

## THE GIRL IS FIRST IN GIRL SCOUTING

In Girl Scouting, the girl is always first. She is the main focus of the Girl Scout organization, where everything is directed toward stimulating her interest and meeting her needs. The mission of the Girl Scouts--to help girls develop to their fullest potential and become competent, resourceful women--is as vital today as it was in 1912, when the organization began.

In our modern society, there are barriers that limit girls' achievements. Girls need an environment that will enable them to develop the skills and talents to overcome such obstacles. Through membership in Girl Scouts, an organization devoted exclusively to her, a girl is encouraged to reach her potential and attain the self-esteem and self-confidence needed to succeed in the larger world. In Girl Scouting, female leaders are the norm, not the exception. The message is "Become your best--set your sights high--you can make it happen."

Girl Scouting has been sending that message to girls for more than 77 years, and it is as essential today as it was in the beginning. The problems of drug abuse, child abuse, homelessness and teen pregnancy threaten healthy development. Girls need an organization that will help them cope and resist these threats--an organization for every girl, of every race, religion and neighborhood, that puts the girls first--an organization called the Girl Scouts.

Our country, indeed our world, cannot afford to leave untapped the skills and talents of more than half the population. We will need women who can make decisions, develop strategies, and lead the way to the future. Many of these women, millions in fact, will come from the Girl Scouts because at some time during their formative years--when it really mattered--they learned in Girl Scouting that they could do and be anything they chose to be.

### Questions and Answers About An All-Girl Organization

#### **Q. Why do girls need an all-girl organization?**

A. In our society, girls and boys often face different expectations and learn different lessons. Girls may be rewarded for passive behavior. Emphasis may be placed on who they are rather than what they can do. Girls may be expected to be less assertive than boys and allowed to have diminished aspirations. Many still opt for careers in traditional female occupations.

At the same time, the responsibilities of adult women and men are converging. Most girls, for example, will work for pay outside the home when they become adults. Many will be breadwinners for their families. During their formative years, girls need a place where they can develop all of their abilities without many of the variables that often work against them in co-ed settings.

#### **Q. Why is Girl Scouts the best place for girls?**

A. The Girl Scout program is designed specifically for girls. Their needs and interests are the basis for program development. Activities are designed specifically to help girls develop critical life skills. Girls have a place where they are encouraged to try new things and experiment with new ideas. They are expected to be decision makers and leaders. They can take risks and learn from their mistakes in a supportive environment of their peers without the social pressures to conform with stereotyped expectations.

#### **Q. Just what are some of the considerations unique to girls?**

A. The Girl Scout program is designed to help girls understand and manage some of the specific issues they must confront:

**Body Image:** In our culture, much more emphasis is placed on girls' being physically attractive than on boys. For many girls, preoccupation with body image can mean poor nutrition due to dieting and even lead to the diseases anorexia nervosa and bulimia, which affect many more girls than boys. For many, it poses difficulties in developing good self-esteem.

**Math and Science Competency:** Girls start ahead of boys in school in nearly all areas, including counting. By age 13, however, their scores in mathematics and science on standardized tests lag behind those of boys. It is apparent that

many contributing factors stem from reduced expectations and opportunities for girls. In our technological society this can have devastating implications.

**Child Abuse:** Girls are more likely than boys to be victims of physical and sexual abuse. As many as one in four girls will have a sexually abusive experience before age 18, as opposed to one in ten boys.

**Teen Pregnancy:** Approximately 11 percent of all teenage girls get pregnant each year. That's over one million girls per year or 3,000 every day. Teenage mothers often lead lives of poverty and isolation and their children are at an increased risk of being abused.

**Suicide:** Girls older than 12 attempt suicide more frequently than boys. While the number of adolescent girls who actually commit suicide is far less than those who attempt to, the great number of attempts signals a clear and pressing problem.

The Girl Scout program considers the girls, the problems they face and helps them understand the issues and develop the health self-esteem necessary to make sound decisions in their lives.

**Q. Why can't these needs be met in a mixed group of girls and boys?**

A. Behavior in co-ed youth groups reflects general societal expectations. Since stereotyping and sexism still exist, girls fall into some roles and avoid others. Often boys dominate and girls defer. Many studies have shown that in mixed groups girls have fewer opportunities to participate and receive less adult attention than boys.

On the other hand, separate environments have been shown to be an effective way of increasing performance, achievement, and leadership of females. Studies indicate that when girls first develop abilities in all-girl settings, they carry over their skills into mixed groups.

**Q. But is it really necessary to have separate organizations for girls?**

A. Yes. For most girls, there is ample opportunity to interact in male/female settings and these experiences are certainly very important. However, a setting where girls are the stars and where female role models are the norm, not the exception, can offer girls the forum to develop the self-confidence and skills required to succeed in tomorrow's world. Here, girls can routinely see women in positions of authority. They must understand that women can do and excel in all kinds of careers, that they do have leadership positions, and are involved in every aspect of human endeavors. That is what girls see in Girl Scouts.

**Q. Aren't co-ed experiences important?**

A. Certainly. We are not suggesting that mixed group experiences are unimportant. What we are saying is that these experiences are available to girls in many ways in many places. We can provide the experiences in an all-girl setting that greatly enhances the development of leadership and decision making abilities that are critical to success in the larger adult world. For many girls, Girl Scouting provides the only place where they will reap the unique benefits of all-female experiences.

**Q. What about boys? They have needs too.**

A. Of course they do, yet the focus and nature of all their concerns are not identical to girls. That's why we believe that boys need their own organizations, with programs designed for them and adults who understand their particular needs.

**Q. Recent court rulings have resulted in previously all-male organizations, such as Rotary and Kiwanis, opening their membership to women. Does this have an impact on the Girl Scouts?**

A. Girl Scouts applauds the fact that membership in leadership organizations for adults is increasingly open to women. However, the Supreme Court has indicated that organizations concerned with raising, instructing, and educating young people have the right to maintain single-sex membership.