



Girls Aspire to be “Normal Healthy” According to New Girl Scout Research Institute study

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Research Brings Voice of Girls to Discussion on Childhood Obesity and Adolescent Health; Encourages Girls and Families to Get Involved

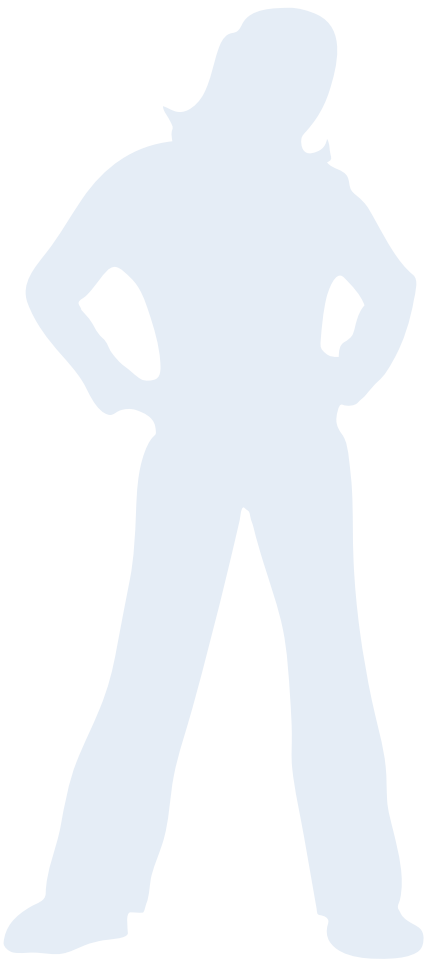
WASHINGTON, D.C. (Jan. 25, 2006) — A new Girl Scout Research Institute study sheds light on the childhood obesity crisis by asking girls directly how they define health and what motivates them to lead a healthier lifestyle.

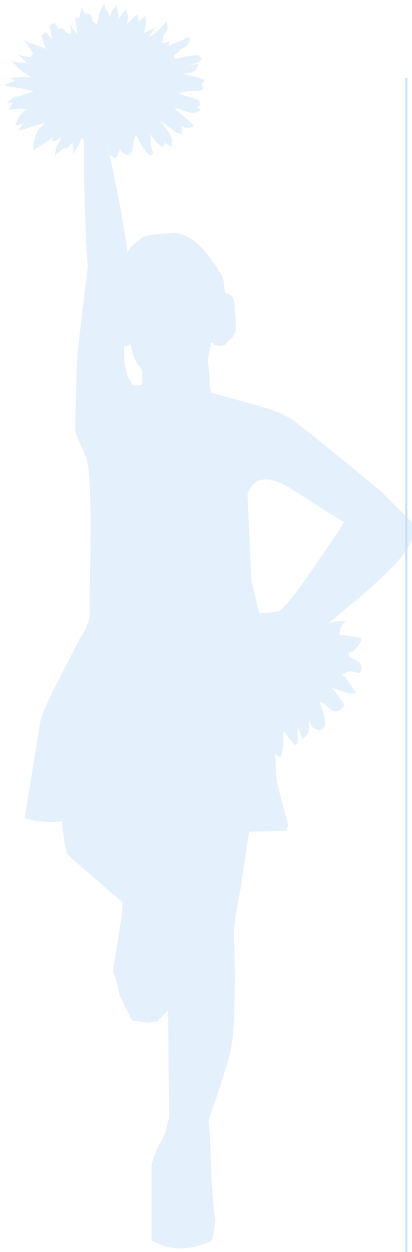
The study, which brings the voice of girls to the forefront of the conversation on childhood obesity for the first time, finds that girls are in many ways ahead of the curve, using a varied, complex set of norms to define health. Today's girls are defining “health” on their own terms, placing the same value on emotional well-being and self-esteem as they do on diet and exercise. For girls, being healthy is more than just eating right and exercising; it is also about feeling good about oneself and being supported by family and peers.

Girls say that efforts to reduce childhood and adolescent obesity that focus solely on nutrition or physical activity miss the mark. “This research gives us a window into girls’ view on health and it illustrates conflicting messages they receive from peers, parents and the media,” says Dr. Lilian Cheung, lecturer and director of health promotion and communication for the Harvard School of Public Health’s Department of Nutrition and also an advisor to the study. “The study will help us advance research and strategies that potentially help control obesity and instill healthy lifestyles among Girl Scouts as well as girls and families nationwide.”

The New Normal? What Girls Say About Healthy Living,” combines focus group research with a nationally representative online survey of more than 2,000 eight- to 17-year-old girls from different racial, ethnic, geographic, and socio-economic backgrounds. The study yields four broad findings:

- ◆ For most girls, being healthy has more to do with appearing “normal” and feeling accepted than maintaining good diet and exercise habits.
- ◆ Emotional health, self-esteem and body image play a critical role in girls’ attitudes about diet and exercise.
- ◆ Girls have basic knowledge about healthy eating but often don’t act on this knowledge, and many regularly make poor diet and exercise choices.
- ◆ Mothers exert tremendous influence as the most frequently cited source of health information and as role models for their daughters.





“Hearing what girls have to say is an important step in understanding and addressing the issues girls care about when it comes to healthy living,” says Kathy Cloninger, CEO of Girl Scouts of the USA. “If we want to help girls adopt better eating and exercise habits, we need to show them how healthy living will support their emotional well-being today as well as their physical well-being tomorrow.”

What Does “Normal Healthy” Mean?: Looking Normal, Feeling Healthy

In both surveys and focus groups, girls often described their health goals as being “healthy enough” or “normal healthy,” a concept they often associated with appearing normal and being supported by peers and family. Girls tended to view any diet or lifestyle choice as healthy as long as it doesn’t harm their appearance or their relationships with friends and family. Overall, 65 percent of girls say their lifestyle is “healthy enough for my age,” while just 16 percent describe their lifestyle as “very healthy.” One girl study participant said, “I want to be someone who is just in the middle. They look happy and normal, and I want that experience.”

But while girls want to look normal, what that means can vary depending on a girl’s age, race, household income, peer group, adult role models and self-perception. Although about two-thirds (65 percent) correctly identify themselves as being either normal weight or overweight, one in three girls has a distorted idea about her weight. Specifically, 45 percent of girls who are overweight by BMI standards and 61 percent of girls at risk for being overweight see themselves as normal weight, while 14 percent of normal weight girls believe they are overweight. In addition, African American and Latina girls, who exhibit higher rates of overweight, tended to be more satisfied with their bodies than White and Asian girls, who have lower obesity rates. Older girls also tended to be less satisfied with their weight than younger girls.

An Integrated View of Health: Girls Ahead of the Curve

Virtually all girls agree that “emotional health is as important as physical health,” and 88 percent of 11- to 17-year-old girls believe that feeling good about yourself is more important than how you look. A strict focus on physical health does not resonate with girls. According to one teen, “Health isn’t always about weight. Health is about your friendships with other people and how social you are.”

Girls’ view that physical and emotional health are of equal importance is also reflected in their behavior. More than a third of girls ages 11-17 reported eating more when they are “stressed out” and overweight girls are more than twice as likely as girls who are not overweight to report eating more in times of stress. Girls also tend to be more prone to stress and worry than boys, making them more susceptible to this behavior. In the study girls were generally more concerned than boys about every issue from getting along with friends to doing well in school to how they look.



In addition, girls who are physically active are more satisfied with how they look and how much they weigh, regardless of their actual weight; aspire to healthier lifestyles; and are less likely to be overweight. Eighty-three percent of very active girls say that physical activity makes them feel good about themselves. Unfortunately, the study found that many girls ages 11-17 say they do not play sports because they do not feel skilled or competent (40 percent) or because they do not think their bodies look good (23 percent).

The Tension Between Awareness and Behavior: What Girls Say vs. What Girls Do

Girls already have basic nutritional knowledge, according to the study, but many don't put this knowledge into practice. For example, more than 60 percent of teenage girls skip breakfast at least once a week, and nearly 20 percent skip it every day. One girl said, "Sometimes, instead of getting lunch, I'll get chips and cookies. I go to the vending machines." Teenage girls also spend increasingly more time on sedentary activities, such as talking on the phone, using the computer and watching television.

Obstacles at home and in school discourage many girls from adopting healthier habits. At school, reliance on vending machines, poor taste and quality of school lunches, optional physical education classes, and a lack of access to more informal physical activities are all barriers. At home, a decline in the frequency of family meals and increased television watching and computer use as girls get older make poor health choices easier. For example, four in 10 teenage girls eat in front of the TV at least three times per week and more than 30 percent sit down for dinner with their entire family not more than twice a week.

The Crucial Role of Mothers: Like Mother, Like Daughter

Mothers play a crucial role in their daughters' health habits, according to the study, which also surveyed mothers of participating girls. Girls with active mothers are more likely to be active themselves; girls with overweight mothers are more likely to be overweight; and girls whose mothers have a negative body image are more likely to feel dissatisfied with their own bodies regardless of what the daughter actually weighs. Girls cite their mothers not only as role models but also as leading sources of nutritional information and emotional reinforcement. Eighty-nine percent of girls report that their mothers make positive comments about how they look.

Girl Scouts In Action

Throughout its 93-year history, Girl Scouts has offered girls innovative programs in sports, nutrition and health. More than 60 earned recognitions (badges and patches) encourage girls to engage in a wide range of activities that teach them about developing healthy everyday habits from the importance of getting enough exercise and sleep to good hygiene and eating habits to learning about specific diseases like breast cancer.

Knowing that girls have a more complete view of health, Girl Scouts offers recognitions that also go beyond more traditional projects involving nutrition education, sports and physical activity to focus on girls' self-esteem and emotional development in promoting overall health and well-being. This reflects Girl Scouts' awareness that girls today are overly concerned about their body image at younger and younger ages, and therefore it is crucial that healthy living initiatives address the "whole girl" rather than just the food she eats, her weight and her exercise habits in order to create lasting change into adulthood.

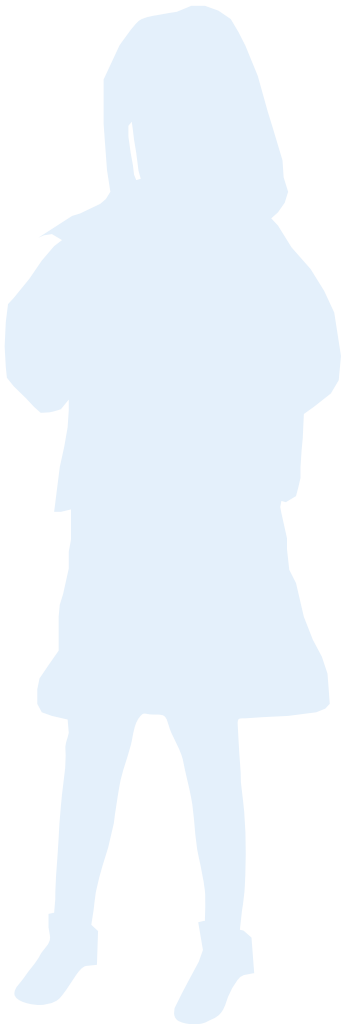
Girl Scouts of the USA partners with Dove™ on the uniquely ME! program to foster positive self-esteem among girls, ages 8 to 17, in the United States and Puerto Rico - with a focus on girls in underprivileged communities. The program, supported by the Dove Self-Esteem Fund, captures the Girl Scouts' comprehensive approach to healthy living.

The goal is to recognize the importance of self-esteem and emotional well-being in girls' lives and use that framework to teach girls about healthy eating habits, exercise and general wellness within the context of building self-esteem. The findings of "The New Normal? What Girls Say About Healthy Living," reinforces the work Girl Scouts is already doing to help girls lead healthier lives and will inform on-going program and policy work to better acknowledge and effectively utilize the girl perspective.

To encourage girls to bring their voice to conversations about healthy living in their community, Girl Scouts is calling on all girls and their families to get involved in the development and implementation of their local school wellness policy. As a result of a federal child nutrition law passed in 2004, every school district that receives federal school meal funds must establish a local "wellness policy" by the first day of the 2006-2007 school year. The law encourages the involvement of students and parents in formulating policies to address nutrition education and physical activity goals, nutrition standards, and other school-based activities that serve to promote and reinforce wellness messages.

Study Methodology

This study combined qualitative and quantitative research from the Girl Scout Research Institute and the Michael Cohen Group, a New York-based research firm. Between December 1-15, 2004, researchers conducted 16 focus groups representing a total of about 160 eight- to 17-year-old girls in four representative regions across the country. Following the qualitative research, a quantitative survey of more than 150 questions was administered online to a national stratified random sample of 2060 girls and 461 boys. In addition, a sub sample of 599 girls' mothers was surveyed at length about their daughters, families and personal health and nutrition. The sample closely resembles the U.S. population on a variety of demographic characteristics, including race, education, marital status and geography.



About the Girl Scout Research Institute

Formed in 2000, the Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI) is a center for research and public policy information on the healthy development of girls. Through conducting groundbreaking research, the main goal of the GSRI is to elevate the voices of girls on key issues that affect their lives -- such as their emotional and physical health and safety. The GSRI originates national projects and initiatives, synthesizes existing research and conducts outcomes evaluation to support the development of the Girl Scout program and to provide information to educational institutions, not-for-profits, government agencies, public policy organizations and to parents seeing ways to support their daughters and to girls themselves. The GSRI includes staff and advisors who have expertise in child development and also includes advisors from academia, industry, government and not-for-profit organizations.

About Girl Scouts

Girl Scouts of the USA is the preeminent organization for and leading authority on girls with 3.7 million girl and adult members. Now in its 93rd year, Girl Scouting cultivates character, confidence, and social conscience in girls while teaching them the critical life skills to succeed as adults. The organization strives to serve girls from every corner of the United States, as well as Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. For more information on how to join, volunteer, or donate to the Girl Scouts, call (800) GSUSA 4 U [(800) 478-7248] or visit www.girlscouts.org. For information about Healthy Living and the Girl Scouts Research Institute study in Spanish, call (866) 830-8700 or visit www.girlscouts.org/espanol.

