



BUILDING STRONG GIRLS

GIRLS' FUND 2009-2012

EVALUATION HIGHLIGHTS



CANADIAN
WOMEN'S
FOUNDATION

ABOUT THE CANADIAN WOMEN'S FOUNDATION

The Canadian Women's Foundation is Canada's public foundation for women and girls. The Foundation empowers women and girls in Canada to move out of violence, out of poverty and into confidence. Since 1991, the Foundation has raised money and invested in over 1,300 community programs across Canada, and is now one of the ten largest women's foundations in the world. The Foundation takes a positive approach to address root causes of the most critical issues facing women and girls. They study and share the best ways to create long-term change and bring community organizations together for training and to learn from each other. They carefully select and fund the programs with the strongest outcomes and regularly evaluate their work. They have a special focus on building a community of women helping other women. Helping women creates safer families and communities, and a more prosperous society for all of us. The Foundation invests in the strength of women and the dreams of girls.

For more information visit www.canadianwomen.org

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Canadian Women's Foundation
133 Richmond Street West, Suite 504
Toronto ON Canada M5H 2L3

Phone: 416-365-1444
Toll Free: 1-866-293-4483
TTY: 416-365-1732

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Evaluation Consultants:

Judit Alcalde
Karen Hayward
Colleen Loomis
Pytor Hodgson



“Because at first I thought that guys were totally, totally better than girls ... now I know that girls can do anything. We just have to set our minds to it.”

HISTORY OF THE GIRLS' FUND

DEVELOPMENT & RESEARCH (2005)

In 2005, the Canadian Women's Foundation conducted extensive research about girls in Canada. The research included a literature review and an environmental scan of girls' programming across the country. The resulting report, *Girls in Canada 2005*, identified 7 best practices (see Page 1) and highlighted the ages 9 to 13 as particularly important in the healthy development of girls.

THE GIRLS' FUND PHASE 1 (2006 - 2009)

The Girls' Fund was launched in 2006 as a three-year pilot project. Eight grants were funded (six program grants and two network grants). A range of programs were funded (i.e., science and technology, sports and physical activity, leadership and empowerment) but all were designed to build resilience in girls aged 9 to 13. A full evaluation of Phase 1 was conducted, which identified the need for a deeper examination of the relationships between best practices and outcomes, and more focus on the promotion of protective factors identified in the literature.

THE GIRLS' FUND PHASE 2 (2009 - 2012)

Based upon the positive results from the pilot phase, the Girls' Fund was expanded in Phase 2 to a total of fourteen grants (twelve program grants and two network grants). The expanded number of programs meant a wider variety of programs could be funded, such as those that focused on media literacy and those that incorporated teachings from traditional Aboriginal cultures. **The evaluation described in this report is about Phase 2.**

THE GIRLS' FUND PHASE 3 (2012 - 2016)

In the current phase of the Girls' Fund, twenty-eight community organizations are receiving funding to deliver programs in fifty-six locations across Canada. Eighteen of these organizations are also receiving additional funding to deliver group mentoring as an extension of their main program for girls. The evaluation of this phase will include a focus on the new group mentoring component. Since group mentoring has not been widely studied in Canada (especially in a girls-only context) this presents an opportunity for the Canadian Women's Foundation to contribute ground-breaking research to the sector.

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**“I’m in a wheelchair...
and at first I didn’t think
I fit in because I was different.
But (the instructor) taught us that
people might seem
different but they are
all really the same.”**

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“...it made me feel better about myself
because the colour of my skin
didn't matter in this program.”

INTRODUCTION

HOW TO BUILD STRONG GIRLS

Picture the typical eight-year-old Canadian girl. Chances are she likes herself, is confident, and feels ready to take on the world.

Most girls in Canada start out strong, but during adolescence (ages 9 to 13) this begins to waver.¹

Every day, girls see dozens of women in advertising, TV shows, music videos, movies, and video games. Virtually all of them are highly sexualized and highly artificial. These images teach both boys and girls that the most important thing about a woman is how she looks. The constant hypersexualization of women creates a toxic culture that is destroying girls' self-esteem. And since these 'ideal' women are almost always white, the destructive impact is even worse for girls from racialized minorities. Not surprisingly, more than half of the girls in one study said they wished they were someone else.

While 36% of girls in Grade 6 say they feel confident, by Grade 10 this drops to just 14%. Girls' mental health declines, too; they are three times as likely as boys to be depressed. To make things worse, girls between the ages of 13 and 15 are at their highest lifetime risk for being sexually assaulted.

In contrast to the self-assurance of younger girls, adolescent girls tend to have a lower sense of self-worth. In general, people with low self-esteem tend to be more easily influenced by others, often accept mistreatment in exchange for attention, and are vulnerable to being exploited. They also tend to lack resilience and have trouble bouncing back from a crisis. For example, girls who lack resilience may have difficulty coping with problems such as low marks at school, arguments with friends or dating partners, and family issues such as divorce.

But research shows that when girls receive the right kind of help at the right time, they can increase their self-esteem, improve their mental health, and develop more resilience in the face of a crisis.

Three protective factors have been shown to be particularly important for developing resilience in girls: Confidence, Connectedness, and Critical Thinking. When a girl feels strong in these three areas, she is much more likely to successfully navigate the challenges of the adolescent and teen years and become a strong young woman.

¹ For sources on all statistics on this page, and for more information on girls, please read *The Facts About Girls in Canada*. canadianwomen.org/facts-about-girls

GIRLS' FUND BEST PRACTICES

The following Best Practices were established during the Development and Research phase (see *History of the Girls' Fund*, previous page).

In order to receive a grant from the Girls' Fund, a program must demonstrate these best practices:

1. Pay explicit attention to gender equity
2. Be asset-based, with a positive focus
3. Be girl-directed and/or girl involved
4. Be interactive and fun
5. Provide a safe, friendly space for girls
6. Be accessible and address any possible barriers to participation
7. Respect and celebrate the diversity of girls

ABOUT THIS EVALUATION

This evaluation was designed to:

- Measure how well the Girls' Fund programs helped girls to develop Confidence, Connectedness, and Critical Thinking (in addition to other protective factors).
- Measure the extent to which the programs used best practices
- Summarize key learnings in order to develop the field of practice

The evaluation involved the girls who attended the programs, their parents, the volunteer mentors, and the staff who delivered the programs.

The evaluation tools included:

- Interviews (group, individual, in-person, phone)
- Online surveys
- Photovoice²
- Group journals or scrapbooks

The evaluation was designed to be flexible. While many of the questions were mandatory, in some cases the program staff could select the questions and tools that best suited their individual program.

To read the full evaluation report, visit www.canadianwomen.org.

² Photovoice is a technique where people take photographs that illustrate their everyday lives, then tell stories about them. It is an empowering method that helps participants to recognize both challenges and opportunities.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE GIRLS

AGE:

All of the girls were aged 9 to 13; most were younger than 12.

FAMILY COMPOSITION:

About one-third of the girls lived in single-parent households; a small percentage lived with extended family (e.g., grandparents) or in foster care.

PLACE OF BIRTH:

Most of the girls were born in Canada; about one-third were first generation Canadians (i.e., their parents were born outside Canada).

CULTURAL IDENTITY:

When asked to describe their cultural identity many girls checked off multiple boxes on the evaluation form, indicating that they felt part of more than one culture. They described their identities as Canadian (85%), Aboriginal (31%), and other identities such as African, Middle-Eastern, European, or Caribbean (65%).

LANGUAGE:

Similarly, about half of the girls spoke more than one language at home, including English (85%), French (17%), and an Aboriginal language (10%).

RISK FACTORS:

The girls were not asked about the presence of poverty, violence, or addictions in their families. However, according to staff observations, more than 50% of the girls lived in a low-income household, more than 25% lived in homes where domestic violence/abuse had occurred, and about 25% came from families where drug and/or alcohol addictions were present.

PROGRAM TYPE & ACTIVITIES

There were six types of Girls' Fund programs; each offered different activities:³

1. Leadership and Empowerment
2. Media Literacy
3. Financial Literacy
4. Aboriginal Culture and Teachings
5. Physical Activities and Sports
6. Science, Engineering, Math and Technology

³ In the full report, the first four program types are sometimes grouped into the single category of 'psychosocial.'

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Attending a Girls' Fund program makes a huge difference to girls. When asked if their levels of Confidence, Connectedness, and Critical Thinking had improved, the vast majority said 'Yes!'

PRIMARY PROTECTIVE FACTORS⁴

- 92% feel more confident
- 95% feel more connectedness
- 95% think more critically

OTHER PROTECTIVE FACTORS⁵

- 96% feel better about being a girl
- 94% feel their social skills have improved
- 91% feel closer to/more supported by family
- 91% feel more able to communicate
- 90% feel more able to deal with bullying
- 89% better understand where to go for help
- 88% have new strengths & skills
- 87% feel more able to resist peer pressure
- 82% feel more able to problem-solve in difficult situations
- 79% feel better about school

NOTE: All of the findings presented in this Highlight Report are from Year 3 of the three-year evaluation. For more information, please see *Program Year*, page 10.

“... I [used to feel] bad about myself... because people made me feel ugly, but after coming [to the program] I stopped believing that.”

4 For more information on these three protective factors, please see pages 3 to 8 of this report

5 For more information on these ten protective factors, please see the full report.

92% OF GIRLS FEEL MORE CONFIDENT

Improvements in self-confidence are especially significant for girls of this age, because adolescence is when they typically experience a significant decrease in confidence.

For girls, having more confidence doesn't just make them feel better, it actually serves as a kind of protective shield against the toxic culture of hypersexualization that surrounds girls, and helps them to maintain their self-esteem.

When a girl feels confident, she is more likely to ask for help, to have the strength to resist peer pressure, to cope better with conflict and other problems, and to not blame herself if she is assaulted.

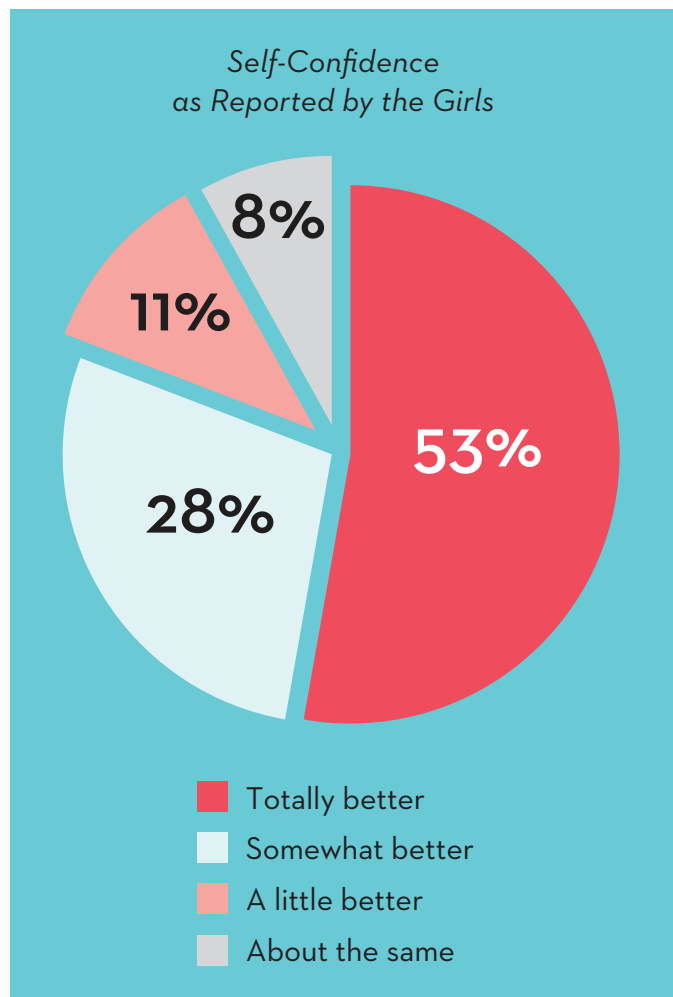
Feeling More Confident can include:

- speaking up more easily
- being proud of her achievements
- sharing more openly with others
- feeling less shy (“coming out of her shell”)
- believing it is okay to be herself
- feeling more positive about her life

In the evaluation the girls, their parents, and staff were asked to rate whether the girls were feeling more confident as a result of participating in the program.

In total, 92% of girls said the programs helped them to feel more confident. As shown in the chart below, 53% of girls said their self-confidence was *Totally Better*, 28% said it was *Somewhat Better*, 11% said it was *A Little Better*, and 8% said their self-confidence was *About The Same*. None of the girls said their self-confidence was worse.

Ninety-five percent of parents agreed the programs strengthened self-confidence for their daughters. Staff were asked about general results for the girls in their program (not on changes for individual girls) and also reported strong improvements in self-confidence.





“I got a lot of pride
with being an
Aboriginal girl.”

“[She] focuses more on
her strengths.”

Parent

“[L]ots of times girls are
taught or influenced to
soften their voice and
not be able to speak
up when they are faced
with a situation, I don’t
think that would be a
problem with any of
my girls [because]
that’s something
that we really
encourage.”

Program Staff

95% OF GIRLS FEEL MORE CONNECTEDNESS

Connectedness is about feeling seen and heard, and knowing that you matter. It's also about belonging. Humans don't simply *want* to belong—we need to belong. In fact, it is so essential that people will often go along with the crowd, sometimes even doing things that conflict with their personal values, rather than experience the emotional pain of exclusion or the fear of being an outsider. The need to be accepted can put enormous pressure on a girl to do things that are not in her own best interest, such as taking drugs or drinking alcohol, texting intimate photographs of herself, or having sex before she is ready.

Feeling a strong connection with friends and peers can be very healthy for girls, as long as those relationships offer positive role models. However, if a girl is surrounded by negative influences, she is at increased risk for unhealthy choices. For example, research has linked the need for belonging to the decision to join a gang. However, having a strong sense of connection with family, school or community can protect girls from making these kinds of choices.

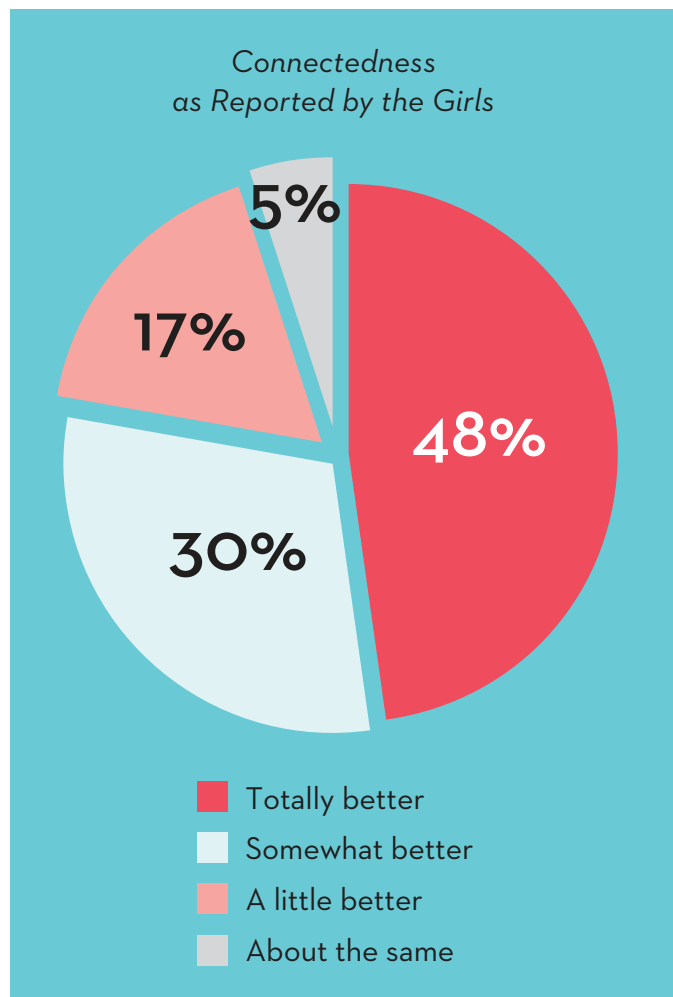
Feeling More Connectedness can include:

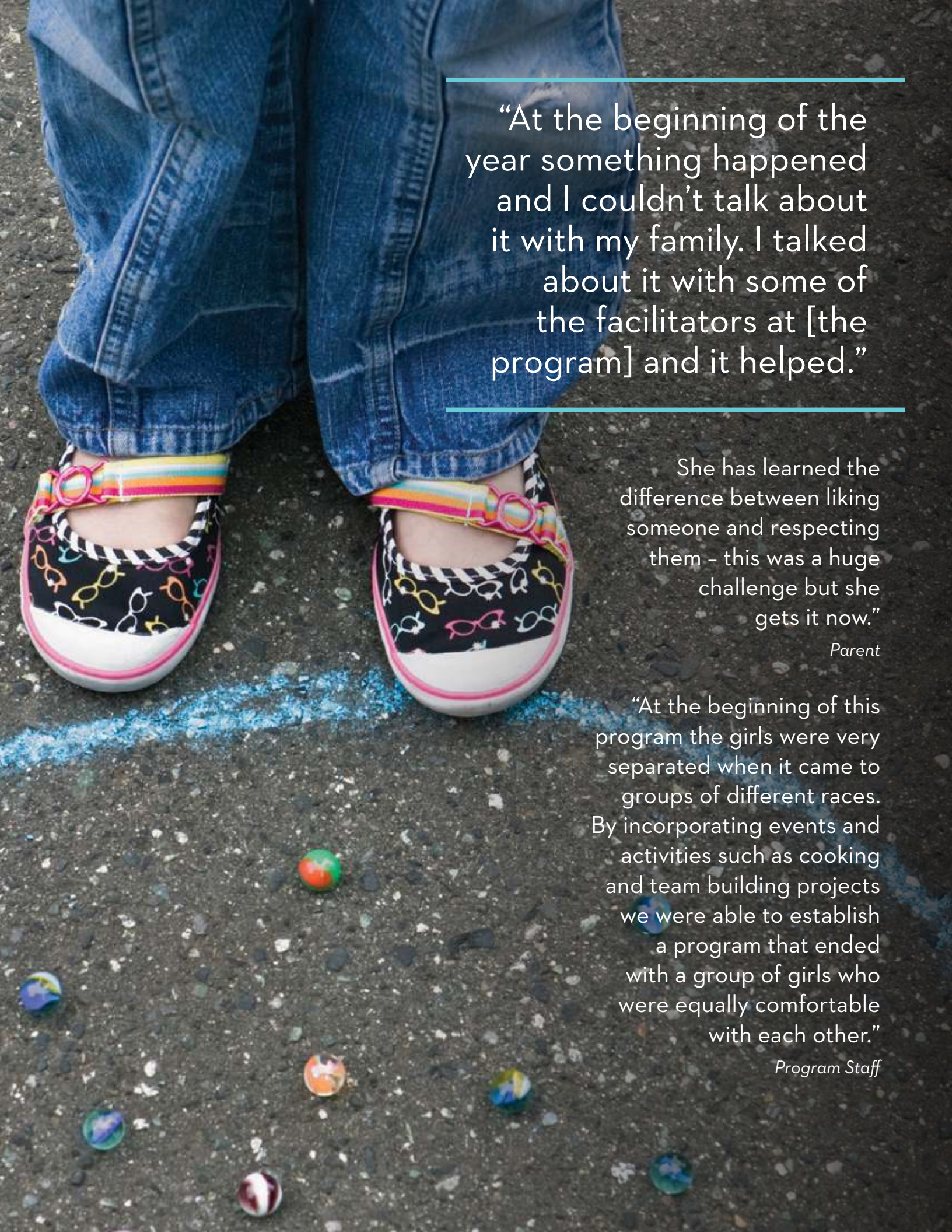
- feeling less lonely
- getting along better with friends; making more friends; making friends with people from other cultures
- feeling part of a group; working better in groups
- being more supportive of others and less judgmental
- finding it easier to be herself, to state her opinions, to show her feelings, and to share problems
- feeling welcome, safe and supported at home
- having a good experience at school
- feeling she has trusted adults to whom she can talk

The girls, their parents, and staff were asked to rate whether the girls were feeling more connected to others as a result of participating in the program. In all three years, the responses were very positive.

In total, 95% of girls said the programs helped them to feel more connected. As shown in the chart below, 48% of girls said their sense of connection was *Totally Better*, 30% said it was *Somewhat Better*, 17% said it was *A Little Better*, and 5% said it was *About The Same*. None of the girls said their sense of connection was worse.

Eighty-six percent of parents agreed the programs strengthened their daughters' sense of connectedness, and staff reported very high levels of connectedness and bonding between the girls.





“At the beginning of the year something happened and I couldn’t talk about it with my family. I talked about it with some of the facilitators at [the program] and it helped.”

She has learned the difference between liking someone and respecting them – this was a huge challenge but she gets it now.”

Parent

“At the beginning of this program the girls were very separated when it came to groups of different races. By incorporating events and activities such as cooking and team building projects we were able to establish a program that ended with a group of girls who were equally comfortable with each other.”

Program Staff

95% OF GIRLS THINK MORE CRITICALLY

Learning to think critically might sound complicated but it really comes down to one thing: asking questions.

Teaching girls to think critically means teaching them to consider options and consequences before jumping into action. They learn to ask questions like: "What are my choices? What are the possible consequences? What do I think is the right thing to do?" They begin to understand there is always more than one possible solution to any given problem. This helps them to recognize and resist peer pressure, and to make better choices.

They also learn to make informed opinions. Before jumping to conclusions about a situation or insisting on seeing things their own way, they begin to respect other points of view. They learn to ask questions like: "Is there another way of looking at this? What do other people think? How would I feel if it were me?" Instead of simply believing what they're told, they ask: "Is that really true? What else might be going on here?"

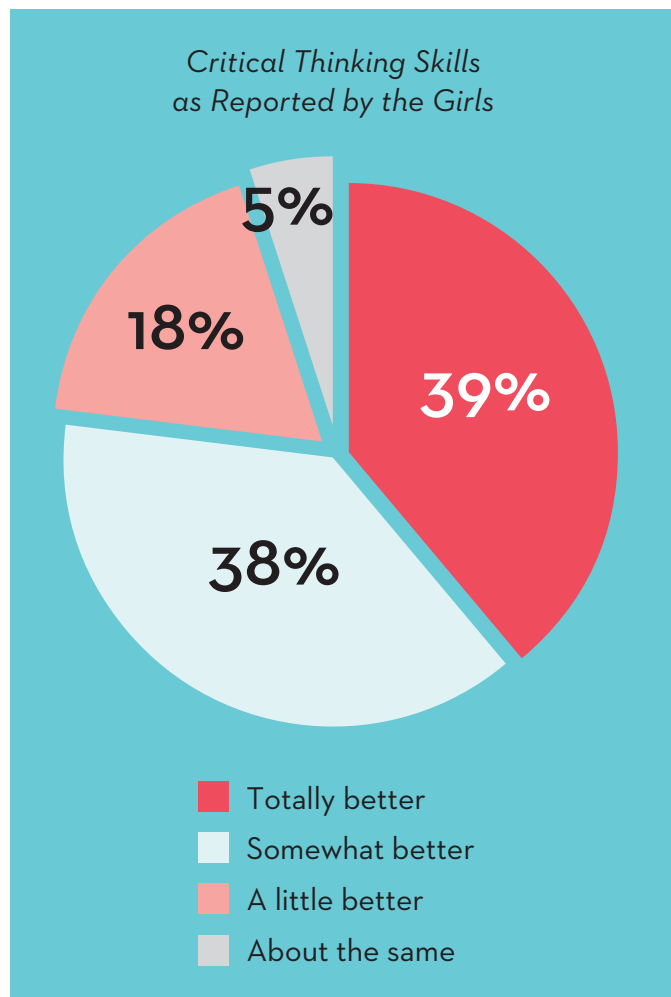
Thinking More Critically can include:

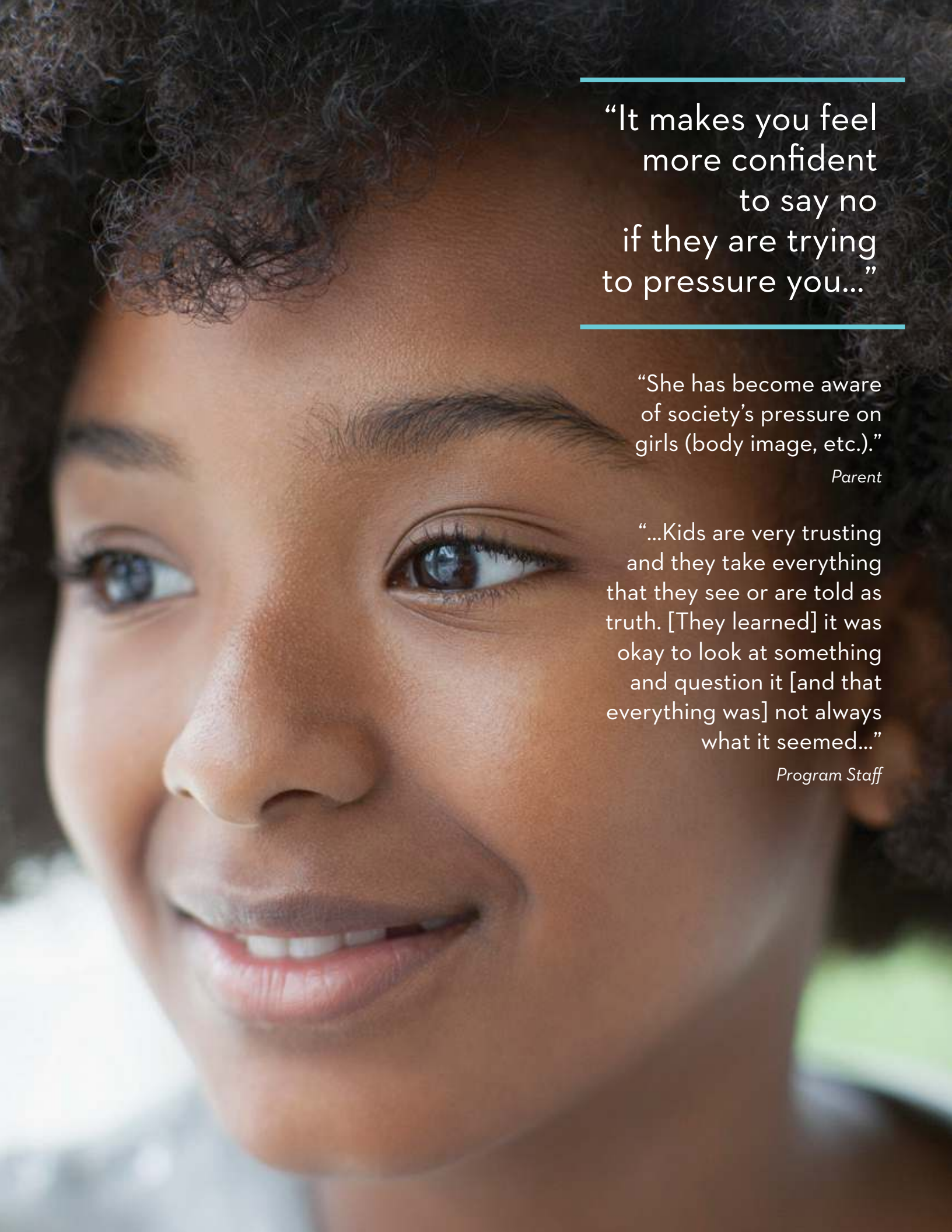
- learning to weigh pros and cons
- learning to problem-solve
- valuing the opinion of others more, and becoming less judgmental
- not accepting things at face value (e.g., questioning the portrayal of women and girls in popular media)
- considering the possible impact of risky behaviours (e.g., smoking, drinking, drugs, unprotected sex)

The girls, their parents, and staff were asked to rate the girls' critical thinking skills. In all three years, the responses were very positive.

In total, 95% of girls said the programs helped them to think more critically. As shown in the chart below, 39% of girls said their critical thinking skills were *Totally Better*, 38% said they were *Somewhat Better*, 18% said they were *A Little Better*, and 5% said they were *About The Same*. None of the girls said their critical thinking skills were worse.

Eighty-nine percent of parents agreed the programs strengthened their daughters' critical thinking skills, and staff also reported strong improvements in this area.





“It makes you feel
more confident
to say no
if they are trying
to pressure you...”

“She has become aware
of society’s pressure on
girls (body image, etc.).”

Parent

“...Kids are very trusting
and they take everything
that they see or are told as
truth. [They learned] it was
okay to look at something
and question it [and that
everything was] not always
what it seemed...”

Program Staff

SUCCESS FACTORS

In addition to measuring the extent to which the girls improved their Confidence, Connectedness, and Critical Thinking, the evaluation also examined what contributed to the success of the programs.

PROGRAM ELEMENTS

The evaluation measured whether there was a relationship between different program elements and each of the three main protective factors. The presence of a relationship is shown with a checkmark; the lack of a checkmark means no specific relationship was identified.

PROGRAM ELEMENT	CONFIDENCE	CONNECTEDNESS	CRITICAL THINKING
The program was girls-only.	✓	✓	✓
The group was a happy and positive place	✓		✓
The girls felt comfortable talking, listening, and sharing their ideas; they trusted one another	✓	✓	✓
The girls could tell the instructors what they wanted to do, or when they didn't like certain things.	✓	✓	
The program had a good range of activities	✓	✓	✓
The instructors were caring and supportive.	✓		
The instructors focused on the girls' strengths and skills.			✓

THE IMPORTANCE OF GIRLS-ONLY PROGRAMS

All programs that are supported through a Girls' Fund grant must be for girls only, and the girls, parents, and staff all strongly agreed this was critically important. In fact, when girls were asked why they had chosen the program, one of the main reasons was that it was for girls only.

There are many reasons for providing girls-only programming:

- boys and girls have different needs and interests
- boys and girls behave differently, and girls often find boys' behavior to be disruptive
- girls are more likely to be themselves in front of other girls
- girls are more comfortable sharing and opening up in front of girls
- girls are especially reluctant to discuss certain topics in front of boys (e.g., sexuality, eating disorders, self-esteem, body image)
- girls worry less about their appearance
- girls worry less about being teased/bullied
- girls behave differently when boys are around
- being only with girls helps girls to feel strong and special
- having female role models shows girls they can be smart and powerful
- girls find girls-only groups to be more positive and fun

Several girls and parents felt that while their programs should remain girls-only, boys should have their own programs, too.

PROGRAM YEAR

As noted on Page 2, all of the findings described in this Highlights Report are from Year 3 of the three-year evaluation. Ratings for all protective factors were highest in this year. The reasons for this are not clear, but there are several possibilities.

The first is that the programs themselves became more effective over time. An evaluation was conducted in each year, and staff would make improvements to the programs based on the findings. By Year 3, most delivery issues had been resolved and the programs were being delivered in a consistent manner. As well, each year some of the evaluation questions were clarified; this may have slightly changed the year-over-year findings.

Another possibility is that there may have been a cumulative positive effect, since many of the girls who attended the programs in Year 3 had also attended the programs in Year 1 and/or Year 2. As well, the girls in Year 3 were somewhat younger than in the previous two years; it may be that younger girls tended to answer the evaluation questions more favourably, or perhaps the program had a greater impact because the girls were younger.

The impact of program year will continue to be studied in future evaluations.

PROGRAM TYPE

While all of the program types (Leadership and Empowerment; Media Literacy; Financial Literacy; Aboriginal Culture and Teachings; Physical Activities and Sports; Science, Engineering, Math and Technology) were beneficial, the first four⁶ had particularly strong outcomes. For Aboriginal girls, the most effective programs were those that incorporated traditional Aboriginal teachings. In future evaluations, the effect of program type will be studied in more depth.

MENTORING

Many of the programs included mentors, either older girls or adults, including Aboriginal Elders. Some of the mentors taught the girls directly, others helped the staff to lead activities, and many worked directly with the girls, talking with them and helping them with program activities.

Girls who were mentored by older girls said they liked that their mentor was older but still young enough to understand them; their age made it easier for the girls to open up to them. Girls who were mentored by adults liked that they had another trusted adult in their life to talk to. The girls said all of the mentors provided positive role models and offered real-life experiences from which they could learn.

The mentors themselves agreed they had a positive impact on the girls, but also said the experience helped them, too, by providing them with:

- a way to give back to the community
- affirmation of their knowledge and expertise
- a sense of hope for future generations
- a way to stay on track with their own healing/ goals
- a way to practice their skills and/or get experience towards a future career
- increased self-esteem
- a way to connect to the community and contribute
- lessons in becoming more patient with their own daughters
- a boost to their spirits and increased happiness

⁶ In the full report, the first four program types are sometimes grouped into the single category of 'psychosocial.'

PROGRAM DURATION

The evaluation attempted to measure the impact of program 'dosage' (the number of hours the girls spent in the programs) but the results were inconclusive.

In Year 1 of the three-year program, it seemed clear that the more hours the girls spent in the programs, the more their self-confidence and connectedness improved. However, in Year 2 and Year 3, this effect was no longer apparent. The evaluators concluded this was because there was so little variation in responses (i.e., everyone rated the programs very highly). In other words, the differences were so small it was impossible to determine which variables had affected these two protective factors. When it came to the third protective factor, Critical Thinking, the evaluators found it was the content of the programs and not their duration that made the most difference.

The question of program duration is being studied further in the current phase of the Girls' Fund. Since this phase is one year longer and involves many more grantees, it is expected that a more detailed analysis of the relationships between program duration and outcomes will be possible.

PROGRAM DELIVERY

For the most part, the programs ran very smoothly.

The programs were in high demand and staff had no trouble recruiting girls to attend. While most of the programs were open to any girl aged 9 to 13, some of the programs focused on recruiting specific groups of girls (e.g., girls from low-income families or girls from racialized groups such as Aboriginal or African Canadian communities). In these cases, staff reported no challenges in recruiting these girls.

The majority of parents were pleased with the number of opportunities for them to participate in the programs, and with the level of communication with the program. Most also reported feeling sufficiently connected to the program.

The main request from both girls and parents was for the programs to be expanded; they wanted the programs offered more frequently, with more topics and/or activities.

Most of the program delivery challenges related to logistics such as transportation, attendance, difficulty in finding a program space, and scheduling mentors and guest speakers. There were also some issues related to the behaviour of individual girls and group dynamics. As well, it was sometimes difficult to get parents involved and to ensure the programs were sufficiently girl-directed.

Some stakeholders pointed out that since the girls spent such a short amount of time in the programs—compared to how much time they spend at home or in school—maintaining the positive effect of the program may prove to be difficult if these longer-duration experiences are negative. The next evaluation will include a longitudinal component to measure the long-term impact of the programs. We expect the addition of mentoring will lead to longer-term improvements, especially if the girls themselves return to the program and volunteer as mentors.

“It makes me think more about other people’s lives and gangs... When I make decisions I think of how it will affect the balance in my life.”

CONCLUSION

The vision of the Canadian Women's Foundation is: "Invest in women and girls. Change everything."

The evaluation described in this report demonstrates that investing in adolescent girls through the Girls' Fund changes their future. The findings reveal overwhelmingly positive improvements in their levels of confidence, connectedness, and critical thinking, as well as in other protective factors.

Thanks to these fundamental building blocks, girls are able to increase their self-esteem, become more resilient and able to recover from a crisis, make healthier life choices, and be more likely to grow up into strong young women. They are also more able to challenge the toxic culture of hypersexualization that teaches them that how they look is more important than who they are.

This evaluation also measured the impact of different program elements and other factors. The results indicate that the current design of the Girls' Fund is highly successful and produces strong outcomes for girls. We will continue to measure these factors in future evaluations.

In the current phase of the Girls' Fund, the number of grants has been doubled. This will provide a much larger data set for the next round of evaluation and allow for an even deeper analysis. And, since the current phase also includes a significant number of group mentoring grants, the next evaluation will also include ground-breaking research on the impact of group mentoring for girls.

Every girl should believe in herself and realize she matters. But too many adolescent girls in Canada struggle with declining confidence, poor mental health, and high rates of sexual assault. They need our support.

We hope our findings will encourage other community organizations to develop programs for girls, and motivate other funders to support their efforts.

A UNIQUE FUNDING PROGRAM

In the third year of the evaluation, stakeholders were asked about the overall impact of the Girls' Fund, over and above the impact on individual girls. The stakeholders included staff from the funded programs, Canadian Women's Foundation donors, and members of the Girls' Fund Advisory Committee.

Many said they believed the Girls' Fund to be unique in Canada, in several ways.

They felt there was no other funding program designed specifically for adolescent girls, even though the need is clear. The very existence of the Girls' Fund helps to raise awareness of these issues.

Stakeholders also praised the deliberate inclusion of Aboriginal Elders and content. And, since the grants are offered for three or four years in a row (most other funders only offer funding for one year) staff have the necessary developmental time to build their skills and improve the programs based on the evaluation findings.

Finally, stakeholders also commended the Girls' Fund program for what one respondent called a "relational model" of funding. The organizations that receive a grant from the Girls' Fund don't simply receive a cheque from the Canadian Women's Foundation. They are also regularly invited to take part in webinars and other training opportunities, and to network with other grantees from across Canada who also work with girls. Grantees report that having this type of capacity-building support doesn't just improve their girls' programs—it also has a ripple effect. Since they often apply the knowledge to their other programs, these supports actually help to strengthen their entire organization.



For more information about
the Canadian Women's Foundation Girls' Fund
please visit canadianwomen.org/girls