



FACT SHEET MOVING GIRLS INTO CONFIDENCE

At the Canadian Women's Foundation, we want every girl to believe in herself and realize she matters.

That's why we work to empower girls with confidence, courage, and critical thinking skills.

We support programs for girls (aged nine to thirteen) that help them thrive through sports and physical activity, science and technology, media literacy, community action, and leadership development.

HERE ARE SOME COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT GIRLS IN CANADA:

1. Why do you focus on girls when some say boys are falling behind?

- We strongly believe that all children—boys and girls—deserve to thrive, and we applaud other campaigns that work to support boys. As a women's organization, our mission focuses on women and girls. However, our teen violence prevention programs are designed for both boys and girls.
- When girls start school, it's true they are more likely than boys to do well in reading, writing, and forming friendships. Yet as girls approach adolescence, their early advantage is overshadowed by two serious problems: 1) high rates of sexual assault and 2) a sharp decline in mental health.
- Aboriginal girls in Canada are especially at risk. They experience alarmingly high levels of depression, suicide, addiction, HIV infection, and poverty.

2. How many girls in Canada are victims of sexual assault?

- In 2008, over 11,000 sexual assaults of girls under the age of 18 were reported to police in Canada. Since only about 10% of assaults are reported, the actual number is much higher.¹
- Girls experience sexual assault at much higher rates than boys—82% of all victims under the age of 18 are female.²
- When girls are sexually assaulted, over 80% of the time the perpetrator is someone they know.³
- Girls are four times as likely as boys to be sexually assaulted by a family member.⁴
- Tragically, about 75% of Aboriginal girls under age 18 have been sexually abused.⁵
- In Ontario high schools, 27% of girls said they'd been pressured into doing something sexual they didn't want to do, and almost half have been the victim of unwanted sexual comments or gestures.⁶

3. What happens to girls' mental health in adolescence?

- As girls enter adolescence, from ages 9 to 13, their confidence declines sharply and they experience higher rates of depression.
- In Grade Six, 36% of girls say they are self-confident, but by Grade Ten this has plummeted to only 14%.⁷
- In Grade Six, boys and girls report the same levels of depression—about 26% says they feel depressed at least once a week.⁸ However, by Grade Ten rates of depression in girls have jumped—they are three times more likely than boys to be depressed.⁹ For girls, depression typically stems from “low self-esteem, negative body image, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, and stress.”¹⁰
- More than 20% of BC girls say they have deliberately cut or harmed themselves.¹¹
- In one study, more than half of the girls said they wished they were someone else.¹²

4. What causes this decline in girls' mental health?

- According to the American Psychological Association (APA), the widespread sexualization of girls and women in our society plays a major role in the deterioration of girl's mental health.
- Sexualization occurs when a person's main value is believed to come from their sexual appearance—rather than their intelligence or other qualities—and when they are held to unrealistic standards of physical attractiveness.¹³ Research links sexualization with the three most common mental health problems facing girls: eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression.¹⁴
- There is ample evidence to show that girls are obsessed with their appearance and weight:
 - Almost half a million girls have posted Youtube videos of themselves asking “Am I pretty, or am I ugly?”¹⁵
 - 90% of girls say the fashion industry and media puts a lot of pressure on them to be thin.¹⁶
 - Girls will go to great lengths to try and achieve the perfect body: In just one year, the number of girls aged 18 and younger who had breast implants nearly tripled.¹⁷
 - In a BC study, 60% of girls who were actually too thin said they were too fat.¹⁸
 - In another study, about one third of girls said they had starved themselves or refused to eat in order to become thinner.¹⁹
 - Another study found that about 50% girls in Grade Six were dieting—by Grade Ten, this had increased to almost 60%.
 - Thirty-seven per cent of all Canadians know a girl who thinks that she is not pretty enough, and as a result, is dieting or wants to get plastic surgery.²⁰
 - Studies show a link between body dissatisfaction in female adolescents and starting to smoke.²¹
- Popular culture teaches girls to focus on their appearance and to play a secondary role in life.
 - Girls are bombarded with media images of females who are thin, tall, and white. Almost all of these images are artificially created through digital manipulation, showing females in sexually provocative poses.

- Women in movies are much more likely than men to show exposed skin, be dressed provocatively, and have an “unrealistic body ideal.”²²
 - Research shows that seeing sexualized images of women causes many girls to be highly critical of their bodies, undermining their confidence and increasing feelings of shame, anxiety and self-disgust.²³
 - When children are sexualized in media, 85% of them are girls.²⁴
 - In many movies and television, females are absent or silent. A study of popular movies found that only 30% of all speaking roles are female.²⁵
 - A study of over one thousand children’s television programs revealed that male characters outnumber female characters two to one.²⁶
 - A study of 121 children’s board games revealed a similar theme—the images on the boxes typically show boys running and taking an active role, while girls stand quietly or even appear nervous.²⁷
- Given the cumulative image of these messages, it is not surprising that, as one researcher notes, “Girls live with the pervasive sentiment that they are not as important as boys.”²⁸
 - As the APA reports—“Just at the time that girls begin to construct identity, they are more likely to suffer losses in self-esteem.”²⁹

5. But hasn’t the sexualization of females gone on for years?

- In recent years, the sexualization of even very young girls is becoming common.
- According to Dr. Blye Frank from the University of Dalhousie, “The challenges that a 14-year-old girl faced 20 years ago are the challenges faced by 9-year-old girls today.”³⁰
- Sixty-two per cent of Canadians see girls being exposed to unrealistic, sexy images of women in advertising as a major problem for women and girls in Canada today.³¹
- There are many examples of products that sexualize young girls:
 - A major retailer is selling baby pacifiers for infant girls emblazoned with the word “Flirt.”³²
 - Over one-third of clothing for girls - from toddlers to pre-teens - sold at major retailers have “sexualizing” features (i.e., the clothing emphasizes the chest or buttocks, was made with fabrics normally used in adult women’s clothing or lingerie, such as leopard prints and slinky fabrics, and/or includes sexualized graphics or writing).³³
 - Push-up bikinis are marketed to girls as young as seven.³⁴
 - Pink underwear for little girls emblazoned with the slogan: “Who needs credit cards?” was removed from shelves after parents complained.³⁵
 - A ‘plastic surgery’ mobile app encouraged children to perform cosmetic surgery on a virtual girl to make her ‘slim and beautiful.’ After thousands of consumer complaints, the app was removed from Apple’s App store.³⁶
 - A “Pole Dancer” toy: children can press a button and watch a girl doll dance and gyrate around a stripper pole.³⁷
- As one commentator has noted: “A sexualized childhood is a stolen childhood.”³⁸

6. How does sexualization affect girls?

- Through constant exposure to sexualized images of women and girls, females learn that their primary value comes from their physical appearance.³⁹
- When girls are trained to obsessively focus on their appearance, they pay a steep price:
 - Research shows too much attention on their appearance impairs girls' ability to concentrate.⁴⁰
 - Sexualization is linked to girls' well-known tendency to chronically underestimate their math abilities, and to drop out of higher level mathematics in high school.⁴¹
 - Negative body image makes girls less likely to be physically active—only 11% of girls aged 16-17 are physically active enough to benefit their health.⁴²
 - Girls who are self-conscious about their appearance limit their physical movements during sports. In one study, the girls who were most concerned about how they looked scored the lowest in a simple ball-throwing test.^{43,44}
- There are strong links between sexualization and risky decisions, such as becoming sexual active too early, not using condoms, and having sex when they don't want to. This is especially true for girls who have special needs or disabilities.⁴⁵
- Early sexualization, when combined with low self-esteem, can lead to behaviours such as 'sexting' - sending sexual photos of themselves through text messages. These digital images can quickly be spread to peer groups and beyond, causing great damage to girls' emotional health, scholastic achievement, and even their physical safety.
- The more sexualized images girls consume, the more they agree with women being shown as sexual objects. They also believe more strongly that a woman's value depends upon her appearance. These girls also had more negative attitudes towards breastfeeding and menstruation.⁴⁶
- Pervasive sexualized images of women also affect how men and boys think of women and girls. The more TV that boys watch, the more sexist their beliefs become.⁴⁷ Exposure to narrow ideals of female sexual attractiveness makes it more difficult for some men to find an "acceptable" partner or to enjoy intimacy with a female partner.⁴⁸

7. How can girls be helped to overcome these messages?

- Through the Girls' Fund, the Canadian Women's Foundation invests in programs across Canada that help girls to navigate the 'triple whammy' that hits in adolescence: a high risk of sexual assault, poor mental health, and a toxic hypersexualized culture. When girls are resilient, they can recover from crisis more quickly, improve their mental health, and reduce the likelihood of sexual exploitation. Resilience flows from confidence, connection, and critical thinking.
- The programs funded by the Canadian Women's Foundation are designed especially to help girls between the ages of nine and thirteen to become more resilient, and provide a safe space where they can explore, create, and achieve without worrying about how they look or what boys think.
- According to a recent evaluation, parents reported the programs helped their daughters to become more confident, less shy, and more physically active. Ninety-five percent of the girls felt a stronger sense of belonging, 94% said they had better critical-thinking skills, 93% said they felt more confident. The girls also said they felt more able to deal with bullying and had better communication and problem-solving skills. Best of all, they said they felt better about being a girl.
- To learn more, please visit canadianwomen.org/empower-girls

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ENDNOTES

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