

Chapter 4: Engaging Girls at All Grade Levels

As a Girl Scout volunteer, you'll be working with girls of all backgrounds, behaviors, skills, and abilities. No matter what a girl's grade level or background, however, it's your job to engage her in meaningful ways, help her grow in maturity and skills, and encourage her to feel safe and accepted. This chapter gives you tips for doing just that.

Understanding Healthy Development in Girls

Just being attentive to what girls are experiencing, feeling pressured by, and enjoying as they mature is a big help to girls. So take some time to understand the likes and needs of girls, then consider how you can dip into the “what and how” of creating quality Girl Scout experiences together.

As you listen and learn along with girls, you may find it useful to review the highlights of their development. Here are some developmental characteristics of girls at different grade levels. Of course, each girl is an individual, so these descriptions are only guidelines that help you address each girl as the wonderful, complex person she is.

Girl-Adult Partnership

Since the group meets for the enjoyment and benefit of the girls, meetings are built around the girls' ideas. When you put the girl first, you're helping develop a team relationship, making space for the development of leadership skills, and allowing girls to benefit from the guidance, mentoring, and coaching of caring adults.

The three leadership processes of girl-led, learning by doing, and cooperative learning are key to the foundation of the Girl Scout Leadership Experience (see Chapter 2) and integral to the girl/adult partnership. Take time to read over the description of these processes and think about how to incorporate them into your group's experiences.

Girl Scout Daisy Development

At the Daisy level (kindergarten and 1st grade), girls:

- Develop coordinated large motor skills (such as skipping, running, and climbing) and fine motor skills (such as tying shoelaces, buttoning shirts, using scissors, and drawing recognizable figures)
- Interact with and learn about the world through play activities
- Experience the world through exploration; feel inquisitive about self and surroundings
- Feel curiosity about bodies; may play games like doctor
- Understand what is good and bad (although she may not understand why) and follow rules
- Express emotions physically and seek hugs and kisses
- Develop relationships with peers and learn to recognize some as friends and others as people they don't like

Girl Scout Brownie Development

At the Brownie level (2nd and 3rd grades), girls:

- Think in concrete terms, but are beginning to process more abstract concepts/complex ideas
- Spend more time with their peer group and turn to peers for information
- Develop an increased attention span; are able to focus on the past, future, and present
- Improve in self-control, can conform to adult ideas of what is “proper” behavior, and recognize appropriateness in behavior
- Become more modest and want more privacy; want more emotional freedom/space from parents/guardians
- Prefer to be with other girls (rather than boys); have a stronger self-concept in terms of sex and body image
- Understand more complex emotions such as confusion and excitement; become better at controlling and concealing feelings

Girl Scout Junior Development

At the Junior level (4th and 5th grades), girls:

- Think in concrete ways but are beginning to think logically and symbolically
- Move toward understanding abstract ideas; things are often “right or wrong” or “all or nothing,” with little middle ground
- Have a strong need to feel accepted and worthwhile
- Begin to take responsibility for own actions
- Develop decision-making skills
- Prefer to be with other girls (rather than boys)

Girl Scout Cadette Development

At the Cadette level (Grades 6, 7, and 8), girls:

- Feel unique, as though no one else has ever felt the way they do
- Display excellent planning skills, long attention spans, and total absorption in their passions (though they may discover a new passion frequently)
- Are extremely concerned with and put a lot of energy and interest into their friends and peer relationships (they may develop self-consciousness in front of peers)
- Are interested in boys and crushes
- Are into “what’s hot” and “what’s not” in fashion, music, celebrities, and style
- Are committed to communicating with and getting along with parents/guardians
- Feel a lot of pressure from the social scene at school, and think that adults don’t understand how complicated and stressful their social lives are
- Typically have good communication skills and, with guidance, can present issues effectively in public forums
- Like to be with and serve people directly—it’s their social nature!

Girl Scout Senior Development

At the Senior level (9th and 10th grades), girls:

- Like to be included in setting rules
- Are beginning to clarify their own values
- Are beginning to promote individuality; thrive with acknowledgment of strengths, skills, and talents
- Can sometimes be in a “know-it-all phase”
- Are developing stronger logic and problem-solving skills

Girl Scout Ambassador Development

At the Ambassador level (11th and 12th grades), girls:

- Are striving for a strong sense of self as they move out into the world
- Are working toward independence and freedom, seeking to make their own decisions
- Crave friends to turn to and trust; eager to belong to trusted groups of friends where they feel emotionally safe and connected
- Are exploring risk taking as a rite of passage and managing the responsibilities of new privileges (such as driving)
- Are juggling life decisions and pressures (college, job, intimate relationships)

Advocating For Girls

The Girl Scouts Public Policy and Advocacy Office in Washington, D.C., builds relationships with members of Congress, officials at the White House, and other federal departments and agencies, continuously informing and educating them about issues important to girls and Girl Scouting. These advocacy efforts help demonstrate to lawmakers that Girl Scouts is a resource and an authority on issues affecting girls. Visit the Advocacy office at http://www.girlscouts.org/who_we_are/advocacy.

Creating a Safe Space for Girls

A “safe space” is one in which girls feel as though they can be themselves, without explanation, judgment, or ridicule. Girl Scout research shows that girls are looking for an emotionally safe environment, where confidentiality is respected and they can express themselves without fear. The environment you create, therefore, is key to developing the sort of group that girls want to be part of. The following sections share tips on creating a warm, safe environment for girls.

Recognition and Acceptance

Girls look up to their volunteers. They need to know you consider each of them an important person. They can survive a poor meeting place or an activity that flops, but they cannot endure being ignored or rejected. Recognize acts of trying as well as instances of clear success. Emphasize the positive qualities that make each girl worthy and unique. Be generous with praise and stingy with rebuke. Help girls find ways to show acceptance and support for one another.

Fairness

Girls are sensitive to injustice. They forgive mistakes if they are sure you are trying to be fair. They look for fairness in the ways responsibilities are shared, in handling of disagreements, in responses to performance and accomplishment. When possible, consult girls as to what they think is fair before decisions are made. Explain your reasoning and show why you did something. Be willing to apologize if it is needed. Try to see that the chances for feeling important, as well as the responsibilities, are equally divided. Help girls explore and decide for themselves the fair ways of solving problems, carrying out activities, and looking at behavior and accomplishments.

Trust

Girls need your belief in them and your support when they try new things. They must be sure you will not betray a confidence. Show girls you trust them to think for themselves and use their own judgment. Help them make the important decisions in the group. Help them correct their own mistakes. Help girls give and show trust toward one another. Help them see how trust can be built, lost, and strengthened.

Effective Conflict Management

Conflicts and disagreements are an inevitable part of life, and when handled constructively can actually enhance communication and relationships. At the very least, Girl Scouts need to practice self-control and diplomacy so that conflicts do not erupt into regrettable incidents. (Shouting, verbal abuse, or physical confrontations are never warranted and cannot be tolerated in the Girl Scout environment.)

When a conflict arises between girls or a girl and a volunteer, get those involved to sit down together and talk calmly and in a nonjudgmental manner. (Each party may need some time—even a few days or a week—to calm down before being able to do this.) Although talking in this way can be uncomfortable and difficult, it does lay the groundwork for working well together in the future. Whatever you do, don't spread your complaint around to others—gossip does not help the situation and causes only embarrassment and anger.

If a conflict persists, be sure you explain the matter to your volunteer support team. If the supervisor cannot resolve the issues satisfactorily (or if the problem involves the supervisor), the issue can be taken to the next level of supervision and, ultimately, contact your council if you need extra help.

Open Communication

Girls want someone who will listen seriously to what they think, feel, and want to do. They like someone they can talk to about important things, including some things that might not seem important to adults. Listen to girls. Respond with words and actions. Speak your mind openly when you are happy or concerned about something, and encourage girls to do this, too. Leave the door open for girls to seek advice, share ideas and feelings, and propose plans or improvements. Help girls see how open communication can result in action, discovery, better understand of self and others, and a more comfortable climate for fun and accomplishment.

Communicating with Girls

When communicating with girls, consider the following tips:

- **Listen:** Listening to girls, as opposed to telling them what to think, feel, or do (no “you shoulds”) is the first step in helping them take ownership of their program.
- **Be honest:** If you’re not comfortable with a topic or activity, say so. No one expects you to be an expert on every topic. Ask for alternatives or seek out volunteers with the required expertise. (You can always consult a staff person from your council for help with this.) Also be honest when you make a mistake. Owning up to mistakes—and apologizing for them—goes a long way with girls.
- **Be open to real issues:** For girls, important topics are things like relationships, peer pressure, school, money, drugs, and other serious issues. (You’ll also have plenty of time to discuss less weighty subjects.) When you don’t know, listen. Also seek help from your council if you need assistance or need more information than you currently have.
- **Show respect:** Girls often say that their best experiences were the ones where adults treated them as equal partners. Being spoken to as a young adult helps them grow.
- **Offer options:** Providing flexibility in meeting changing needs and interests shows that you respect the girls and their busy lives. But whatever option is chosen, girls at every grade level also want guidance and parameters.
- **Stay current:** Be aware of the TV shows girls watch, the movies they like, the books and magazines they read, and the music they listen to—not to pretend you have the same interests, but to show you’re interested in their world. One easy way to check in with girls is to visit <http://lmk.girlscouts.org>, an interactive Web site for girls from Microsoft Windows and Girl Scouts. You might also want to direct parents to this site, which includes information about online safety, cyber-bullying, and social networking, among other topics.

Working with Teens

Consider the following tips when working specifically with teenage girls:

- Think of yourself a coach or mentor (not a “leader”)
- Ask girls what rules they need for safety and what group agreements they need to be a good team.
- Understand that girls need time to talk, unwind, and have fun together.
- Ask what they think and what they want to do.
- Encourage girls to speak their minds.
- Provide structure but don’t micromanage.
- Give everyone a voice in the group.
- Treat girls like partners.
- Don’t repeat what’s said in the group to anyone outside of it.

One way to communicate with girls is through the LUTE method—listen, understand, tolerate, and empathize. This of the acronym LUTE to remind you of how to respond when a girl is upset, angry, or confused.

- **L = Listen:** Hear her out, ask for details, and reflect back what you hear, such as, “What happened next?” or “What did she say?”
- **U = Understand:** Try to be understanding of her feelings, with comments such as, “So what I hear you saying is...” “I’m sure that upset you,” “I understand why you’re unhappy,” and “Your feelings are hurt; mine would be, too.”
- **T = Tolerate:** You can tolerate the feelings she just can’t handle right now on her own. This doesn’t mean you necessarily agree with her idea. It just signifies that you can listen and accept how she is feeling about the situation. Suggestions, “Try talking to me about it. I’ll listen,” “I know you’re mad—talking it out helps,” and “I can handle it—say whatever you want to.”
- **E = Empathize:** Let her know you can imagine feeling what she’s feeling, with comments such as, “I’m sure that really hurts” or “I can imagine how painful this is for you.”

The Girl Scout Research Institute

The Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI), a world-class center for research and public information on the healthy development of girls, ensures that the complex and ever-changing needs of girls will continue to be addressed. GSRI supplies cutting-edge information to educational, not-for-profit, and public policy organizations; to parents/guardians seeking ways to support their daughters; and to girls themselves. For more about the work of the Girl Scout Research Institute, visit www.girlscouts.org/research.

Discussing Sensitive Topics

According to *Feeling Safe: What Girls Say* (2003), a Girl Scout Research Institute study, girls are looking for groups that allow connection and a sense of intimacy and closeness. They want volunteers who are teen savvy and can help them with issues they face, such as bullying and other conflicts (online and offline), peer pressure, dating, sexual harassment (online and offline), academic or athletic performance, eating disorders, alcohol and drug abuse, depression, and more. When Girl Scout activities involve sensitive issues, your role is that of a caring adult who can help girls acquire their own skills and knowledge in a supportive atmosphere, not someone who advocates any particular position. Contact your Membership Services staff or the Leadership Program Manager at the Bemidji office with questions about sensitive issues in your volunteer experience which may require additional council support to present and discuss, as well as whether parent/guardian permission is required.

Listen and Ask

As the preceding sections suggest, you can help most just by being an empathetic listener. That’s right: Just by listening, you’re helping! Sometimes, you may also find that by asking questions, you can help girls figure out how to get more information and guidance at school or at home. You don’t have to solve their issues, but you can put them on the trail toward solving them.

Arrange for Education

If you observe that girls need or want more information on a topic that concerns them, check with your Membership Services staff about opportunities for arranging topical discussions with experts, on areas such as healthy eating, coping with bullies and cliques, and sex education. Every region of the country differs in terms of what families feel is okay for girls to discuss at various grade levels. So do be sure to check in with Membership Services staff. At the very least, we advise getting parental permission *before* any planned discussions!

Don’t feel you have to solve everything! Your role is helping girls get information from those trained people who provide it. And if you’re unsure who to ask to fill this role, count on the staff at Lakes and Pines, who have built up relationships with community experts who can help.

If It Sounds Serious

There may be times when you worry about the health and well-being of girls in your group. Alcohol, drugs, sex, bullying, abuse, depression, and eating disorders are some of the issues girls may find themselves coping with. If you believe a girl is at risk or hurting herself or others, your role is to get her the expert assistance she needs:

- Contact your membership staff at Lakes and Pines and find out how to refer girls and their parents/guardians to experts at school or in the community.
- Share your concern with the girl’s family, if this is feasible.

Here are a few signs that could indicate a girl needs expert help:

- Marked changes in behavior or personality (like, unusual moodiness, aggressiveness, or sensitivity)
- Declining academic performance and/or inability to concentrate
- Withdrawal from school, family, or friendships
- Fatigue, apathy, or loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities
- Sleep disturbances
- Increased secretiveness
- Deterioration in appearance and personal hygiene
- Eating extremes, unexplained weight loss, distorted body image
- Tendency toward perfectionism
- Giving away prized possessions; preoccupation with the subject of death
- Unexplained injuries like bruises, burns, or fractures
- Avoidance of eye contact or physical contact
- Excessive fearfulness or distrust of adults
- Abusive behavior toward other children, especially younger ones

Communicating with Parents or Guardians

Most parents and guardians are helpful and supportive and sincerely appreciate your time on behalf of their daughters. And you almost always have the same goal: to make Girl Scouting an enriching experience for their girls. Encourage them to check out www.girlscouts4girls.org to find out how to expand their roles as advocates for their daughters.

As you know, however, families today are terribly busy—parents and guardians may want to be involved but may sometimes need a reminder or specific guidelines. Perhaps the most important tip with communicating with parents/guardians is for you to use “I” statements instead of “you” statements. “I” statements tell a parent what you need from her or him, while “you” statements may make a parent/guardian feel defensive.

Here are some examples of “you” statements:

- “Your daughter just isn’t responsible.”
- “You’re not doing your share.”

Now look at “I” statements:

- “I’d really like to help your daughter learn to take more responsibility.”
- “I’d appreciate it if you could help me with registration.”

If you need help with specific scenarios involving parents/guardians, try the following:

If a Parent or Guardian...	You Can Say...
Asks how she can help but seems to have no idea of how to follow through or take leadership of even the smallest activity,	“I do need your help. Here are some written guidelines on how to prepare for our camping trip.”
Constantly talks about all the ways you could make the group better,	“I need your leadership. Project ideas you would like to develop and lead can fit in well with our plan. Please put your ideas in writing, and perhaps I can help you carry them out.”
Tells you things like, “Denise’s mother is on welfare, and she really doesn’t belong in this group,”	“I need your sensitivity. Girl Scouting is for all girls, and by teaching your daughter to be sensitive to others’ feelings you help teach the whole group sensitivity.”
Shifts parental responsibilities to you and is so busy with her own life that she allows no time to help,	“I love volunteering for Girl Scouts and want to make a difference. If you could take a few moments from your busy schedule to let me know what you value about what we’re doing, I’d appreciate it. It would keep me going for another year.”

Creating an Atmosphere of Acceptance and Inclusion

Girl Scouts embraces girls of all abilities, backgrounds, and heritage, with a specific and positive philosophy of inclusion that benefits everyone. Each girl—without regard to socioeconomic status, race, physical or cognitive ability, ethnicity, primary language, or religion—is an equal and valued member of the group, and groups reflect the diversity of the community.

“Inclusion” is an approach and an attitude, rather than a set of guidelines. Inclusion is about belonging, about all girls being offered the same opportunities, about respect and dignity, and about honoring the uniqueness of and differences among us all. You’re being accepting and inclusive when you:

- Welcome every girl and focus on building community
- Emphasize cooperation instead of competition
- Provide a safe and socially comfortable environment for girls
- Teach respect for, understanding of, and dignity toward all girls and their families
- Actively reach out to girls and families who are traditionally excluded or marginalized
- Foster a sense of belonging to community as a respected and valued peer
- Honor the intrinsic value of each person’s life

What a wonderful opportunity such an approach will offer to the girls you mentor!

A Variety of Formats for Publications

The Hispanic population is the largest-growing in the United States, which is why Girl Scouts has translated many of our publications into Spanish. Over time, Girl Scouts will continue to identify members’ needs and produce the resources to support those needs, including translating publications into additional languages and other formats.

As you think about where, when, and how often to meet with your group, you will find yourself considering the needs, resources, safety, and beliefs of all members and potential members. As you do this, include the special needs of any members who have disabilities, or whose parents or guardians have disabilities. But please don’t rely on visual cues to inform you of a disability: Approximately 20 percent of the U.S. population has a disability—that’s one in five people, of every socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and religion.

As a volunteer, your interactions with girls present an opportunity to improve the way society views girls (and their parents/guardians) with disabilities. Historically, disabilities have been looked at from a deficit viewpoint with a focus on how people with disabilities could be fixed. Today, the focus is on a person’s abilities—on what she *can* do rather than on what she cannot.

If you want to find out what a girl with a disability needs to make her Girl Scout experience successful, simply ask her or her parents or guardians. If you are frank and accessible, it’s likely they will respond in kind, creating an atmosphere that enriches everyone.

It’s important for girls to be rewarded based on their best efforts—not completion of a task. Sometimes that means changing a few rules or approaching activities creatively. Here are some examples of ways to modify activities:

- Invite a girl to complete an activity after she has observed others doing it.
- When visiting a museum to view sculpture, find out if a girl who is blind might be given permission to touch the pieces.
- If an activity requires running, a girl who is unable to run could be asked to walk or do another physical movement.

In addition, note that “people-first” language puts the person before the disability.

You Can Say...	Instead of Saying...
She has a learning disability	She is learning disabled
She has a developmental delay	She is mentally retarded; she is slow
She uses a wheelchair	She is wheelchair-bound

When interacting with a girl (or parent/guardian) with a disability, consider these final tips:

- When talking to a girl with a disability, speak directly to her, not through a parent or friend.
- It is okay to offer assistance to a girl with a disability, but wait until your offer is accepted before you begin to help. Listen closely to any instructions the person may have.
- Leaning on a girl’s wheelchair is invading her space and is considered annoying and rude.
- When speaking to a girl who is deaf and using an interpreter, speak to the girl, not to her interpreter.
- When speaking for more than a few minutes to a girl who uses wheelchair, place yourself at eye level.
- When greeting a girl with a visual disability, always identify yourself and others. You might say, “Hi, it’s Sheryl. Tara is on my right, and Chris is on my left.”

Registering Girls with Cognitive Disabilities

Girls with cognitive disabilities can be registered as closely as possible to their chronological ages. They wear the uniform of that grade level. Make any adaptations for the girl to ongoing activities of the grade level to which the group belongs. Young women with cognitive disorders may choose to retain her girl membership through their 21st year, and then move into an adult membership category.