



The “Just Us Girls” Commitment

Why Guides Canada is Female-Only

BY SHARON JACKSON PRUNER

For more than 90 years, Girl Guides of Canada-Guides du Canada has been successfully providing programs designed, organized and conducted by women for girls and young women. A large part of the ongoing success of our organization can be attributed to the fact that it is women who administer it and who work directly with the girls we serve.

Photo: Pat Lacroix

Guiding offers a unique environment in which girls and women can interact without male influences. This environment does not negate the role of boys and men in the lives of girls or women. Rather, it offers an alternative avenue of development that complements the many other influences girls and women find in all other aspects of their lives.

Fostering Self-Esteem

The effect of sexual stereotyping on the self-esteem of adolescent girls has long been acknowledged as an issue of immense societal significance. Writing for a Canadian Teachers' Federation project, *A Cappella*, health promotion consultant Peggy Edwards outlined what she calls “the high cost of low self-esteem,” specifically on girls. “Those who do not possess an adequate sense of self-esteem attempt to ‘fake it,’ using defensive mechanisms to display ‘unauthentic self-esteem.’ Thus the little girl who is discouraged from

free exploration and praised for smiling sweetly (even when she doesn't feel sweet) begins to construct a 'deflated' self. This pattern may eventually result in the predominantly female problem of depression." Edwards listed five strategies to foster self-esteem in girls and young women:

- Ensure early successes based on realistic gradual progression.
- Avoid sex-stereotyped activities and comments.
- Provide sincere positive encouragement.
- Decrease competitive situations when learning.
- Reduce anxiety-producing situations (i.e., build girls' confidence in a "readiness to perform," instead of a "fear of performing").

All five of these strategies are inherent in Guiding and are enhanced by the fact that the all-female Guiding environment eliminates the possibility of even inadvertent sex-stereotyping, because, for the hour or two girls and women meet each week and the days or weeks they go camping each year, they do it free from the influence of men or boys. Further supporting this argument, Associate Dean of the College of Education at the University of Arizona Janice L. Streitmatter wrote on the subject of self-esteem in her book, *For Girls Only*, "While I addressed the self-esteem issue through conversations with girls and teachers, it became clear that many of the girls valued their girls-only experiences in part because they felt better about themselves and, in some sense, safer."

Providing Role Models

Another benefit to the single-sex nature of Guiding is the provision of female role models. The camping experience is a good example. When a girl goes camping for the first time, she needs someone to teach her how to camp. Arguably, this leader can be male or female. If the leader is a man, the girl can learn these skills from him. But if it is a woman who pitches the tent, lights the fire and generally organizes the campsite, isn't this girl much more likely to visualize herself doing these same things? Girl Guides of Canada contends that she is, because we are offering her more than camping lessons; we are presenting a role model with whom she can readily identify.

Of course, role modelling in Guiding takes place in many more situations than camping. In a different vein from the camping experience, noted Canadian futurist Richard Worzel, in his book, *The Next Twenty Years of Your Life*, discussed female role models in a section entitled "The Decline of Male Domination." In it, he stated, "As more women achieve senior positions in corporations and governments, it will become more natural for people to see women as suited to such roles. As more role models emerge for young women, they will become more willing to put themselves forward for advancement."

In Guiding terms, we would say that, as more girls find role models among the women who provide them with

leadership, the more they will emulate these role models and learn to fulfil their own leadership potential. Mary Pipher, author of *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, strongly supports connecting girls with female role models, saying, "The best thing you can do for an adolescent girl is to get her with someone successful over 20 years old."

Furthering the argument for female role models, Aniko Varpalotai, a professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario, has written extensively in support of the single-sex environment. In her paper, *Single Sex Education and the Adolescent Girl*, she discussed the results of two case studies designed to "ascertain the value of all-female educational opportunities from the girls' point of view." One study took place at an all-girls' sports camp, which featured ringette, a sport in which very few boys participate, but for which coaches are predominantly male. The second study was with Girl Guides of Canada.

Varpalotai introduced her paper by saying, "Among research findings is the suggestion that girls benefit from single-sex educational opportunities. Furthermore, it has



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been argued that it is important for girls to have female role models in a variety of traditional and non-traditional activities." She went on to compare the aspirations of the ringette players and members of Girl Guides. "The ringette players, many of them highly skilled athletes, were convinced that male coaches were superior and preferable to female coaches, and did not themselves aspire to become coaches. The Girl Guides, on the other hand, had a much less limited view of their own capabilities. They and their female leaders had experienced the challenges of outdoor living in their program, as well as a variety of other non-traditional activities. Their competence was not compromised by the presence of men. They felt that there were fewer arbitrary limitations based on their sex, yet at the same time they valued traditional female skills and attributes."



Creating a Safe Haven

In another paper, Varpalotai discussed the single-sex aspect of Guiding, as seen through the eyes of 13 girls. “Each of the girls has an awareness of the tensions and contradictions facing girls and women in a society that continues to discriminate against women. In Girl Guides, they have found a safe and comfortable haven to support one another, develop a respect for girls and women, value female friendship and role models, and learn more about their own strengths and abilities. Girl Guides has enabled them to develop their self-confidence in the face of male teasing and dominance at school and, with respect to non-traditional career aspirations, independence as adults and active participants in their communities. Each of the girls has found the single-sex environment of the Girl Guides to be of particular value in comparison to the co-educational situation at school and elsewhere where their self-expression and confidence is undermined by both the boys and the teachers who rarely intervene.”

Good examples of high-profile Canadian women who have unequivocally proclaimed the positive effect their girlhood Guiding experiences have had on their self-image and personal and professional development include, among many others, astronaut/scientist Roberta Bondar, actor Andrea Martin, former Governor General the late Jeanne Sauvé and journalist Michelle Landsberg.

Challenging Gender Inequities

While in no way diminishing the part that boys and men play in society today, by adhering to its traditional and time-tested single-sex commitment, Girl Guides of Canada-Guides du Canada provides a place where gender-role socialization does not go unchallenged. The average Canadian girl spends most of her life in co-ed environments, especially in our school system, where gender inequities and gender role-modeling are widely acknowledged to present roadblocks to the development of healthy self-esteem and self-image in youth, especially girls. In Guiding, the girl is given a regular opportunity to develop the self-awareness and confidence to get around these roadblocks.

The positive effect of Guiding’s all-female environment on girls and women is frequently noted by men as well as by women. One such man is Richard Worzel, who was quoted earlier in this article. Another

is University of Windsor Head of Psychology Dr. Stewart Page, whose comments have been published in previous issues of *Canadian Guider* (January/February 1994 and May/June 1996). He has long considered Guiding to be “one path to positive expectations in girls” in contrast to the negative expectations they often set up for themselves in co-ed classrooms where boys’ abilities tend to be taken more seriously. “In a same-sex environment, such as Guiding, a girl can feel free to develop skills and pursue challenges, especially if her leaders are aware of how their vocabulary and attitude can affect her expectations. While educators are being made aware of the inequities in their attitudes towards the two sexes, Guiders are already setting the stage for self-sufficient girls and young women to change these attitudes by their example, both in the classroom

and in society in general.” Dr. Page has since submitted to *Canadian Guider* further comments in support of the GGC same-sex environment, which we have published on page 7 of this issue.

Freeing the “Female Voice”

Guiding provides one place in the increasingly complex lives of girls and women where they can be free from the restraints of the sexual tension and competition inherent in co-ed environments. In this place, they encounter the time, space and support to find what psychologists Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan refer to as “their voices.” In their book, *Meeting at the Crossroads – Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development*, they claim that “women’s psychological development within patriarchal societies and male-voiced cultures is inherently traumatic. The pressure on boys to dissociate themselves from women early in childhood is analogous to the pressure girls feel to take themselves out of relationships with themselves and with women as they reach adolescence. For a girl to disconnect herself from women means to dissociate herself not only from her mother, but also from herself – to move from being a girl to being a woman, which means ‘with men.’ For women, being with girls at this time means witnessing this process and listening to girls re-sound voices which many women have silenced or forgotten.”

As Guiders work with girls, especially through adolescence, both they and the girls begin to discover and rediscover the “female voice.” There is overwhelming evidence that this process is far less likely to take place in environments that are dominated by males. Just as boys are more likely to find their “voices” in the company of male mentors, so are girls more likely to find theirs with female mentors. Likewise, the women and men who partake in same-sex mentorship, through organizations such as Big Brothers, Big Sisters and Girl Guides of Canada, will often rediscover parts of themselves. Given that, in Guiding, this process complements, rather than negates, the other developmental processes girls undergo as they mature, whatever “costs” critics of this single-sex commitment may bring up are far outweighed by the rewards reaped by a society in which girls and women become stronger, better and more self-reliant citizens. 🌱

Sharon Jackson Pruner, of Toronto, Ontario, is Editor of *Canadian Guider*.