

**A Summary of Focus Group Discussions
Regarding Key Female Findings of the 2002 Asset Survey
Marquette and Alger Counties
January, 2004
By
Karen S. Dubow, Ph.D. & Stephanie C. Risdon, MPA**

One of Great Lakes Center for Youth Development's major information sources is *Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors*. Developed by the Search Institute, this survey which is more readily known as the "Youth Asset Survey" was implemented in 1997, 2000, and 2002 in Marquette and Alger Counties. Although the Youth Asset survey results provide an array of youth development data in rural environments, specific data regarding adolescent female issues became a focus to nonprofit organizations participating in the Learning Network. In 2002, more than 1,100 female 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students in the two county areas were surveyed. To supplement the adolescent female asset survey results, Consultants Karen S. Dubow, Ph.D. and Stephanie C. Risdon, MPA conducted five focus group discussions with a total of 30 high school and college-age females to investigate female youth's perceptions on the topics of having positive identity, maintaining good health, being victims of violence, using substances, and taking risks.

The following information summarizes the female youth input:

- Many of the female participants were uncertain of understanding the meaning of having control over "things that happen to me." Female participants indicated that "parents" and "schools" are the reasons why ***"over 40% of girls who took the asset survey are unsure or do not believe they have control over things that happen to me."***
- Many of the female participants acknowledged that their initial reaction when they hear the statement ***"sometimes I think I am not good at all"*** has to do with a girl's low self-esteem and many of the female participants believed that girls' self-esteem relates to their appearance or "how they look."
- Many of the female participants agreed that ***"boys feel more proud of themselves than girls"*** and provided various reasons to why that is: "boys are boastful, confident, and outgoing."
- There were thoughtful and mature perspectives about what ***"Purpose in Life"*** means to female participants.
- Nearly all female participants believed "weight" is the major reason why girls ***"maintain their health."***
- Responding to the statement ***"25% of female respondents in the survey are victims of violence,"*** most of the female participants thought the percentage number should be higher. Female participants perceived violence as a physical action and that "friends" are where girls go to get help when they are victims of violence.

- “Peer pressure” or “friends” were common responses to why ***“locally 12% of our girls are using illicit drugs.”***
- Female participants consistently listed many “changes” that occur between 8th grade and 10th grade to cause an ***“increase in eating disorders, depression, attempted suicide, and other risk-taking behaviors.”***

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Background

The Great Lakes Center for Youth Development (GLCYD), formerly the Marquette-Alger Youth Foundation, administered the *Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors* survey during the 2002-2003 school year. The sample included 2,123 students from 8th, 10th, and 12th grades across Marquette and Alger Counties of which more than 1,110 were female 8th, 10th, and 12th graders. To supplement the female survey findings, during the year of 2004, GLCYD facilitated five follow-up focus group discussions with a total of 30 female participants in the two counties. Two focus group discussions were held with female youth participants involved with Great Lakes Recovery Center and the court system; two focus group discussions were held with female college students at Northern Michigan University; and one focus group discussion was held with high school female students at Grand Marais. All focus group participants were high school and college age female youth. The focus group facilitators were Consultants Stephanie C. Risdon, MPA and Karen S. Dubow, Ph.D.

The purpose of the focus group discussion was to learn in more depth the reactions of female youth to the key findings of the developmental asset survey: Positive Identity Assets and Risk-taking Behaviors. Focus group questions were designed to reflect female youth perceptions of:

- why over 40% of the surveyed female students were “unsure” or do not believe they have control over things that happen to them;
- why over 40% of the surveyed female students do not have a high self-esteem;
- attitudes toward maintaining good health, being victims of violence; using substances, having eating disorders, depression, and attempting suicide; and
- factors that impact the increase in risk-taking behaviors in females from 8th grade to 10th grade.

This report is organized by the questions asked during the focus group discussions. The text does not differentiate between responses from participants in the focus group locations.

Findings of the Focus Groups

Question 1: Over 40% of girls who took the asset survey are unsure or do not believe they have control over “things that happen to me.” Why do you think they think that?

It appeared that this question was difficult to understand. At all the focus groups, female participants would ask “what do you mean by control over what things?” Female participants viewed “things that happen to me” more externally controlled versus “internally” controlled. “Parents” and “schools” were the two reasons mentioned the most often as to why females do not have control over things that happen to them. While in high school, one is told to go to school, one has to take a test and during the time one lives at home, one has to live under parent rules. Female participants thought their age, gender, lack of opportunities, diseases, and car accidents are additional reasons girls do not have control over things that happen to them. Only one female participant acknowledged that she was surprised by the high number of girls who are unsure or do not believe they have control over things that happen to them.

Question 2: When you hear the statement “sometimes I think I am not good at all”, what comes to your mind or what is your initial reaction to such a statement?

Many of the female participants acknowledged that what immediately comes to mind when they hear girls think they are “not good at all,” is that “*girls have low self-esteem.*” It was mentioned at all focus group discussions that girls’ self-esteem relates to their appearance or “*how they look.*” Female participants thought that possibly girls do not think they are “not good at all” because they do not get as many “congratulations” or they may not participate in sports which provide one with a lot of attention. Other female participants’ reactions from hearing the statement “sometimes I think I am not good at all” were based upon disobeying parents, getting into trouble, feeling overwhelmed, trying something and it didn’t work, and trying to get attention.

Question 3: Do you think boys feel more proud of themselves than girls, and why?

“*Yes!!!....that is for sure*” represented many of the female participants’ thoughts. The reasons given as to why boys feel more proud of themselves than girls were that boys are boastful, confident, outgoing, more honest than girls, involved in competitions, and receive more fanfare or congratulations than girls, etc. It was said that “*high school boys are cockier.*” Also, female participants indicated that our culture encourages boys to be “macho” and that females are taught to be self-contained and self-conscious. Several female participants did not agree that boys are more proud than girls. They thought it depends upon the boy, himself and how one grows up and how one is taught.

Question 4: What does “Purpose in Life” mean to you? How do girls find a purpose in life?

Although many of the female participants related “Purpose in Life” to traditional expectations such as finding a guy, having a family, and finding a job, many of the female participants thought “Purpose in life” related to finding independence, discovering self, sharing with others, being comfortable with self, etc. It was indicated that “*your purpose in life changes with age*”; “*girls do look ahead*,” and “*you find your purpose in life by accomplishments.*”

Question 5: What happens for you to pay attention to your health?

According to nearly all the female participants, “weight issues” make them pay attention to their health. It was said, “*especially for girls, when someone makes a negative remark about our weight...negative consequences...it causes girls to give attention to how they look... not for their health, nutrition, exercises reasons.*” Several female participants provided other reasons why they pay attention to their health such as not feeling good, pain, and sicknesses.

Question 6: What opportunities and/or barriers are out there to help you pay attention to your health?

There were many comments provided to this question, but several female participants’ responses stand out:

“I was both anorexic and bulimic...I didn’t care what I ate. When I was bulimic, I thought I needed to lose weight; then I would get depressed and eat chocolate...there was no help from school...it gets boring eating salads ...at home I had only one meal and a snack...”

“It matters more to girls...to be like Hollywood...it is impossible to live up to that; it is impossible to get that skinny; who wants to eat celery all day...it is about boob lifting, lipo suction,...we think we want to be like that, but it is not real.”

To pay attention to your health, female participants listed the following opportunities:

- Gyms or fitness center in every town
- PEIF, Y
- Health classes
- Sports
- Bike paths, lake
- Positive feedback and support
- Weight Watchers
- Yoga
- Self-consciousness and self-control
- Friends
- Fitness tapes

To pay attention to your health, female participants listed the following barriers:

- Time
- Lack of understanding
- Lack of access
- Not caring
- Lack of energy
- Cost; Gym membership
- TV, magazines
- Female model pictures on boys' lockers
- Cafeteria food is not healthy
- Peer pressure to skip lunch
- Standards of how you look

Question 7: We learned that 25% of female respondents in the survey are victims of violence. Do you think this number is accurate?

Most of the female participants thought 25% of female respondents in the survey are victims of violence should be a higher number; however, there were a few female respondents that indicated the number should be lower or is accurate. It was indicated that “*violence in the home is a normal routine action*” and it was suggested that girls don’t want to admit they are victims of violence.

Question 8: How do you think girls perceive violence?

In general, female participants thought that girls perceive violence as a physical action, i.e. males beating females. Many of the female participants acknowledged that girls don’t think verbal and emotional abuse is considered violence. It was indicated that girls’ perceptions of violence depend upon where the person is regarding age, community awareness level, economics, her personality, and how the girl feels about herself.

In one focus group, female respondents talked about sexual abuse as a part of violence that included family members, girlfriends, and boyfriends. It was noted that “*sexual abuse is common and lots of parents sexually abuse their kids.*”

Question 9: Where do you think girls go for help?

“*Friends*” was the common response from the female participants to the question of “where do you think girls go for help?” Friends are easier to trust, provide support, and give feedback. Girls may not get the right information from friends, but friends are more comforting than others. Many female participants indicated that girls do not go for help: “*they don’t tell anybody...many keep it to themselves*” because “*they are ashamed...they cope.*” Not all female respondents

thought that girls would go to their parents for help and it was learned that girls would not go to school counselors for help.

Additional responses to where girls go for help were:

- Someone who you can trust
- Siblings
- Grandparents
- Close teacher/coach
- Drugs

Question 10: Locally 12% of our girls are using illicit drugs (cocaine, LSD, etc). Why are they using these drugs?

There were many responses to why girls are using drugs: peer pressure; boredom; problems at home; need to fit in, to be noticed, to be cool; to make them happy and to escape any responsibilities. Several female respondents said, “*I have no ideas why anyone would choose drugs; ...never considered it at all.*” It was indicated that “12%” is “*way off*” and the number should be higher.

Question 11: Eating disorders/depression and attempted suicide increase a great deal from 8th grade to 10th grade. Why do you think this is?

Female participants consistently mentioned that going from 8th grade to 10th grade involves “changes.” They indicated that high school is a whole new challenge. For example, going from 8th grade to high school, one goes from being the oldest to being the youngest. It is a time one tries to fit in and has more pressure with dress, grades, guys, and peers. Female participants indicated that one’s “*self-esteem,*” “*weight,*” or “*wanting to be skinny*” relate to eating disorders and attempted suicides.

Question 12: In the topic areas, we noticed an increase in risk-taking behaviors from 8th grade to 10th grade. What factors are impacting the difference or the increase in risk-taking behaviors at the 10th grade level?

Overall the female participants’ input to this question was similar to the responses to the last question. In the 8th grade, a youth is “*so lucky and naïve*” and are not in contact with older students by being in different school buildings. In the 10th grade, a youth has the pressure to fit in, to prove that they are cool; and “*guys and girls are going through puberty.*” Also, in high school, students are experiencing more peer pressure, hanging out with older kids, having more independence from parents, changing friends, and participating in more intimate relationships. It was learned that in 10th grade, a youth gets his or her driver’s license which is another step of freedom or independence. “Curiosity” was mentioned as a reason why risk-taking behavior happens.

Question 13: To have a positive impact on these areas for girls, what do you think the community/schools should do?

Female participants thought girls need to be paired with mentors, role models, and adult support; i.e. college girls paired up with junior high girls. These role models for young girls need to be “cool” young females types not “grandma” types. Girls need to find something of interest such as a job or after-school activities. It was suggested there is a need to provide all-female groups: young girls in science, math, and engineering group; intramural sports for girls only; and weekend activities for girls. Also, it was mentioned that more opportunities at schools would help. It is important *“to teach girls to have pride... and be proud... and do anything they want to be...perfect hair and clothes don’t make the person”*.

Conclusion

Female youth participants were very thoughtful with their remarks and had a range of opinions and perceptions about positive identity assets and risk-taking behaviors. Interestingly, the high school and college-age female participants in the focus group discussions had diverse backgrounds by age and experiences which impacted their level/depth of responses in group discussions, but at the same time their perceptions were similar on many of the questions. Overall, it was heartening to hear the many suggestions for positive impact on girls.

It was puzzling to learn that in all focus group discussions, female participants had difficulty understanding the first question (delivered verbatim from the written survey) which asked why do you think that “over 40% of girls who took the asset survey are unsure or do not believe they have control over things that happen to them?” The occurrences of not understanding by the female focus group participants makes one question whether or not the female youth who were surveyed understood the question which may have influenced the results: “over 40% of girls who took the asset survey are unsure or do not believe they have control over things that happen to them.”

It was apparent that the female respondents’ perception of personal control may be limited; they definitely understood why females sometimes think they are not good at all; they strongly believed males are more proud of themselves than females; and they were very thoughtful about finding a purpose in life.

In general, female participants were not surprised by the survey finding that 25% of the surveyed girls are victims of violence. It was clear female respondents were limited in their awareness of defining violence other than physical abuse. Also, it was clear that female respondents believed that female victims of violence turn first to their friends for help.

Without a doubt “maintaining health” is equivalent to “weight” or “how one looks...fat or thin” among the female participants. Female participants explicitly and easily described changes that take place between 8th grade and 10th grade to impact risk-taking behaviors.