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WE DISCOVER, WE GROW

Girlguiding

Girls' wellbeing explored

Understanding pressures and resilience

September 2016



Foreword: YoungMinds

YoungMinds champions the mental health and wellbeing of all children and young people and so I am delighted to introduce this important research about girls' wellbeing.

Girlguiding is a hugely valuable and positive resource for girls and young women's development of resilience and positive self-identity. But, as this report shows, the modern-day stresses that girls and young women are coping with in day-to-day life are having a range of negative effects.

The findings support YoungMinds' own research with over 5,000 young people, so it is very welcome that the report also outlines recommendations that provide clear steps for change and should be supported by us all.

This report starkly illustrates the challenges that girls face, but also shows that they can do a huge amount to support each other. Building resilience to cope with pressures is essential.

That's why we are delighted to be supporting and advising Girlguiding in its work on girls' wellbeing and helped create their peer education programme, *Think Resilient*, which teaches girls how to manage difficulties and cope when times are tough. This research gives us many more examples of what helps girls cope.

Our teenage years are when mental health is developed and patterns are set for the future. With good mental health, girls do better in every way. They enjoy themselves, are able to deal with stress and difficult times, do better at school, and enjoy friendships and new experiences.

That's why this research and recommendations are so important. I am sure you will find it illuminating. YoungMinds certainly looks forward to continuing its work with Girlguiding to help more girls to stay well and flourish.

Sarah Brennan
Chief Executive
YoungMinds

YoungMinds is the UK's leading charity committed to improving the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people. Driven by their experiences we campaign, research and influence policy and practice.

YOUNGMINDS
The voice for young people's mental health and wellbeing



Foreword: Advocates

Mental health and wellbeing have become top priorities for the Advocate panel as these issues have come to dominate the concerns of girls and young women. Girlguiding's 2010 Girls' Attitudes Survey showed smoking, binge drinking and drug abuse were the top health concerns amongst girls. In 2015, their top concerns were mental health and self-harm – a significant change in five years.

Reading over the quotes in this report was very encouraging but also disturbing. It was reassuring to see that many girls had found positive coping mechanisms to deal with stress, such as playing sport, relying on friends and attending Guides. However, there were too many who just felt isolated, overwhelmed by stress and pressure and guilty or embarrassed when they didn't know how to cope; some even turn to self-harm. This is not only deeply upsetting but unacceptable.

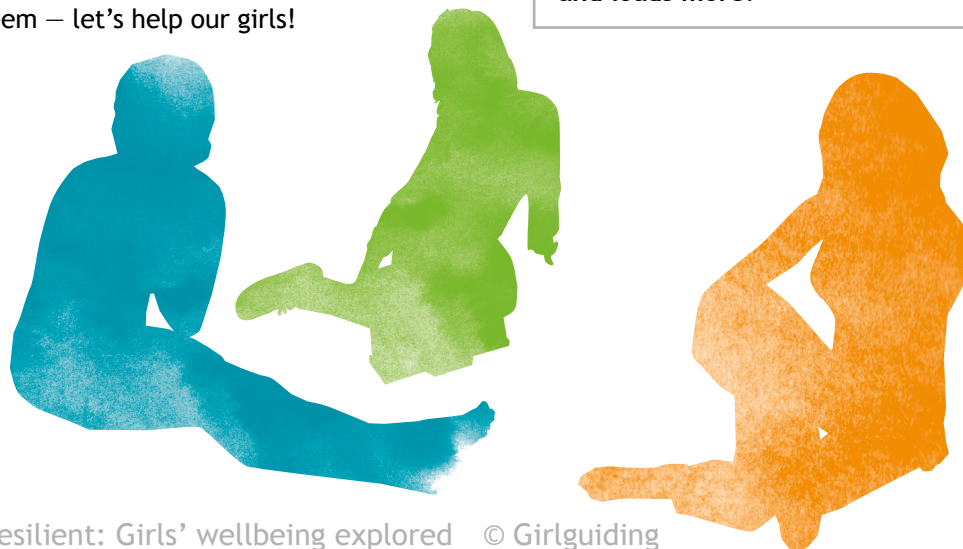
One quote simply read "We just need support". Why are we failing to offer this? Why do girls not feel they can speak to their parents or teachers? Why do they think they won't understand? Why do they feel they won't be on their side? Now is the time to increase support to girls and show them we care.

It's wrong that girls growing up in Britain today feel uncomfortable when being themselves, feel "boys expect too much" and feel "you've always got to look good". Furthermore, they feel sexual harassment is just "what goes on isn't it?". Let's give girls a safe space in which to talk, let's offer sex education so they understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships, let's prevent low self-esteem – let's help our girls!

As Advocates we have been busy trying to make these changes happen. We played an important role in designing the questions asked in the Girls' Attitudes Survey to focus on mental health. Following from this we have been vocal in the creation of a resource, *Think Resilient*, to promote resilience and positive coping mechanisms for our members. We also had the opportunity to meet some YoungMinds Youth Ambassadors to learn more about the role we can play and what we should and could be doing.

We must do all that we can to tackle the mental health issues and stigma affecting girls and young women in our society. As Advocates, we will proudly continue to do so, and address one of the most important challenges of our time.

The Advocates are a group of Girlguiding members aged 14-25 who discuss the issues girls care about and seek change. They talk about body confidence, representation of girls and women in the media, education, teenage mental health, role models for girls... and loads more!



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Executive summary

Mental wellbeing is an increasingly important issue for girls. In our 2010 Girls' Attitudes Survey, the health issues girls were most concerned by were smoking, binge drinking and drug abuse. In 2015, mental health and self-harm had become top concerns, with 62% of girls knowing a girl their age who has experienced a mental health problem and almost half personally needing help with their mental health. This reflects broader research that has revealed a significant decline in wellbeing in young women.

Girls are facing unprecedented levels of stress and pressure – to do well at school, to look and behave a certain way, to measure up to expectations from friends, family, teachers and the media. Girls tell us that the combination of all these pressures can be unmanageable and is having damaging consequences for their wellbeing. Despite this, girls say that the adults in their lives are out of touch with their concerns and not providing the information or support they need to remain resilient in the face of increasing and changing pressures.

Following our 2015 survey, we commissioned this qualitative research to hear more from girls themselves about their wellbeing – to better understand, in their own words, the pressures they are facing.

A perfect storm of pressures

This research reveals that for even the youngest girls, there are compounding pressures across all areas of their lives. Many girls aged 7-10 are already picking up on sensitivities around issues of weight and appearance and, as girls make the transition to secondary school, they face an increasing number of social, emotional, school and sexual pressures. Social media exacerbates many of their worries and fears, making it hard to shut out pressures or gain perspective on realistic expectations. By age 16-18, many girls feel resigned to the pressures and stresses in their lives.

“ I don't think it's easy to pick out certain things because I think there's just so many contributing matters that they're all just kind of together. There's a lot of pressures and causes of stress.”

(Young woman aged 16-18)



Normalising pressures and barriers to support

The constant and numerous pressures facing girls are threatening their emotional wellbeing, but fear of embarrassment, shame, blame or not being understood often prevents many of them from opening up about this. This research reveals a tendency for girls to dismiss or play down the issues they face and to feel they should be able to cope alone.

“ You shouldn’t go to the doctors just for stress. That’s embarrassing. How are you going to go to the doctor and say I’m having a depression in school? You should try to solve it yourself.” (Girl aged 11-15)

It is especially worrying that girls are trivialising and normalising the unacceptable, sexist pressures they face in the belief that they are expected to cope with issues such as sexual harassment and bullying. They are not getting the help they need to address this or the negative impact on their wellbeing. Our focus groups highlighted that, when girls do seek help, it is typically from friends rather than professional sources.

“ Say if you’re at a party and they like try and touch your bum and that. I wouldn’t really say that’s – I don’t know. I just class it as banter.”

(Young woman aged 16-18)

Resilience strategies

Girls’ tendency to normalise and trivialise the pressures they are facing makes the need for support all the more pressing. Girls of all ages did share some positive steps they take to feel happy and more resilient. Many girls spoke about the importance of spending time with friends and having strong peer support networks, and having time to enjoy their hobbies.

“ I think after I’ve played sport. I get an adrenalin rush. And I feel really confident then.” (Young woman aged 16-18)

Alongside many positive coping strategies, our research shows there are a significant number of occasions where girls’ resilience breaks down. Some girls discussed their difficulty in coping with their feelings and end up isolating themselves and taking things out on the people around them, such as friends and family.

“ I was really naughty. When I was stressed I smashed a window. I felt really guilty.”

(Girl aged 7-10)

Our research highlights the need for further support to build resilience and challenge the unacceptable gendered pressures girls are experiencing.



Changing the context for girls

Some pressure and stress will always be a reality for girls. However, girls' wellbeing is suffering as a result of the overwhelming pressures they face in today's society, and many of these issues should not be pressures in their lives at all. We want all girls to live in a society that is equal and where they do not feel resigned to gendered pressures and to having to cope alone.

Improving support for girls

There is a gap in the support available for girls' wellbeing, and in tackling the causes and consequences of this decline in how girls tell us they feel. As part of this research, girls told us the value of having a safe space in which to talk about how they feel. Our research revealed girls want to know more about where to get help and support and that schools play an important role in supporting girls' wellbeing



Recommendations

From listening to girls it is clear that action is needed to help reverse the decline in their wellbeing and prevent low wellbeing in the future. The clear message of this research is that girls are experiencing unacceptable and sometimes overwhelming pressures that are not an inevitable part of growing up. The pressure girls face related to gender inequality and stereotypes must be dealt with at the source – not by future generations of girls in their everyday lives.

Our findings clearly show that building girls' resilience to everyday pressures can help protect positive mental wellbeing and that peer support is crucial. Having safe spaces in which to talk, peer support and pursuing hobbies and interests are all crucial to improving girls' wellbeing. This research highlights girls' need for more support at school and suggests more should be done so that teachers and other staff are able to identify issues and offer appropriate support.

To support girls' wellbeing, Girlguiding Advocates call on the Government to:

1 Listen to girls and young women, take them seriously and make sure their voices count

To better understand the issues affecting girls' wellbeing, all decision-makers need to listen to girls' voices and engage them in the decisions that affect their lives.

2 Demand that schools take a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment

The whole school environment must be safe for all students. Schools should be required to address the high levels of sexual harassment through effective and clear school policies, support for reporting and clear sanctions. A statutory, modernised Relationships and Sex Education programme should support prevention of sexual harassment.

3 Teach wellbeing and respect through compulsory PSHE and RSE

Make Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education a statutory entitlement for all young people so there is time for and focus on high-quality education on mental health and positive wellbeing. This should include gender equality and body confidence specifically, to help challenge and prevent girls from normalising narrow beauty ideals and the pressure to be perfect. High-quality Relationships and Sex Education should be a statutory part of PSHE with a modernised curriculum that includes teaching on sexual consent, gender equality, healthy relationships, online safety, violence against women and girls, and LGBT relationships. This would help to challenge some of the gender stereotypes and double standards that create pressure in girls' lives.

4 Stop children's exposure to harmful sexualised images and content in mainstream media

With regulators, stop children's exposure to harmful sexualised content in the media to address the negative and damaging consequences this has on young people.

Girlguiding's role in girls' wellbeing

Girlguiding has an important part to play in developing girls' resilience and supporting their wellbeing. We have always supported girls to recognise and develop their skills and interests, to challenge themselves, to have fun and to make brilliant friends.

Girlguiding can play a vital prevention role in relation to girls' mental health by strengthening resilience and offering a safe, fun and supportive space where they can get away from the pressures of school and be themselves. Through Peer Education, Girlguiding delivers programmes that enable girls to think and talk about issues that are important to them. As young people, they use their experiences to bring the subject to life. Our Peer Educators deliver sessions on:

- *Think Resilient* – focuses on building girls' mental wellbeing through resilience-building techniques and planning how to manage difficulties in their lives and recognise and apply positive coping strategies and support.
- *Free Being Me* – focuses on growing girls' body confidence and self-esteem and challenges unrealistic beauty ideals.
- *Healthy Relationships* – helps to ensure girls can develop and identify good, safe and healthy relationships.



Introduction: How are girls doing?

Girls' mental wellbeing today

Girls today are facing unprecedented levels of stress and pressure – to do well at school, to look and behave a certain way, and to measure up to expectations from friends, family, teachers and the media. Girls tell us that the combination of all these pressures can be unmanageable and is damaging their wellbeing.

Since 2009, Girlguiding has conducted the largest survey of its kind into the views and experiences of girls and young women in the UK – the Girls' Attitudes Survey. It gives an annual snapshot of girls' own take on their lives and the issues and pressures they face. In our 2010 Girls' Attitudes Survey, the health issues girls were most concerned by were smoking, binge drinking and drug abuse. In 2015, mental health and self-harm had become top concerns:



62 % of girls and young women aged 11-21 know a girl their age who has experienced a mental health problem.



Only one in four girls and young women aged 11-21 think their parents are concerned about mental health issues despite it being their main concern.



Almost half of young women (46 %) aged 17-21 have needed help with their mental health.



82 % of girls and young women aged 11-21 think that adults around them do not understand the pressures young people are under.

Girls say the adults in their lives are out of touch with their concerns and not providing the information or support they need to remain resilient in the face of increasing and changing pressures.

A growing problem

Alongside school and exam pressures and concerns about the future, girls have also told us about the impact of everyday sexism, gender stereotypes, cyberbullying, sexual harassment, sexual and emotional harm and body confidence. These are creating a perfect storm of pressures and anxieties that are damaging girls' wellbeing.

Our findings mirror broader evidence of the decline in girls' emotional wellbeing. Recent research in the UK shows the number of girls at risk of 'emotional problems' sharply rose by 55% between 2009 and 2014. This rise was not seen in boys, who had lower levels of emotional problems over this period.¹ Further research has also highlighted that girls are faring less well than boys in self-reported wellbeing and self-esteem by the age of 11 and that this continues to decline as girls get older, whereas for boys it remains fairly stable.²

Analysis of calls and contact from young people to Childline between 2013 and 2014,³ shows that the top concerns for girls included low self-esteem, self-harm and mental health conditions. Over the past year, there was a 15% increase in calls about eating disorders, the vast majority from girls. There was a 21% increase in concerns about body image (91% were girls), many of whom had experienced bullying, name-calling or been victimised about their weight. Girls often believed that by changing their body they would become socially accepted. The analysis also found a 168% increase in young people needing counselling about sexual abuse online and a 145% increase in young people talking about exposure to online pornography, websites with harmful content or child abuse images.

A report by Fixers⁴ highlighted how sexual harassment has become normalised behaviour for young people – impacting on young women disproportionately, and leading to girls feeling isolated and often blaming themselves. Research by the NSPCC revealed at least half of young people had seen pornography and that 94% had done so by the age of 14. Girls who had seen pornography were more likely to feel negatively about it and to be worried about what boys who watch it would expect from them.⁵

International research⁶ has shown that the UK has poorer outcomes for young people's wellbeing than other countries, and there is a bigger gap between girls' and boys' wellbeing in the UK compared to all other countries surveyed, especially around self-esteem and body confidence.⁷

Over half of all mental ill health starts before the age of 14 and 75% by the age of 18. Evidence shows that early intervention and effective support is crucial in preventing this impact in adulthood.⁸ In particular, developing resilience and tackling some of the causes of poor wellbeing, such as bullying, at a young age has a significant impact on improving future wellbeing.⁹

1 University College London and the Anna Freud Centre (2015) 'Emotional problems in schoolgirls rose dramatically over past 5 years' published in the Journal of Adolescent Health <http://www.annafreud.org/about-us/news/2015/04/emotional-problems-in-schoolgirls-rose-dramatically-over-past-5-years/>

2 NPC (2014) 'Measure what you Treasure'

3 ChildLine (2015) 'Under Pressure: ChildLine Review. What's affected children in April 2013 to March 2014'

4 Fixers (2015) 'Fixers Investigates: The Trouble With... Sex in Schools'

5 NSPCC (2016) 'I wasn't sure if it was normal to watch it... A quantitative and qualitative examination of the impact of online pornography on the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of children and young people'

6 Rees, G and Main, G (2015) 'Children's Views on their lives and wellbeing in 15 countries: An initial report on the Children's Worlds Survey'

7 The Children's Society (2015) 'The Good Childhood Report 2015'

8 CentreForum (2016) 'CentreForum Commission on Children and Young People's Mental Health: State of the Nation'

9 Centre for Mental Health (2016) 'Missed Opportunities: Children and Young People's Mental Health'

Research approach

Following the troubling findings around girls' mental wellbeing in our 2015 survey, we commissioned ChildWise to do this qualitative research to hear more from girls themselves about their wellbeing – to better understand, in their own words, the pressures they are facing. Girlguiding worked with expert youth mental health charity YoungMinds to advise on this research which heard the views of over 120 girls and young women 7-18 across the UK, both within and outside Girlguiding's membership. This report outlines the emerging themes of this research and offers insight into the pressures girls are facing, the impact this is having, how girls are coping and the support girls want and need.



A perfect storm of pressures

Girls are facing a perfect storm of pressures – to look ‘right’, to do well in school, to fit in, to get a good job, to behave in certain ways. Sexism affects girls across all areas of their lives as they feel an overwhelming pressure to be ‘perfect’.

Our 2015 Girls Attitude Survey revealed an astonishing 70% of girls often or sometimes feel like they have to be perfect. Our focus groups confirmed that as girls get older, gendered pressures are key areas of concern and anxiety, and that the image of ‘perfection’ is often shaped by gender stereotypes and sexism. The media, popular culture, society and the pornography young people are exposed to all portray women in certain ways. These ideals, while unobtainable, are pervasive and seep into the everyday lives of girls. The pressures linked to life online did not exist for previous generations, and this difference presents another challenge to young people feeling understood and getting the right support.

School and academic pressures

Many girls in primary school spoke about the stresses they face at school to do well and the embarrassment and shame they felt if they made a mistake.

“*I’m stressed when I get my work wrong. You get told off. That made me feel really embarrassed.*” (Girl aged 7-10)

“*In SATs it depends like how you are getting on. You can only get in top set, second set and third. First set is good. I get anxiety about all that. I am quite scared.*” (Girl aged 7-10)

As girls make the transition to secondary school at age 11, they told us they experience significant academic pressures.

“*It’s just too much. We have like exams as well as homework. They overload it. When you’d be out with your family you’d just be thinking about your schoolwork. It’s kind of like you isolate yourself because you need to do all this work and it’s so much stress. I think when you do go out you’re not fully enjoying yourself because you keep thinking about the work.*”

(Girl aged 11-15)



“It feels like teachers don’t always recognise how hard we work. But I don’t think they realise that we do try our hardest. And we do have a lot going on. When they (raise an issue) in front of the class it obviously then embarrasses you and knocks your confidence down.”

(Young woman aged 16-18)

Social pressures

Alongside increasing school pressure, when girls enter secondary school, the pressure to do what other girls are doing, to conform to expected ‘norms’ of behaviour is increasingly important to many of them.

“Like you know when friends do something. It’s just that connection I think that you want. You don’t want to feel left out.” *(Girl aged 11-15)*



Relationship and sexual pressures

In secondary school, many girls begin to feel pressure to have intimate relationships and have to deal with physical attention.

“Loads of people our kind of age lose their virginity or whatever. And I think there’s a lot of pressure behind that.” *(Young woman aged 16-18)*

At the same time, girls are experiencing sexual pressures. Our 2013 Girls’ Attitudes Survey showed that 76% of girls and young women aged 11-21 said girls are judged more harshly for sexual behaviour that is seen as acceptable for boys.

Some girls in the focus groups recognised negative behaviour, including the controlling boyfriends of their friends.

“Boys sometimes request you to do things you don’t want to. They try and control you more. Like with your friends and everything.”

(Young woman aged 16-18)

Our 2015 Girls’ Attitudes Survey revealed that a significant minority of girls have experienced controlling and coercive behaviour from a partner – 13% said their boyfriend made them feel frightened or unsafe.

Sexual harassment

Our 2014 Girls' Attitudes Survey revealed that 59% of girls and young women aged 13-21 had experienced sexual harassment at school, college or work in the previous year. In 2015, three quarters of girls said anxiety about sexual harassment negatively affects their lives, such as their choice of clothing (51%), body confidence (49%) or having the freedom to go where they want (43%). In the focus groups, girls talked about their personal safety; even if they had not experienced sexual harassment or violence, they were still anxious about it. Most girls we spoke to said they had experienced boys whistling at them or making rude comments.

“Even whistling is just disgusting. Don't whistle at me please.”
(Girl aged 11-15)

Some girls had experienced unwanted touching, especially outside of school at parties. Many of the girls said they liked the idea of a campaign to tackle sexual bullying and harassment and that being together as a group made them feel more confident.

Self-esteem and body image

Our focus groups with girls support previous Girls' Attitudes Survey evidence that pressures around body image intensify with age, but it is clear that even for the youngest girls, a pressure to 'be perfect' and compare themselves to others is emerging. Our 2014 survey highlighted how anxiety about how they looked had led 20% of girls aged 7-10 to say they had been on a diet. Younger girls we spoke to were clearly sensitive around the pressures of weight and appearance.

“When you want to be yourself you feel a bit awkward. Because you look at the other children and you just think oh wow they're much more basically perfect. And if you're like kind of chubby and you're the last one, you're going to think to yourself oh I need to lose weight.”
(Girl aged 7-10)

Every year our survey with girls highlights body image and confidence as key issues, and this research with girls revealed the pressures girls face to look a certain way and match up to body image ideals.

“I diet. It takes over in your head. When all your friends are skinny and you feel like you are the largest out of them it kind of makes you think, oh maybe I should just lose weight.” (Girl aged 11-15)

Our 2013 Girls' Attitudes Survey found that 87% of girls and young women think women are judged more for their appearance than their abilities. Stereotypes and body image expectations affect the way girls feel they should look and behave, and impact on their aspirations and the things they enjoy. Some girls said their insecurities around how they look sometimes led them to cancel plans or avoid doing the things they enjoy, such as swimming.



Sexism, sexualisation and the media

Today's parents and teachers are unlikely to have faced such a sexualised popular culture when they were growing up. The widespread sexual objectification of women's bodies across media channels is shaping girls' expectations in relation to their own bodies. Although many of the girls we spoke to knew these ideals were unrealistic, they were still highly likely to compare themselves to celebrities and friends, with damaging implications.

Social media culture typically encourages girls to share only the most exciting and glamorous parts of their lives – another area where they feel a pressure to be perfect. Many girls spoke of the pressure they feel to conform to stereotypes and the 'ideal' body type. These expectations directly reflect the often sexualised portrayal of women across popular culture and the media that bombards girls' lives.

“ The media is always telling you how to look. You've always like got to look good. You feel like you're in competition with other girls.”

(Young woman aged 16-18)

“ You see photos of pretty girls and boys expect too much from girls. They expect like a model at our age which is a bit ridiculous. They expect a girl to like be skinny but have big boobs and a big bum. I think it's also like it's what's in your head. You think that's what they want. But you don't actually know.” *(Girl aged 11-15)*

Exposure to inappropriate imagery

Some of the younger girls (aged 7-10) said they were anxious about their safety and had been exposed to violent and graphic videos and films by older siblings or peers, which was affecting their wellbeing.

“ What makes me worried is scary videos and people posting like real videos with people in. My brother makes me watch them.”

(Girl aged 7-10)



Online bullying

Many of the stresses girls are facing today were not a reality when their parents were growing up. Social media and new technology, while providing new opportunities for communication, is also adding many stresses to girls' lives. This can mean that home is no longer a safe haven from these daily pressures. Underage (below age 13) use of social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter is common.

Our 2015 Girls' Attitudes Survey revealed that cyberbullying is a significant issue for girls. It leaves them feeling isolated and lonely. Among girls and young women aged 11-16, 45% say they have experienced bullying on social media. This has a significant impact. Half (49%) of girls who experienced bullying say it led to them taking more risks than they usually would. One in four 17 to 21-year-olds say the pressure of bullying made them use drugs or alcohol (27%), or pressured them into having sex (24%). Girls also gave examples of others posting pictures of them on social media without their consent and using social media to exclude them.

“ Now we have like different ways of bullying, like cyber bullying, internet and then back in the day they didn't have that. So parents wouldn't understand it.” (Girl aged 11-15)

“ On Instagram people make like fake accounts and things like that. And they put things on about you. Then you don't know who that person is and you get really annoyed about it.” (Girl aged 11-15)



Normalising pressures and barriers to support

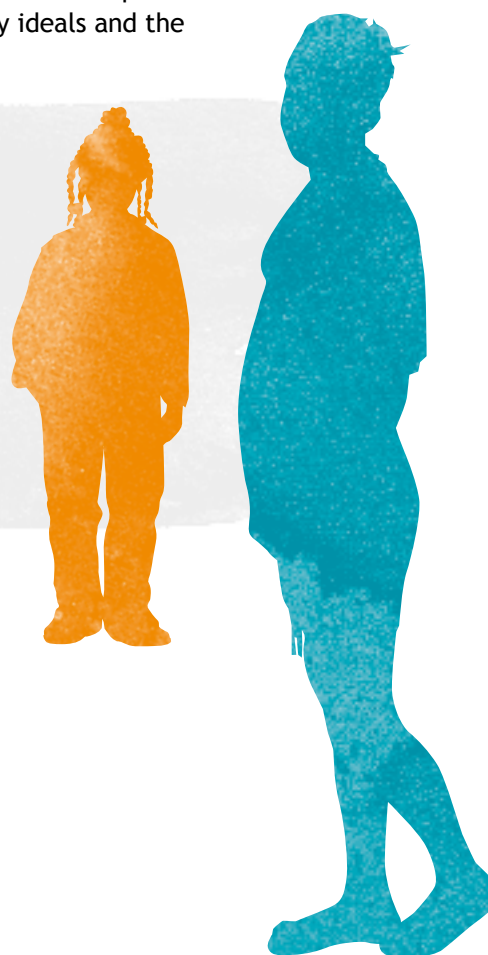
While some stresses are an inevitable part of life, it is worrying that girls are absorbing the impact of normalised gendered pressures and inequality. As they grow up, they become increasingly exposed to pressures of ‘beauty ideals’ and gender stereotypes that offer a limited view of the role and expectations of women in society. Many feel a pressure to strive towards unrealistic and unobtainable standards and behave in ways they not only feel uncomfortable with, but that are damaging. This research revealed tendencies for girls to diminish the pressures they face, experiences of sexual harassment, for example, and to normalise the negative consequences for their wellbeing. Girls also told us they do not feel able to talk about how they are feeling and are often resigned to high levels of stress and mounting pressures.

Normalising pressures to be perfect

Girls told us that despite being able to identify narrow beauty ideals and negative media representations as unobtainable or not real, they still felt a pressure to conform to them and that in the world around them, this was being presented to them as the ‘norm’. Girls clearly feel a pressure to be ‘perfect’ and there is little being done in their eyes to challenge this. Girls did say that a focus on high-quality education on mental health and positive wellbeing including gender equality and body confidence specifically, would help challenge and prevent girls from normalising narrow beauty ideals and the pressure to be perfect.

“*I think it is quite a pressure to have the perfect body, skinny and lean and boobs and butt. It is like what the boys want. They are quite open. You can like compare yourself with everyone and that is why you judge yourself.*”

(Girl aged 11-15)



Normalising sexual harassment

Girls in our focus groups accepted many of the pressures they face as normal – pressures to do well at school, ‘look right’, fit in with their peers and behave in certain ways. However, girls also normalised everyday sexism, harassment and inequality. As this and previous research shows¹⁰, sexual harassment is behaviour that some girls have come to expect.

“ *I wouldn’t say it’s normal. But when everyone’s in a party, and they’ve all had like a drink. Like it’s kind of like that’s what goes on, isn’t it. It’s only like a bum touch though, isn’t it? Like nothing else really happened. Its minor, compared to what could happen.* ”

(Young woman aged 16-18)

A staggering 59% of young women aged 13-21 have experienced sexual harassment at school, college or work in the previous year, and of those, half sometimes report it to a teacher but only a fifth do so every time. As girls get older they are less likely to report sexual harassment. It is clear that there is an inconsistency in how schools address and respond to sexual harassment. Half of girls stated that teachers or staff sometimes or always dismiss this behaviour as just a bit of banter, though 42% of girls said they are always taken seriously.¹¹ When this is the message some responsible adults are giving to girls it is not surprising that they start to normalise sexual harassment and feel they simply have to put up with it, regardless of how upsetting it can be for them.

“ *Some teachers are quite biased. Like they kind of like pick sides. Sometimes the teachers take the wrong side. Or they go on the boy’s because the girl’s skirt is too short or something like that.* ”

(Girl aged 11-15)

It was evident that girls feared being blamed for experiences of sexual harassment and abuse and this stopped them speaking out. Some girls told us they would not feel comfortable talking to their parents, and others said they would not speak to anyone.

“ *No-one would go to their parents or siblings and that. I’d tell my sister. Because parents think it’s your fault sometimes. They might say you were with the boys or it’s you that started it. They won’t believe us.* ”

(Girl aged 11-15)



¹⁰ Girlguiding (2013) ‘Care vs. Control: Healthy Relationships’ http://www.girlguiding.org.uk/news/conservative_party/faqs_care_versus_control.aspx
¹¹ Girlguiding (2014) Girls’ Attitudes Survey

“ I wouldn’t tell anybody. I don’t know, really. Like I wouldn’t even speak to my friends about it, or my mum, or anyone. Because it sounds stupid, you know.”

(Young woman aged 16-18)

The normalisation of these issues alongside some parents and teachers dismissing this behaviour reinforces the idea that they are simply a reality of life for girls today. The ubiquitous sexualisation of women and girls in the media adds to the impression that girls should expect to be objectified and harassed. Our 2013 Girls’ Attitudes Survey showed that one in four girls thought that if a woman was drunk she could be partly to blame for rape or sexual assault, suggesting some girls are taking on board views that are harmful to women. A fifth agreed that the high incidence of rape and sexual assault in society ‘almost makes it seem like a normal occurrence’.

The impact of normalised pressures

Many girls are ignoring the severity of how they feel and are resigned to the huge pressures in many areas of their lives and to everyday sexism, harassment and inequality. Our focus groups revealed that, on the surface, most girls are well versed in resilience messages – they know that personality matters more than appearance, they know that no-one is perfect and everyone is different. But in reality, they find comments, scrutiny and the expectations of others hard to deal with. These pressures are threatening girls’ wellbeing yet, for many, the fear of embarrassment, shame or not wanting to burden others or the feeling that their problems will not be seen as problems by others, often prevents them from opening up about this.

“ Quite a few people don’t really like telling people, because people can laugh at them, or find them stupid or something.”

(Young woman aged 16-18)

“ I personally find it’s better to just sort of keep it and not put it on anyone else. It’s embarrassing I think. Say if you did come to tears and then you’re at college, so you don’t really want it to happen. Sometimes I feel like I burden people when I tell them. And I feel like, I don’t know, I feel like I’ve burdened them and I shouldn’t put it on them. I don’t want to cause them problems because I have them.”

(Young woman aged 16-18)



Getting help

For the majority of girls, when they do seek help, it is typically from friends rather than professional sources. Our focus groups showed that friends are a vital source of support for many girls.

“ Listen to your friends. Do some fun stuff, arts and crafts.”

(Girl aged 11-15)

While girls hugely value the support of their friends, for some girls this important support network may be lacking. At times, falling out with friends or bullying can limit girls' ability to feel supported by their peers.

“ I've never really had that support network. So I just do my own independent thing to get away from it.” *(Young woman aged 16-18)*

Some girls were clear that they would not feel able to seek professional help for their mental wellbeing.

“ How would you go and see the doctor? Would they give you like pills? Antidepressant pills, would they give you them? You have to have a valid reason to go to the doctor. You can't just say you've got stress.”

(Girl aged 11-15)

“ You shouldn't go to the doctors just for stress. That's embarrassing. How are you going to go to the doctor and say I'm having a depression in school? You should try to solve it yourself.” *(Girl aged 11-15)*



School support

While our focus groups showed that girls feel comfortable talking to teachers and adults about academic pressures, they appear to be much less comfortable talking to adults about issues such as sexual harassment, relationships, wellbeing and stress. Some girls did mention the support they receive from school pastoral care, but this was less effective for girls who found it harder to reach out for support.

While some of the younger girls (aged 7-10) felt they could speak to parents and teachers if they were worried, it is clear that, as girls get older, many of them feel they need to cope with stress and mental health alone. Our 2015 Girls' Attitudes Survey showed that just one in four girls and young women aged 11-21 think their parents are concerned about mental health issues (25%), despite it being the main concern among girls. Our focus groups revealed that this reluctance to talk about wellbeing can be troubling, with girls feeling uncomfortable talking to their parents about even very serious issues such as sexual harassment.



“ You can't ask your parents but you can ask your sisters because they've been through it. Imagine if you don't have any siblings. Then you've got to ask your like cousins and things. If not then you've got no-one. Oh my god.” (Girl aged 11-15)

While some girls spoke of family as a key source of happiness that helps to build their resilience, a number of girls spoke about the stresses that family issues can cause them. Some girls were concerned that talking to parents might lead to them being disappointed in them; for others, talking about the stresses they face could have negative consequences.

“ My family is messed up. I keep things in my head, it's best that way.” (Girl aged 7-10)

Throughout our focus groups it was clear that some girls feel there is insufficient support available for them at school. This reinforces our Girls' Attitudes Survey findings which revealed that fewer than half of girls and young women 11-16 say they have talked about mental health during lessons at school (44%). However, over half say they would like to know more about where to get help and support (52%).

Girls' strategies for resilience

While the demands and pressures that girls face can be intense, it is how they respond to these that has the biggest impact on their wellbeing. Girls' resilience is important in enabling them to 'bounce back' from challenges and cope with difficulties. Evidence¹² shows how important peer contact, hobbies and autonomy to make their own decisions are for girls and young women's resilience. Our focus groups revealed that many girls and young women have positive strategies for dealing with the issues they face. However, for some girls at some points in their lives, it is not always possible to utilise these positive resilience techniques.

Positive resilience strategies

Throughout our focus groups, girls of all ages talked about the kind of things that make them feel happy and more resilient. From a young age, girls derive happiness from simple fun and having positive relationships.

“*What I do when I'm worried is I ask someone for a hug, that I know that is quite close to me. And then try and calm down by watching a really relaxing movie.*” (Girl aged 7-10)

Having time to enjoy their hobbies is also a source of strength for many girls – sports, music, drama and arts were all mentioned.

“*Well I go Guides and I have been on a camping trip and I really like camping and stuff. What makes me happy is I love going out to places, exploring, going out. I like going Guides because we do interesting things.*” (Girl aged 11-15)

“*I think after I've played sport. I get an adrenalin rush. And I feel really confident then.*”
(Young woman aged 16-18)



¹² The Children's Society (2007) 'Resilience in Children and Young People'

Whether through spending time with friends, writing down their concerns, watching relaxing films or engaging with their hobbies, it is clear that many girls have positive coping strategies in place.

“*If I have a lot in my head I write it down and try to get it out of my head so then I won't stress about it. Like at night is the worst time when you are sitting there and you can't sleep because of it.*”

(Girl aged 11-15)

Peer support is a hugely valuable resilience strategy for many girls. Younger girls feel more comfortable talking to parents and teachers about the issues they are facing, but as girls get older, friends are an increasingly important source of support.

“*I like being with my friends. We go out, I think is probably when we're most happiest. You know, because it's something different to do. You can be like relaxed and forget about it for that time that you're out.*” *(Young woman aged 16-18)*

Girls' ability to get through challenges positively can be affected by a number of factors, including feeling supported by friends, the nature of their friendship group, the ethos and support available at school, their family circumstances, their temperament and their wider approach to life. While friendships form an increasingly important source of support as girls get older, there can be some limits to this, with many girls talking about the stress they feel when they fall out with friends and, in more extreme cases, the isolation that can be caused by bullying.



When resilience breaks down

Alongside the many positive coping strategies girls shared, our focus groups showed that at times some girls are not able to transform their negative feelings into a positive strategy and instead feel despair and anguish. Some girls explained that they feel they need to keep a brave face but at times struggle to do this or to manage their feelings. Instead they end up taking things out on the people around them or bottling up stress and anxiety, with hugely negative consequences.

“ **Sometimes if you’re really angry then you take it out on your friends. You lose the people that you don’t actually want to lose. Because if they’re angry and you’re angry then you just start an argument then it just like goes out of proportion and then.**” (Girl aged 11-15)

“ **I was really naughty. When I was stressed I smashed a window. I felt really guilty.**” (Girl aged 7-10)

The bottling up of pressure and a reluctance to speak to their support networks about how they feel can lead to negative or damaging behaviour. A number of girls spoke about the anger or aggression they feel when they are stressed.

“ **I might punch the wall.**” (Girl aged 11-15)

“ **I get angry when I have lots of things on my mind. You have like different moods.**” (Girl aged 11-15)

Drinking was another way that some girls said they coped with stresses and pressures. From even a young age, girls find that getting drunk is a way to forget their concerns.

“ **Go partying. Getting drunk.**” (Girl aged 11-15)

“ **I cry when I’m in bed. Since I’m older and I know about more things. I watched a film the other day on YouTube which I shouldn’t have watched. I think it’s because I drank a bit of my mum’s cider and I got a bit drunk.**” (Girl aged 7-10)



Other girls in the focus groups spoke about staying at home and retreating from school and social activities when things get tough. They choose not to engage with their friends when they are feeling low and often only express how they feel when they are at home by themselves.

“ Just stay indoors. Don’t go out. Yes, you miss out on a lot of things. But when I’ve felt really uncomfortable, the girls invite me somewhere and I don’t go.” (Girl aged 11-15)

Girls in the focus groups were aware of negative behaviour to try to cope, including dieting and self-harm. While none of the girls in our focus groups spoke about their own experience of self-harm, a number of girls mentioned this as a way that some girls they know try to deal with the pressures they are facing. Our 2015 Girls’ Attitudes Survey findings suggest that self-harm is widespread among girls and young women. Three quarters of girls and young women aged 11-21 feel that self-harm is a serious health issue for young people - higher than for any other health concern. Our survey also revealed that two in five girls and young women in the same age group (37%) say they have needed help with their mental health. It is clear that, where girls lack positive coping mechanisms and tools for building resilience, their wellbeing is at risk.

“ It happens in school, lots of people do it, they hurt themselves and they think they aren’t good.”

(Girl aged 11-15)

The pressure worsened when girls compared themselves to their peers, celebrities or pictures of women in the media. Restricting the amount of food they were eating was the only way some believed they could achieve ‘perfection’, or the ‘ideal body type’. Girls also talked about social anxieties arising from body image issues, with some not wanting to leave the house because they were scared other people would judge them. For some, this increasing isolation made matters worse as they did not surround themselves with the comfort of friends to help build their self-esteem.



Conclusions and recommendations

Changing the context for girls

Some pressure and stress will always be a reality for girls. However, girls' wellbeing is suffering as a result of the overwhelming pressures they face in today's society, and many of these issues should not be pressures in their lives at all. The 2015 Girls' Attitudes Survey reveals that three quarters of girls and young women said that anxiety about potentially experiencing sexual harassment negatively affects their lives and that there are high levels of sexual harassment. We want all girls to live in a society that is equal and where they do not feel resigned to gendered pressures and to having to cope alone.

Improving support for girls

There is a gap in the support available for girls' wellbeing, and in tackling the causes and consequences of the decline in how girls tell us they feel. As part of this research, girls told us the value in having a safe girl-only space in which to talk about how they feel. They also realise that many of their peers are having similar experiences and feelings. Girls need positive support networks and safe spaces in which to talk about how they are feeling. When stress is normalised and girls feel embarrassed to talk about their concerns, it will be much harder for them to cope.

“ *A support group maybe. A group that maybe, kind of like this group, like a group where you get free speech and everybody can listen to you and you have people with conditions like you and you feel at home. Can we do this again?*” (Girl aged 11-15)

Girls look to their friends as a key source of support.

“ *We just need support. Friends. A shoulder to cry on really.*” (Girl aged 11-15)

Our research revealed girls want to know more about where to get help and support and that schools play an important role in supporting girls' wellbeing.

“ *We should have a guidance counsellor so if you have a problem they'd be able to give you a hug.*” (Girl aged 7-10)



Recommendations

From listening to girls it is clear that action is needed to help reverse the decline in their wellbeing and prevent low wellbeing in the future. The clear message of this research is that girls are experiencing unacceptable and sometimes overwhelming pressures that are not an inevitable part of growing up. The pressure girls face related to gender inequality and stereotypes must be dealt with at the source – not by future generations of girls in their everyday lives.

Our findings clearly show that building girls' resilience to everyday pressures can help protect positive mental wellbeing and that peer support is crucial. Having safe spaces in which to talk, peer support and pursuing hobbies and interests are all crucial to improving girls' wellbeing. This research highlights girls' need for more support at school and suggests more should be done so that teachers and other staff are able to identify issues and offer appropriate support.

To support girls' wellbeing, Girlguiding Advocates call on the Government to:

1 Listen to girls and young women, take them seriously and make sure their voices count

To better understand the issues affecting girls' wellbeing, all decision-makers need to listen to girls' voices and engage them in the decisions that affect their lives.

2 Demand that schools take a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment

The whole school environment must be safe for all students. Schools should be required to address the high levels of sexual harassment through effective and clear school policies, support for reporting and clear sanctions. A statutory, modernised Relationships and Sex Education programme should support prevention of sexual harassment.

3 Teach wellbeing and respect through compulsory PSHE and RSE

Make Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education a statutory entitlement for all young people so there is time for and focus on high-quality education on mental health and positive wellbeing. This should include gender equality and body confidence specifically, to help challenge and prevent girls from normalising narrow beauty ideals and the pressure to be perfect. High-quality Relationships and Sex Education should be a statutory part of PSHE with a modernised curriculum that includes teaching on sexual consent, gender equality, healthy relationships, online safety, violence against women and girls, and LGBT relationships. This would help to challenge some of the gender stereotypes and double standards that create pressure in girls' lives.

4 Stop children's exposure to harmful sexualised images and content in mainstream media

With regulators, stop children's exposure to harmful sexualised content in the media to address the negative and damaging consequences this has on young people.

Girlguiding's role in girls' wellbeing

Girlguiding has an important part to play in developing girls' resilience and supporting their wellbeing. We have always supported girls to recognise and develop their skills and interests, to challenge themselves, to have fun and to make brilliant friends.

Girlguiding can play a vital prevention role in relation to girls' mental health by strengthening resilience and offering a safe, fun and supportive space where they can get away from the pressures of school and be themselves. Through Peer Education, Girlguiding delivers programmes that enable girls to think and talk about issues that are important to them. As young people, they use their experiences to bring the subject to life. Our Peer Educators deliver sessions on:

- *Think Resilient* – focuses on building girls' mental wellbeing through resilience-building techniques and planning how to manage difficulties in their lives and recognise and apply positive coping strategies and support.
- *Free Being Me* – focuses on growing girls' body confidence and self-esteem and challenges unrealistic beauty ideals.
- *Healthy Relationships* – helps to ensure girls can develop and identify good, safe and healthy relationships.



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