

The Learning Team

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A publication for parents and teachers working together for children's education



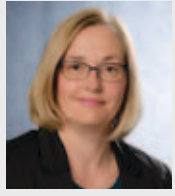
PART TWO OF A THREE-PART SERIES
focused on challenges faced by LGBTQ2S+ youth, girls and boys

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Girls' path to adulthood is complicated

Three-part series focuses on challenges faced by LGBTQ2S+ youth, girls and boys



Lisa Everitt
Editor
The Learning Team

Autumn Peltier, an Indigenous Canadian climate activist; Malala Yousafzai, an advocate for girls' education and Nobel Prize winner; Emma Gonzalez, a Parkland, Florida, survivor and advocate for gun control; and Greta Thunberg, a climate activist who sparked a worldwide movement: these young women are leading the way, and they are important role models for us all. Their passion for social justice, a healthy environment, and women's and girl's rights have inspired the world. These young role models help set out the dream of what we hope every girl will be able to achieve, each in her own way.

Not every young person wishes to lead, but as parents and teachers, we hope to open the doors and help knock down any barriers that might exist for youth as they aspire to make their dreams come true. However, the path to adulthood for girls is complicated by many factors, and growing up is hard work.

As a student in the public school system in the 1980s, I was fortunate to be involved in school athletics, I liked going to classes and excelling academically, and I enjoyed strong support from my family. My profile, if you will, was not terribly unique. I went to school with many girls who were excellent athletes, incredibly smart and very talented.

I was struck then, as I am now..., how strange it seemed that these girls did not seem to meet their potential during high school, even though they were talented.

One of my clearest recollections about the transition from junior high to high school was how it impacted the girls I knew from junior high. I watched many of these friends drop out in various ways; they did not try out for school teams, they went into nonacademic classes, they started hanging out in the smoke pit (this was the 1980s after all) and going to parties on the weekend. For the most part, my connection with many of the girls I knew from junior high disappeared. We found different peer groups and hung around in different social circles. I was struck then, as I am now writing this, how strange it seemed that these girls did not seem to meet their potential during high school, even though they were talented. I often wonder what became of these friends, and I also wonder about the factors that lead to very different high school experiences for us all.

This issue of *The Learning Team* is informed by the research and experience of professional teachers as we reflect on what it means to be a girl growing up in Canadian society. The articles for this edition focus on girls — their well-being, the challenges they face growing up, and how we, as teachers and parents, can help them succeed to their fullest potential.

Lisa Everitt is an executive staff officer with the Alberta Teachers' Association.

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Girls face unique challenges

Supports bring positive results and a bright future

Lisa Everitt,
Editor, *The Learning Team*

According to the Statistics Canada report, *The Girl Child* (Hudon 2017), there are 3.4 million girls in Canada. Within this group, there exists a great deal of diversity. Census data from Statistics Canada (Hudon 2017) show that more than one million Canadian girls belong to a visible minority group or identify as Indigenous. However, even with so much variation within the Canadian and Albertan populations, some general observations can be made about the well-being of girls as they progress from kindergarten to Grade 12.

From 2009 to 2014, Alberta teachers assessed 86,564 kindergarten students using early development instruments (EDI), which measured five key areas of child development:

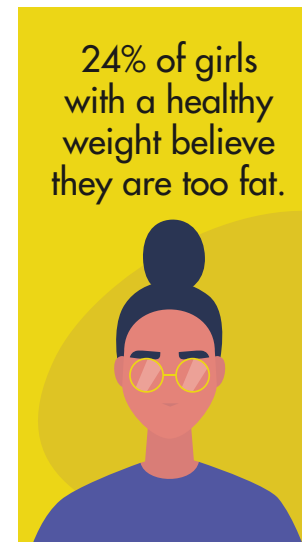
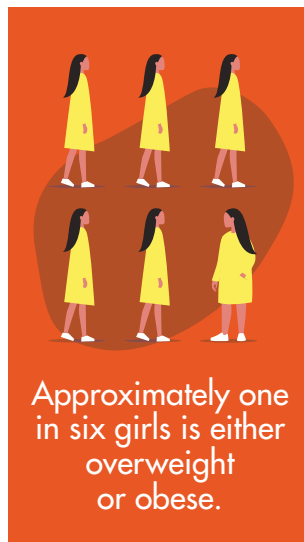
1. Physical health and well-being
2. Social competence
3. Emotional maturity
4. Language and thinking skills
5. Communication skills and general knowledge

The purpose of the EDI was to help determine whether children were developing as expected by the time they entered kindergarten in order to craft thoughtful and supportive policy structures that would enable children to succeed in their early years. The Alberta government's

How Are Our Young Children Doing? Final Report of the Early Child Development Mapping Project (2014) found that "more girls tend to score highly on the EDI than boys. This holds true for all areas of development, although the difference between boys and girls is smaller in the area of language and thinking skills" (p 11). Given these findings, it seems reasonable to assume that, upon entry to school, girls are well-equipped to be successful as they grow into their adult lives.

However, girls' pathway from childhood to adulthood is not linear. The Canadian Women's Foundation fact sheet on the barriers girls face (2017a) reports that girls, while initially advantaged, lose ground to boys as they get older. This raises the question, what happens to girls as they enter adolescence and their teen years?

The fact sheet (2017a) points to three important factors contributing to challenges that girls experience as they grow up. First, compared to boys, girls experience higher rates of sexual violence and sexual harassment. It is difficult to know the true number of girls who experience sexual assault because it is estimated that only 10 per cent of sexual assaults are reported to police annually, but when girls are sexually assaulted, more than 88 per cent of the time the perpetrator is someone they know. The numbers are serious and also help to explain how girls become more vulnerable as they move into adulthood. Even though not all girls are victims of sexual violence

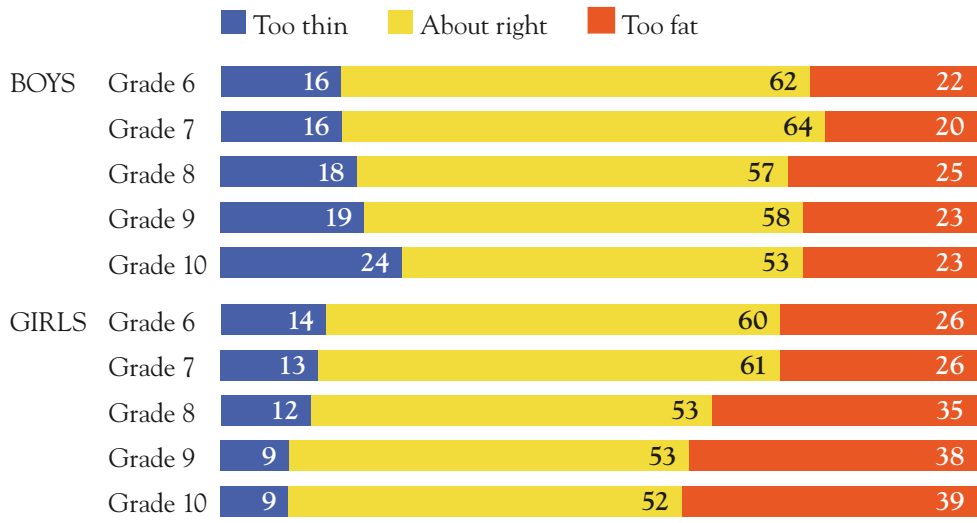


Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children, Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010

ISTOCK

Body image and weight-loss practices of Canadian students

Students who think their body is too thin, about the right size or too fat by grade and gender (%)



Students reporting high levels of emotional problems by BMI category, by gender (%)



Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children, Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010

and sexual harassment, they all know that it is a possibility for their own lives. Given this reality, it is incumbent on parents and teachers to work together to teach and model for all young people how to engage in healthy relationships including romantic relationships. In addition, it is important for all youth to understand issues of sexual health and consent, and schools and parents play an important role in providing this information to young people.

Second, more girls experience a sharp decline in mental health as they move into adulthood. As girls move from elementary school to high school, their confidence drops, they become more stressed and they experience depression at high rates (Hudon 2017; Public Health Agency of Canada 2008). For girls, some factors that contribute to a decline in mental health include the pressure to perform at school, impossibly high standards for body image, high rates of social media use, a lack of physical activity, bullying and cyberbullying. Parents and teachers can help raise the confidence and mental well-being of girls by ensuring that they feel a part of a community and that their presence in the world matters.

Finally, the third factor that harms the growth of girls as they move into adulthood is negative gender stereotyping. The research literature and data show that women do not have the same opportunities as men in terms of career progression. The numbers are daunting; for example, in Canada, the Canadian Women's Foundation fact sheet on women in leadership (2017b) reports that women make up 19.5 per cent of the board members for Canada's top 500 companies, and that only 8.5 per cent of the highest paid positions in Canada's top 100 listed companies are held by women. In addition, women continue to carry the burden of domestic labour in higher proportions than men. Society has work to do to help create more equitable arrangements between men and women both at home and in the work force.

Canadian girls are watching. The Girl Guides of Canada (2018) commissioned a survey to learn more about how young women experience gender stereotyping, and they found that "one in four (24%) girls aged 15 to 17 do not feel motivated to pursue their dream career because they are concerned they will be compensated less than their male counterparts" (p 7). Given the current gender wage gap, the girls participating in the Girl Guides survey are not wrong.

The picture for girls is not all doom and gloom. Steps can be taken to help girls meet their goals in life. At an individual level, parents and teachers can help girls succeed by providing encouragement and opportunities for involvement in clubs, programs for young women or sports teams. We can let girls know that it is alright to try something new, even if success is not immediate. At the structural level, we can help support policies and services that are specific for girls and women, including access to mental health support, health care and legislative structures that protect women's and girls' rights.

The future for Canadian girls remains bright. Our country and our province prioritize support for young people, and these supports include a vibrant public education system featuring excellent schools and successful partnerships between teachers and parents. Girls benefit from these supports, which help them to grow into healthy, confident and resilient adults.



Statistics Canada

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Growing up

What supports do our adolescent daughters need?

Erin Luong
President, ATA Council of School Counsellors

As our daughters grow up, one area in which they need support is in the development of healthy relationships (both friendships and eventually dating relationships). It is normal for all kids to have both positive and negative relationships in their lives, and our job as parents is to help them navigate these rivers. Sometimes we forget that our kids still need some guidance and support in developing these skills.

When kids are younger, parents have much more control over their friendships because they are able to control their schedules and contacts—parents are the ones who arrange for playdates and drive their kids to their social events. As children become older and more independent, parents have less and less automatic control over their social lives. Not only are children spending time with peers at school, they may also be spending time with them online.

There is a saying that we have until our children reach the age of 12 to instill our values in them, and then we must trust them to exercise these values, knowing that they have a safe place where they can come home to debrief on how things are going. Conversations around topics such as social-emotional learning and digital literacy will be important for parents and daughters to explore together.

The ability to develop healthy relationships involves accessing skill sets from a variety of areas. Social-emotional

learning skills such as self-awareness, identifying emotions, communicating with others, conflict resolution, expressing empathy, resilience and setting boundaries are important everyday skills that set the foundation for future learning. Helping our daughters explore these topics will set them up for success in the future.

Digital literacy skills such as the importance of safety and privacy, balancing screen time with offline time, and being aware of content accuracy, perspective and motivation also help girls navigate healthy relationships in an online world.



For more information on these topics, feel free to check out the following information.

What is digital literacy? A parent's guide

<https://parentinfo.org>

Core social and emotional learning competencies

<https://casel.org>

As girls approach adolescence, they face

1. high levels of sexual assault and other forms of violence,
2. a sharp decline in mental health and confidence, and
3. negative stereotyping and sexualisation.

In 2012, more than 11,000 sexual assaults of girls under the age of 18 were reported to police in Canada. Since we know that less than 10% of sexual assaults are reported to police annually, the actual number is much higher.

Canadian Women's Foundation (canadianwomen.org/the-facts/barriers-for-girls/)



CORY HARE

Nellie McClung Girls' Junior High

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Nellie McClung provides junior high programming for girls that emphasizes leadership, initiative, self-reliance and independence.

GOALS

- High academic achievement
- Demonstrate leadership skills

BENEFITS

- Improved understanding of women's issues and contributions to society
- Improved self-confidence and leadership skills
- Demonstration of responsibility and citizenship at home, at school and in the community

PROGRAM DELIVERY

- Classroom study focuses on four themes: building relationships, active and healthy living, citizenship and looking toward the future
- Participation in community service activities
- Uniform or dress code

epsb.ca



All-girls program fosters confidence and leadership

Cory Hare
Managing Editor, *The Learning Team*

Junior high school is a challenging environment for girls and one program within Edmonton Public Schools has structured itself to give girls the best chance at success — by eliminating boys.

Founded 25 years ago by a group of parents who believed in the merits of an all-girls program, the Nellie McClung program currently draws 59 students from throughout the city to Oliver School in downtown Edmonton. The program focuses on empowerment, leadership and confidence.

by social pressures that can come with being in a coed environment.

“It’s just to get a space in these really important formative years for these girls, where their voices can be heard and they can figure out who they are in relation to themselves and not in relation to other people,” Davis says.

Uniforms are another way the school creates an environment that reduces social pressures and sex stereotyping.

“We see girls that come to us a little bit quiet and a little bit timid, and they realize that this is a real safe place for them to be risk-takers and challenge themselves, and to try new things and to speak out,” Davis says.

Students in the program say they feel more comfortable in the girls-only setting.

“Constantly being told that our voice matters, and that we have the ability to change and do what we want is really nice,” says Grade 8 student Lucinda Fraser-Suarez. “They always encourage us to speak up and do well in school.”

One of the most common criticisms of all-gender programs is that they shelter the students from the reality of having to coexist with members of the opposite gender. The program’s website counters with a quote from the National Coalition of Girls’ Schools.

“When you combine strong female mentors and positive role models, reduced sex stereotyping and abundant learning opportunities, the results are clear. Single-gender schools for girls provide greater opportunity for educational attainment, curriculum and course placement, leadership behaviour, number of years in formal education and occupational achievement.”

Judy Wong, a board member of the school’s parent advisory committee, says its impact is plain to see.

“I was astounded at how strong these girls are,” Wong says. “When I see them coming in at Grade 7 and leaving at Grade 9, it’s amazing the development of these girls.”

“Sometimes boys talk a lot more, and the girls just often learn that their voice isn’t as important or to quiet themselves,” says teacher Jennifer Severson. “Here, if you’re quiet, it’s going to be a really quiet classroom for a few minutes until somebody puts up their hand.”

McClung students are encouraged to speak their minds, take on leadership roles and try new challenges, says principal Kelly Davis. She and her teaching staff talk a lot to the girls about building each other up and the importance of always being kind.

The all-girl environment enables the students to grow into themselves without being sidetracked



Girls who attend all-girl schools are twice as likely to study physics in university compared to girls who attend coed schools.

Canadian Women's Foundation
(canadianwomen.org/the-facts/barriers-for-girls/)