



FACT SHEET MOVING GIRLS INTO CONFIDENCE

At the Canadian Women's Foundation, we want every girl to believe in herself and realize she matters.

That's why we work to empower girls with confidence, a sense of connection, and critical thinking skills.

We support programs for girls (aged nine to 13) that help them thrive through sports and physical activity, science and technology, media literacy, community action, and leadership development.

HERE ARE SOME COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT GIRLS IN CANADA:

1. Why do you focus on girls when some say boys are falling behind?

- We strongly believe that all children - no matter their gender - deserve to thrive, and we applaud other campaigns that work to support boys. As a women's organization, our mission focuses on women and girls. However, the teen violence prevention programs we fund are designed for all youth.
- When girls start school, it's true they are more likely than boys to do well in reading, writing, and forming friendships. Yet as girls approach adolescence, their early advantage is overshadowed by: 1) high rates of sexual assault and other violence, 2) a sharp decline in mental health and confidence, and 3) negative stereotyping and sexualization.
- Indigenous girls in Canada are especially at risk. They experience alarmingly high levels of depression, suicide, addiction, HIV infection, and poverty.

2. How many girls in Canada are victims of violence and sexual assault?

- In 2012, over 11,000 sexual assaults of girls under the age of 18 were reported to police in Canada.¹ Since we know that less than 10% of sexual assaults are reported to police annually, the actual number is much higher.²
- Girls experience sexual assault at much higher rates than boys. In 2012, 81% of all sexual assault victims under the age of 18 were female.³
- When girls are sexually assaulted, over 88% of the time the perpetrator is someone they know.⁴
- Girls are more than four times as likely as boys to be sexually assaulted by a family member. Girls are also at a higher risk for other forms of family violence, such as physical assault.⁵

- In Ontario high schools, 27% of girls said they'd been pressured into doing something sexual they didn't want to do, and almost half have been the victim of unwanted sexual comments or gestures.⁶
- Rates of family violence against girls are highest in Canada's territories. In the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, girls face a rate of family violence nearly twice as high as boys. In Yukon, the rate is more than double.⁷
- The overall rate of sexual assault for Indigenous women is almost three times the rate for non-Indigenous women. Indigenous women are also at a significantly higher risk of sexual or physical assault by a spouse or partner.⁸
- A 2017 survey by the Canadian Women's Foundation indicated that 79% of Canadians believe that the next generation of women (defined as Generation Z: those born in 1999 or later) are just as or more likely to experience sexual assault. Canadians hold a similar view for other forms of violence, including online harassment (87%), physical violence from a partner (81%), sexual harassment in public (70%), and sexual harassment in the workplace (64%). Further, 79% of Canadians believe Gen Z women will be just as or more likely to feel unsafe because of their gender.⁹

3. What happens to girls' mental health in adolescence?

- Despite increasing national awareness and dialogue surrounding mental health, the statistics relating to the mental health of girls in Canada are alarming. In Grade 6, 36% of girls say they are self-confident, but by Grade 10 this has plummeted to only 14%.¹⁰
- Between age nine and 13, girls become less confident and are more likely to say they are feeling depressed.¹¹
- 12% of girls in Canada aged 12-19 say they have experienced a major depressive episode at some point in their life.¹²
- A study of Ontario students found that girls (8.4%) are prescribed medication for depression, anxiety, or both much more often than boys (2.8%).¹³
- More girls aged 10-17 are hospitalized for mental disorders than boys the same age.¹⁴
- Canadian girls are also 15 times more likely to be hospitalized for an eating disorder than their male counterparts. Over half of female patients hospitalized for eating disorders in Canada are girls aged 10-19.¹⁵
- The number of hospitalizations of Canadian girls for self-harm related injuries has more than doubled from 2009-2014. The group that saw the biggest increase was girls aged 14-17.¹⁶
- Girls in Ontario are twice as likely than boys to report feeling an unmet need for mental health support.¹⁷
- In Canada, suicide remains the third-leading cause of death for girls aged 10-14, and the second-leading cause of death for girls aged 15-19.¹⁸

4. What causes this decline in girls' mental health?

- Girls today balance many daily pressures, ranging from family and school obligations to peer pressure and media stereotypes.

- The pressure to do well at school may be a contributing factor, as 55% of 15-year-old girls in Canada report feeling stressed about school and grades.¹⁹
- Nearly 1 in 4 Canadian girls aged 15-17 report feeling high levels of daily stress.²⁰
- The widespread sexualization of girls in our society also plays a major role in the deterioration of girls' mental health. Sexualization occurs when a person's main value is attributed to their sexual appearance - rather than their intelligence or other qualities - and when they are held to unrealistic standards of physical attractiveness.²¹
- Social scientists have found that exposure to sexualized images and messages can lead to body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, depression, and low self-esteem.²²
- Popular media is often the source of sexualization.
 - Women who are political and public figures are often scrutinized for their clothing choices and appearances, which are in no way relevant to their professional roles.²³
 - The average American child watches 20,000 television commercials each year. That amount of exposure can lead girls to believe the women and girls they see in ads represent "normal" or "average" body types. But fashion models are typically between a size 0-4, which is far smaller than the average Canadian woman.²⁴
 - This inaccurate representation makes many girls feel insecure and unhappy with their own bodies, because they don't look like the images that the media presents.²⁵
 - In a survey conducted by the Canadian Women's Foundation, over 60% of people said celebrities are the primary role models for girls. In comparison, only 36% said girls look up to their parents the most, and almost no one said girls look up to professionals such as scientists or writers.²⁶
- While generations of girls have dealt with the negative effects of popular culture, girls today face added pressure from the growing influence of social media.
 - In a study of Ontario students, girls were 22% more likely than boys to spend five or more hours on social media daily.²⁷
 - Millennials (those born between around 1980 and 2000) report the highest levels of stress related to social media (48%), according to an American study which also suggested that the parents of teen girls are worried about the effects of social media on their daughters' mental and physical health (69%).²⁸
 - 25.8% of girls in Grade 7-12 report being victims of cyberbullying, compared to 14% of boys the same age.²⁹
 - Visual social media networks allow users to filter and edit images of themselves before posting. Girls now not only compare themselves to "perfect" images of celebrities, but also to artificially perfected images of their friends and people they know.
 - Popular photo-editing apps may reinforce the message to girls that they aren't good enough as they are.
 - As a result, these apps may detract from girls' self-esteem. The disconnect between the edited images and the inability to look "perfect" in real-life can lead to anxiety, frustration, and increased body-image issues.³⁰

5. But hasn't the stereotyping and sexualization of women and girls gone on for years?

- While the stereotyping and sexualization of women and girls isn't new, a younger age group of girls is being affected.
- Clothing and toys marketed to young girls play a role in sexualization by reinforcing gender stereotypes.
 - In 2014, a woman brought attention to two Superman-logo onesies for sale at her local Target by sharing images online. The onesie designed for baby boys read "Future man of steel," while the girls version read "I only date heroes."³¹
 - Halloween costumes for boys range from professionals to animals, with hundreds of other options in between. In contrast, many girls' costumes depict sexualized versions of stereotypical roles, like princesses or witches.³²
 - Dolls like Barbie idealize an unrealistic body type that studies have shown only accurately reflect the body types of 1 in every 100,000 women.³³
 - Toys targeted to girls tend to teach them to be nurturing and passive, while many toys marketed to boys focus on experimentation and active play.³⁴
- Sexualization also continues to occur in movies and TV shows. Gender imbalances and sexualized characters can be harmful to young girls, given the strong influence of the entertainment industry.
 - A study analyzing the top 100 highest-grossing films of 2015 revealed that only 17% had a woman or girl as the lead character. It also found that male characters appear onscreen and speak twice as often as female characters.³⁵
 - The gender gap is highest in the action genre, where men appear onscreen and speak three times as often as female characters. This is true despite the popularity of action movies with women leads, like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* series.³⁶
 - Another study of the highest-grossing films of 2015 found that viewers were more likely to know the occupation of male characters, and to see those characters at work or working. In contrast, viewers were more likely to know the marital status of female characters.³⁷
 - The study also confirmed that female characters of colour were even less likely to appear onscreen. Additionally, the average age of female characters is much younger than the average age of male characters.

6. How do stereotypes and sexualization affect girls at school?

- When society teaches girls to focus on stereotypical gender roles and their appearances, it can affect their academic performance and career aspirations.
 - Scientists found that girls who show high levels of "internalized sexualization" - defined as the belief that sexual attractiveness is an important part of their identity - earn lower grades and score lower on standardized tests than their peers.³⁸

- In Canada, girls and boys aged 15 had the same average scores on tests measuring scientific ability. Yet, boys are twice as likely as girls to pursue STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) subjects than girls.³⁹
- What's even more alarming is that girls who scored the highest on math ability were still less likely than boys who scored the lowest to pursue STEM subjects in university.⁴⁰
- These findings suggest that a lack of confidence may cause girls to question their abilities to succeed in these traditionally male subjects.
- This is supported by evidence that girls who attend all-girls schools are twice as likely to study physics in university compared to girls who attend co-ed schools.⁴¹
- Another factor that may discourage women and girls from pursuing STEM careers is the classroom environment. A University of Missouri study found that male students underestimated their female peers' academic performance in undergraduate biology classes. Male students were more likely to be recognized as knowledgeable about course content than females, and this perception increased as the course continued.⁴²

7. How can girls be helped to overcome stereotypes and sexualization?

- Through the [Girls' Fund](#), the Canadian Women's Foundation invests in communities across Canada to help girls to navigate the 'triple whammy' that hits in adolescence: a high risk of sexual assault, poor mental health, and a toxic, sexualized culture. When girls are resilient, they can recover from crisis more quickly, improve their mental health, and reduce the likelihood of sexual exploitation. Resilience flows from confidence, connection, and critical thinking.
- The programs funded by the Canadian Women's Foundation are designed specifically to help girls **between the ages of nine and 13 to become more resilient, and provide a safe space where they can explore, create, and achieve without worrying about how they look or what boys think.**
- One of the best ways to help a girl develop confidence is through mentorship. Research shows about 60% of Canadians who say they are "very confident" had a mentor in their youth.⁴³ Many of the programs for girls that are funded by the Canadian Women's Foundation include mentoring opportunities.
- According our program evaluation, parents reported the programs helped their daughters to become more confident, less shy, and more physically active. Ninety-five per cent of the girls felt a stronger sense of belonging, 94% said they had better critical-thinking skills, 93% said they felt more confident. The girls also said they felt more able to deal with bullying and had better communication and problem-solving skills. Best of all, they said they felt better about being a girl.
- To learn more, please visit canadianwomen.org/empower-girls

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