each of them. Acknowledging to girls that their experiences as young women are *different*—that gender makes a difference—is an essential step toward creating a safe space in which they can

share their voices. Often, particularly in the juvenile justice system, programs that are designed for and based on the experiences of boys or young men are used for girls and young women. This serves to disregard the unique experiences of girls and to further silence their voices.

## A Program of Self-Discovery and Empowerment

*Voices* consists of a Facilitator's Guide and a Participants Journal. It was created to address the unique needs of adolescent girls and young women. *Voices* encourages girls to seek and celebrate their "true selves" by giving them a safe space, encouragement, structure, and support to embrace their important journey of self-discovery. The program advocates a strength-based approach that helps girls to identify and apply their power and voices as individuals and as a group. The focus is on issues that are important in the lives of adolescent girls, from modules about *self* and *connecting with others* to exploring *healthy living* and the *journey ahead*. It can be used in many settings (e.g., outpatient and residential substance-abuse treatment, schools, juvenile justice, and private practice).

The girls in the group will go through a process of:

- Understanding more about their experiences as girls—their similarities to and differences from others in the group;
- Exploring how the influences in their lives (e.g., gender, families, various forms of oppression, substance abuse, and interpersonal violence) have impacted them;
- Learning skills and coping mechanisms to help them both now and in the future; and
- Feeling safe and learning that this is a safe place to share their voices.

## Approaches Used in the Program

*Voices* is based on the realities of girls' lives and the principles of gender responsibility; it is also grounded in theory,

research, and clinical experience. The *Voices* curriculum uses a variety of therapeutic approaches, including psycho-educational, cognitive-behavioral, expressive arts, and relational theory. The psycho-educational approach helps young women begin to link some of their current difficulties and experiences to larger societal influences. They will learn that, although each of them is unique, many of the girls in the group will have had similar experiences. They will find that their thoughts, feelings, and experiences are "normal" and that they are not alone. They will explore new skills that will help them cope with the challenges and stressors in their lives. The cognitive-behavioral approach used in this program is accompanied by other methods. Expressive arts are used throughout, as an enjoyable and meaningful way for the girls in the group to work through the content of the program.

In this program, young women are given the opportunity to explore who they are in a "girl-friendly" environment that fosters a sense of empowerment and support. The program provides young women with a safe space in which they can share their voices in the company of other young women. The support of a female facilitator acts as a model to the girls in the group. This relationship, based on respect and caring, gives the girls an opportunity to experience a positive and trusting relationship with an adult.

## Program Content

The program materials consist of a facilitator's guide and a participant's journal. The facilitator's guide has three parts: Introduction, Four Modules (18 Group Sessions), and Appendix.

The introduction consists of two parts: The first provides background information about young women, gender-responsive principles, and the theoretical foundation of the program. Having a basic understanding of the issues that girls are experiencing will help you to facilitate the group process. The second part of the introduction includes information

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girls' sexuality tends to focus on deficits and problems rather than on the natural emergence of desire and its healthy expression. Sex education classes generally consist of warnings about reproduction, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), pregnancy, and victimization. These realities do not diminish the importance of normalizing healthy sexual desire among girls. As writer Peggy Orenstein points out, boys face fewer constraints while girls are "supposed to provide the moral inertia that (temporarily) slows that force. In the classroom, just as in the family, girls' sexual behavior is seen as containable; boys' as inevitable." Ignoring girls' sexual desire is not only another form of censorship but is also a strategy that limits girls' exploration of safe alternatives for the healthy expression of sexuality.

Given that approximately 50 percent of ninth-through-twelfth graders report having had sexual intercourse, adolescents urgently need access to accurate information about sexuality and sexual health.

Engaging in sexual intercourse at an earlier age has been linked to heightened risk for a variety of negative outcomes. One study by the Allan Guttmann Institute revealed that 74 percent of women who had intercourse before age fourteen and 60 percent before age fifteen reported having experienced intercourse involuntarily. Even voluntary sex does not necessarily mean wanted sex. In fact, approximately 25 percent of women aged fifteen to twenty-four who reported consensual first-time sex said that they had not "entirely wanted it to happen."

### Violence and Aggression

**An Increase in Violent Crimes.** A marked increase in female arrests and growing media coverage of "girls gone bad" suggest that girls today are more aggressive and violent than their predecessors. In 1997, police in the United States arrested nearly 750,000 girls under the age of eighteen, which accounts for over one-fourth of all juvenile arrests. Statistics indicate that violent crime among girls doubled between 1988 and 1994, and studies further suggest that girl-initiated violence has increased 118 percent since 1987. However, it is important to note that aggravated assault is the level of violence that accounts for these increases.

**Gender-Biased System.** Overall, the rise in crime rates among girls may not necessarily reflect an increase in delinquency; it may be indicative of a gender-biased system. Although the crimes committed by girls generally are less severe than those committed by boys, girls are more likely to be taken into custody, detained, and committed to residential programs for crimes that don't tend to be taken as seriously for boys or adults. Furthermore, adolescent girls within the juvenile justice system experience alarmingly high rates of physical and sexual abuse. More than 70 percent of incarcerated girls report abuse experiences. Sadly, girls who need treatment for the abuse they have experienced in their lives often do not receive this treatment while in detention. Rather, they are at risk of being assigned to behavioral-management programming that is designed for boys. This is not the most effective therapeutic approach for working with girls who have histories of trauma.

**Aggression Among Girls.** Examining female juvenile justice populations reveals only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to aggression among girls. As Lyn Brown points out, "But by focusing on the overt, the extreme, and the physical only, we are likely to miss most of what constitutes girlfighting—that is, the more relational forms of aggression like gossip, backstabbing behavior, and covert competition; the more subtle forms of psychological cruelty." Brown rejects the notion that girls are inherently catty and mean; she explains the phenomenon of relational aggression as girls' attempts to assert power and express anger within the confines of the culture's gender norms. Instead of risking the repercussions of being overtly angry and "unfeminine," girls use indirect forms of aggression. Instead of risking rejection by

attacking boys, girl fighting is acted out "horizontally"—toward one another. Unfortunately, these behaviors leave girls feeling isolated and on-guard, thereby undermining the power they could collectively access as a cultural force for change. Brown states that:

Most women in their growing years did not learn to be a sister and an ally in the way they learned the benefits of selling out other girls. Most did not have opportunities to talk about why being an ally is even an important thing to know and practice. This is an important point. We have few public stories or images of sisterhood, of loyal friendship between girls and women, of women fighting and organizing for real and lasting social change.

### Expressions of Risk

The absence of a solid sense of self has been identified as a potential factor that contributes to a variety of physical and mental health problems, including depression, substance use, violence in relationships, and eating disorders. Although the women's movement of the past few decades has increased opportunities for today's girls, compared to the generation before them, our culture is also more violent, media-saturated, sexualized, and confusing for adolescents than ever before. The end product of these cultural and social influences is that girls today are vulnerable to a variety of physical and psychological risks that threaten their health and well-being.

### Depression

Adolescent girls experience greater rates of depression than do adolescent boys. The emergence of sexual differences in rates of depression begins in early-to-late adolescence, appears to be sustained throughout adolescence, and peaks around the age of seventeen or eighteen.

A recent study by the Oregon Health Division found that 21 percent of middle-school girls in the state reported seriously considering suicide and that 76 percent of thirteen-to-eighteen year olds who attempted suicide were female.

Studies suggest that the stress of female socialization and gender differences in coping styles may explain the presence of more depressive risk factors and symp-

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toms among adolescent girls. Girls tend to use the coping styles of social support, wishful thinking, and rumination; boys are more likely to engage in physical recreation as a way to deal with stress.

### Substance Abuse

Today's adolescent girls use cigarettes, alcohol, and other drugs at rates similar to those of adolescent boys. By the time they graduate from high school, more than 60 percent of girls have smoked cigarettes, over 77 percent have used alcohol, and 38 percent have smoked marijuana.

A recent study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University concludes that girls and young women use substances for different reasons than males and are more vulnerable to the negative consequences of use, including addiction. The CASA report suggests that young females, "tend to use alcohol or drugs to improve mood, increase confidence, reduce tension, cope with problems, lose inhibitions, enhance sex or lose weight, whereas young males tend to use alcohol or drugs for sensation seeking or to enhance their social status." As for negative consequences, the report further suggests that, even when girls use the same amount or less than boys, they are more vulnerable to nicotine addiction, alcohol intoxication and impairment, alcohol-induced brain damage, and other health problems.

### Relationship Violence

The National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect reports that one in three girls experience sexual or physical abuse in childhood—a rate that is three times greater than that of boys.

Abuse has been linked to a variety of emotional and behavioral consequences, including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, aggression, criminal behavior, and substance abuse.

Relationship violence can escalate to a life-threatening level. From 1995 to 1998, homicide was the second- and third-leading cause of death among girls aged fifteen to eighteen and eleven to fourteen, respectively. Most often, female adolescent victims were killed in their homes by persons they knew.

In the context of dating relationships, an analysis of the 1997 and 1999 Youth Behavior Survey conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health states that

one in five girls reports abuse by a dating partner. Although adolescent girls are three-to-four times more likely to experience physical or emotional injury in relationships, they may have difficulty recognizing this as interpersonal violence.

### Eating Disorders

Approximately seven million women suffer from eating disorders in the U.S. Of these, 86 percent report onset of the disorder before the age of twenty, 43 percent between the ages of sixteen and twenty, 33 percent between the ages of eleven and fifteen, and 10 percent at age ten or younger.

The prevalence of bulimia nervosa among adolescent girls and young adult females is approximately 1-3 percent.

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4<sup>th</sup> edition) (DSM-IV-TR), 90 percent of all cases of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are found in females.

Factors commonly associated with eating disorders are perfectionism, a desire to please, and a belief that one does not deserve to have needs.

### Girls in Juvenile Justice Settings

Juvenile females recently have become the focal point in the juvenile justice system, in part because they are the fastest-growing segment of the juvenile justice population. While girls comprise about 28 percent of all juvenile arrests, the arrests of girls increased by 50 percent between 1989 and 1998 (compared to a 17 percent increase for boys). Although much media attention has focused on an increase in violent crimes among girls, research suggests that there is not a significant rise but, rather, a re-labeling of girls' conflicts as violent offenses. In a majority of cases, girls enter the juvenile justice system for running away; only small numbers are there for violent crimes or gang-related incidents.

A profile of at-risk females identifies common characteristics, including histories of victimization, unstable family lives, school failure, repeated status offenses, and mental-health and substance-abuse problems.

Researchers know that girls run away primarily because they are not safe at home and that traumatic childhood events leave young women at high risk for delinquency. Therefore, understanding the impact of trauma on girls' lives is

imperative when working with females in the juvenile justice system.

### Teen Mothers

Programs for teen-aged mothers traditionally have been based on middle-class norms and ideals. It is important to recognize the diverse experiences of these young women. Often, the assumption is that young mothers have chosen to become pregnant and are, therefore, limiting their ability to do well in the future. However, the idea that pregnancy ruins a girl's chance to graduate from high school and go to college is only one version of the reality. Researchers have found that, for impoverished teenaged girls, postponing motherhood changes their lives very little in terms of job prospects and economic status. Five out of six adolescent mothers are poor. Current researchers are working toward designing programs that better address the employment and economic aspects of young mothers' lives in order to increase their chances of success.

Despite what has been written about teen parenting as a deficit, this may not always be the experience of the young women themselves. There are complex and varying reasons that young women become mothers as well as diverse outcomes in terms of their futures. Young mothers with impoverished pasts often describe parenting as a "catalyst for responsibility and maturity;" one said that mothering "creates a more promising future as the baby anchored and reorganized her life." Although class and culture play a role in how the public views young mothers, they also play a role in how the young mothers view themselves, and not all girls feel shame about becoming pregnant at a young age.

Although this program has not been written specifically for young mothers, it can be used with them. The group process lends itself to creating a support network that is particularly beneficial to teen-aged mothers in need of support from other young women who are experiencing similar challenges.

### Gender-Responsive Principles

Traditional interventions for youth have been described as "gender-neutral," which means that they have not directly addressed the social and cultural contexts of girls' lives. In fact, most "neutral" programs are created to respond to the outwardly aggressive behaviors more

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often seen with boys, rather than the internally destructive behaviors more often exhibited by girls. An effective, gender-responsive program for girls requires more than an all-female group undergoing traditional interventions designed for males. Rather, it requires an approach that is based on the relational nature of girls and the social contexts in which they develop.

In developing effective programs for young women, the experience and impact of living as a girl in a male-based society must be included as part of the clinical perspective. The term *gender-responsive* describes this programmatic approach and is defined as follows: creating an environment through site selection, program development, content, and material that reflects an understanding of the realities of the lives of women and girls and that addresses and responds to their strengths and challenges. *Voices: A Program of Self-Discovery and Empowerment* is a gender-responsive curriculum.

For example, because female and male adolescents use alcohol and other drugs for significantly different reasons, it makes sense that treatment programs be geared toward issues that are gender-specific. A recent research study that examined the elements that are important for adolescent drug-treatment programs identified "Gender and Cultural Competence" as one of nine key elements. Gender responsiveness is becoming widely regarded as an essential foundation for many types of programming and treatment.

### Key Elements

Although adolescence is fraught with challenges and risks, it also is a time of opportunity for effective prevention and intervention. Research on effective strategies that maximize girls' strengths and allow them to use their voices is noticeably limited in the literature. However, the following appear to be vital components for limiting risk and supporting the healthy development of adolescent girls:

- Celebrating strengths;
- Safety;
- Female mentors and role models;
- Developing and supporting leadership skills;

- Empowering girls to be forces for social change;
- Media literacy;
- Physical, sexual, and mental health information;
- Cultural connections; and
- Solidarity between girls and women.

### Celebrating Strengths

Focusing on girls' strengths rather than their risks and deficits enhances girls' feelings of power and possibility. Patton and Morgan suggest that existing strengths can be used as the foundation for teaching new skills. To accomplish this, they recommend: reframing girls' survival skills; providing caring relationships with adults; celebrating cultural roots; emphasizing high expectations and hope for the girls' success; valuing girls' opinions and ideas; and teaching social, education, and job skills. A study by the Collaborative Fund for Healthy Girls/Healthy Women reveals that "girls, particularly those from communities of color and low-income communities, require more than problem prevention to claim their voice and become community leaders."

### Safety

Safety is a critical issue for girls. They need to feel safe in order to explore themselves and connect with others in an authentic way. Safety involves both physical and emotional security. This means that programs need to be conducted in environments that are free from violence, abuse, harassment, bullying, and teasing. The Ms. Foundation for Women defines a safe space as, "girl-affirming and encourages girls' strong, healthy development. Safe space also fosters positive relationships among girls, young women and adult women and creates an environment of fun and joy." Providing a separate space for girls (apart from boys) is an important way to give them the comfort and confidence they need to express themselves without the distraction and potential threat of males.

### Female Mentors and Role Models

Studies suggest that all adolescents benefit from identification with positive role models or mentors. A recent study of 750 ethnically diverse adolescents in Los Angeles County concluded that par-

ticipants of both sexes who identified someone they "admire or look up to" had higher grades, better self-esteem, and strong ethnic identity.

For girls, relationships that involve sharing and supportive connection are essential for psychological health and development. Brown and Gilligan's research reveals that, "85 percent of the girls interviewed described an important relationship with a woman through which the older women either acted as advocates, served to validate the girls and their experiences, or fostered the girls' sense of self-respect or confidence."

### Developing and Supporting Leadership Skills

Viewing the construct of leadership through a "gender lens" reveals that feminine ideals of leadership may be different from traditional (male) views of being "first, strongest, and most vocal." Girls and young women define leadership as being powerful, strong, and passionate; speaking up for oneself and others; being honest; being able to admit being wrong; having humility; communicating in a way that motivates people; possessing a willingness to take risks; and serving as a role model.

### Empowering Girls to Be Forces for Social Change

There are nearly 36 million girls aged eighteen and under in the United States today. It is important for these young women to be educated about social change. Girls can gain perspective and clearer voices by discussing the influences of race, gender, and socioeconomic status on power and control in today's society. Brown suggests that:

Adults can help girls develop an eye for what educators refer to as "cultural capital"—those culturally influenced ways of dressing, talking, acting, and socializing that benefit some and render other marginal or invisible within schools and society . . . We do girls a service when we teach them how to question and critique assumptions about how "good" girls should act, look, and feel. And when we offer girls ways of understanding other girls' pain, anger, and resistance, we provide new possibilities and new reasons to work together for social change.

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### Media Literacy

One important aspect of helping girls limit the influence of negative social messages about women and girls is to teach them media literacy. Helping girls to recognize manipulative and inaccurate media messages about their gender empowers them to reject rather than internalize these harmful messages.

### Physical, Sexual, and Mental Health Information

Many girls simply don't have access to accurate information about the physical, sexual, and emotional changes they are experiencing. Patton and Morgan report that girls have four times as many health issues as boys. They struggle with body image, become sexualized by society, and face a host of mental-health issues that stem from pressure to conform to the feminine "ideal." Open communication about the facts of health and sexuality is critical to their development. In addition, helping girls become conscious and critical of soci-

ety's impossible standards of femininity can strengthen their self-esteem.

### Cultural Connections

The Ms. Foundation for Women suggests that connecting girls to their cultural roots and traditions fosters a sense of identity, purpose, and connection among them. Connecting with their cultural roots also can give girls access to broader networks of support.

### Solidarity Among Girls and Women

Brown stresses the importance of avoiding a "girls will be girls" message that assumes that gossip, fighting, jealousy, and back-stabbing are innate tendencies of girls. Instead, Brown suggests helping girls to connect with one another by affirming their relational strengths, encouraging collective activism, celebrating both similarities and differences among girls, and modeling committed and honest relationships among women and girls of all ages. The spirit of solidarity can unite girls in their common experiences and give them confidence in their united voice for change.

### Guidelines for Girls' Programs

In addition to the elements listed above, the six guiding principles adapted from the National Institute of Corrections research project, "Gender-Responsive Strategies: Research, Practice and Guiding Principles for Women Offenders," can assist in the development and improvement of services for girls:

**Gender.** Acknowledge that gender makes a difference.

**Environment.** Create an environment based on safety, respect, and dignity.

**Relationships.** Develop programs that are relational and promote healthy connections to family, children, significant others, and the community.

**Services and Supervision.** Address the issues of substance abuse, trauma, and mental health through comprehensive, integrated, culturally relevant services and appropriate supervision.

**Economic and Social Status.** Provide girls with opportunities to improve their socioeconomic conditions.

**Community.** Establish a system of community supervision and reentry with comprehensive, collaborative services. ■

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ate conduct that would not be punishable if between two youth of different sexes;

"In one case, a counselor in a juvenile justice facility petitioned to extend a lesbian's placement for allegedly holding hands with another girl under a bathroom stall and subsequently mouthing 'I love you' to the girl across the room."

- LGBTQ youth have been arbitrarily labeled as or placed with sex offenders, even though they are detained in a juvenile justice facility for an unrelated offense;

"[A] young transgender girl sentenced to a juvenile justice facility on robbery charges was arbitrarily labeled a sex offender by facility staff, made to wear clothes designating sex offenders in the facility, and told to participate in sex offender therapy."

- LGBTQ youth are sometimes subjected to reparative or conversion therapy (overt attempts to change one's sexual orientation) by juvenile justice officers and/or social workers;

"Two of the staff members wanted to 'help' me...I was told that two thousand years ago, I would have been stoned to death....they quoted the Bible to me, told me I would never have true sexual satisfaction, and asked me if I didn't want a man's strong arms around me..."

- Lack of awareness of the needs of LGBTQ youth among judges and attorneys representing these youth also leads to more frequent sentencing of LGBTQ youth to lock down programs rather than to other social reformative programs.

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