

Handout 5-6: State of Oregon Guidelines for Effective Gender-Specific Programming for Girls

Introduction

The Guidelines for Effective Gender-Specific Programming for Girls, based on best practices, were written to assist you in your planning process, program design, and evaluation of services for girls. All the guidelines listed below are important and need to be incorporated to maximize program effectiveness.

We recognize that implementing these guidelines will take time. Therefore, they are written in such a way as to allow flexibility as you fully integrate them into your policies, programming, and outcome evaluations.

These guidelines are applicable to all services along the continuum: from community-based prevention programs for at-risk girls to intensive residential programs, detention, and state institutions. Even if your program is for a small population of girls or operates just a few hours a day, all programs can meet the guidelines creating an effective continuum of care for girls. If all programs follow the guidelines, each program will reinforce the others, and girls will receive clear and consistent gender-specific programming.

1. Administration and Management of Gender-Specific Programs

A. Programmatic Structure for a Comprehensive Continuum of Care System

Policies. Develop gender-specific policies for the agency, organization, and program serving girls. Policies may be developed at the State, county, city, agency, or local program level. This ensures that everyone is informed of and follows a similar set of work practices, understands the philosophy and commitment to girls' gender-specific services, and creates a culture where gender issues are integrated into the organizational structure. Policies need to be in writing and also should include guiding principles, program values, and how services are going to be delivered in accordance with the law (Federal civil rights laws; Oregon's Equal Access for Girls statute: ORS 417.270). It is important that gender-specific policies and practices are integrated into all parts of the system continuum from intake to follow-up/after-care.

Data and Profile of Girls. Document demographic profile information on the population of girls being served, as well as girls in the general community. Data on risk and protective factors of both populations also should be collected. This ensures that services are targeted and based on data-driven information.

Assessment Tools, Screening Instruments, and Intake Practices. Develop instruments and practices that are gender-specific for females and designed to eliminate barriers, cultural bias, and gender bias. Formal and informal decision points throughout the system (places where decisions are made by staff and other professionals involving the girl) should also be examined for gender bias practices.

Program Design. Include girls in the design of the programs and services. Programs need to review best practices and incorporate promising program components, if appropriate. The design should include an understanding of protective and risk factors as they relate to a girl's development with resiliency, strengths/assets, independence, self-esteem, and life skills, and how girls are socialized within the context of society and culture.

Long-Term, Stable Programming. Integrate aftercare and follow-up services/plans that are relationship-based from intake/entry point. Relationships need to be a thread that transfers from a program into the community. Girls need stability and relationships as they transition.

Outcome Measurements. Develop outcome measurements and evaluation methodology that are gender appropriate and make the goals or outcomes identified meaningful for the girl. The measurement tool should be written free from bias and accommodate differences in communication, interpretation, and subject sensitivities. The data collection method should be appropriate for females (e.g., includes qualitative as well as quantitative methods), and interpretations incorporate current research on girls (with the diversity of the research in mind).

Quality Assurance and Continuous Feedback Loop. Include girls in evaluating service delivery, program content, and effectiveness through feedback and suggestions. Programs need to conduct formal and/or informal needs assessments with staff and clients on a regular basis. The issues and concerns identified should be dealt with and incorporated into program changes and redesigns. A program's effectiveness and relevance to girls and their lives needs to be continually evaluated.

B. Staff Qualifications Regarding Female Gender Issues

Hiring. Interview applicants with questions that focus on gender issues. When hiring staff for girls' programs, the interview should include questions on experience, interest in working with girls, and if applicant has had training regarding female gender-specific service delivery.

Staff Diversity. Balance staffing regarding race, gender, and ethnic backgrounds to ensure that multiple perspectives are included and integrated into the services.

Training. Provide an orientation for all new employees and regular and follow-up training opportunities for all staff, supervisors, and managers on gender and culturally relevant current research and data, books and information on adolescent female development, female issues and needs, communication, sexuality, and gender identity. Staff needs to be well versed on gender issues as they relate to alcohol and drug use, abuse, domestic violence, and victimization issues for girls. Trainings also should be evaluated for relevance, effects on behavior and practice changes, and retention of knowledge.

Staff Education about Agency Policies. Inform staff as to gender-specific policy and values regarding agency/program philosophy and program content through orientation videos and manuals, trainings, emails, postings, and other means.

Positive Staff Attitude toward Girls. Ensure that staff members genuinely like working with girls and desire training to make their work with girls more effective and fulfilling. Staff need to understand their own biases and attitudes and to model and communicate positive messages about gender and culture.

Staff Boundaries. Ensure that staff members have and use their knowledge and clear understanding of emotional, physical, and sexual boundary issues specific to girls and that they receive training on how to appropriately relate with girls and respond to potential problems/issues they may face in working with girls.

C. Environment

Physically Safe. Create a physically safe environment for girls. The location where girls meet or reside should be safe from relational aggression, violence, physical and sexual abuse, verbal harassment, teasing, stalking, bias, racism, and sexism. Management and staff need to create a safe environment where boundary issues are clear, acting out behavior is consistently addressed, and physical safety is taken seriously. Girls not only need to be safe, but to feel safe as well.

Emotionally Safe. Create an emotionally safe environment for girls. The location where girls meet or reside should be nurturing and safe, one that encourages them to express themselves and share feelings, allows time to develop trust, and does it all within a context of building ongoing relationships. Girls need time to talk and to process, free from interruption and negative or coercive behaviors. When possible, these spaces should be free from the demands for attention from adolescent males.

Surroundings Value Females. Create an environment that values females. Facilities, classrooms, and other settings should have books, magazines, posters, videos, wall decorations, and other things that celebrate females' achievements and contributions, currently and historically, and that add to a girl's understanding of female development, that honor and respect the female

perspective and experience, and that empower young women to reach their full potential. Programmatic curricula should also use materials that speak to the girl's heritage and life experiences.

2. Program Content

A. Holistic Approach for Girls

Holistic Approach. Develop a holistic approach in programming for girls. Programs need to address the whole girl within the "social context" of her life as an individual, in her relationships, and in her community. This holistic approach includes an understanding of how she is socialized in her culture, and the "gender messages" she receives from her surroundings about relationships, systems, and society to help her define who she is as an individual and a female. Additionally, the system itself needs to be holistic because many girls are involved in multiple parts of the system. It is important that services share common guiding principles about girls and are integrated along a continuum of care to ensure a comprehensive, responsive, and seamless approach.

Social Context: Relationships

Family. Include the "family," as defined by the individual girl, in programming whenever possible. Many families are chaotic and fragmented due to intergenerational cycles of poverty, early pregnancy, abuse/violence, and incarceration. But involving the family allows girls to connect with them in a structure where she can work on issues and develop skills to understand the family dynamic and how to best relate to them in her life.

Friends. Address issues involving a girl's friends. "Friends," as defined by her, play a significant role in her life and the decisions she makes. Friends may include boyfriends, girlfriends, and gangs. Recognizing the importance of these people in her life and concurrently building her competence in making good decisions in friends will allow her to choose if these friends or other friends will help her be the person she wants to be.

Social Context: Systems

Education. Address issues regarding the school setting, curriculum, and the relationships involved (teachers, administrators, other students). Educational curricula need to be reshaped to reflect and value the experience and the contributions of women and girls. This could include women's history programs, speakers, and school/community relationships. Educational programs also need to assess and address issues that could be barriers to education for some girls. This includes the adolescent girl from a low-income family who is the childcare provider for a single employed parent or for her own child. Schools should be responsive to girls' needs and understand her social conditions.

Juvenile Justice System, Social Service System. Address issues that may involve the justice system and social services. Higher-risk girls often encounter these two systems. The manner and approach that girls are dealt with and labeled, and the overall services and care they receive or don't receive, can have a powerful impact on their lives and how they see themselves as individuals and females.

Social Context: Society

Media. Address how the media influences girls' lives. The impact of music, videos, movies, television, advertising, magazines, and all forms of "gender messages" are critically important to discuss in a girl's program. Girls need to be given tangible ways to advocate for themselves and speak out against these negative messages (e.g., sending letters to the editor, policy-makers, displaying bumper stickers, or spending money on things they support) and to recognize the impact these messages have on their lives and how they define themselves.

Culture. Address cultural issues in a girl's life. Services for girls need to be presented within the context of her culture. Race/ethnicity and gender are separate issues but intertwined in a girl's life. Girls of color (Latina American, Native American, Asian American, African American) tend to be more vulnerable to triple jeopardy: race, class, and gender oppression. Girls view the world through the lens of their gender and race, and both flavor everything they do because they influence the formation of self-esteem, self-competency, and perceptions of the physical, sexual, and social self and are overarching program and education issues.

Community. Address issues that involve a girl's community. Girls need to be given skills to combat negative influences that affect their lives and given opportunities to connect with the community. This might include volunteering at an abuse hotline or a domestic violence shelter, being shown how to register and vote, getting politically involved, making social change, developing a sense of power through social justice and responsibility, and understanding the importance of civic and community connectedness and pride.

B. Relationship-Based Programming for Girls

Girls Need Relationships. Develop programs that embody an understanding of the significance that relationships play in the life, connections, and interactions of young women. Programs, models, incentives, infrastructures, etc., need to be developed with relationships and connections with others at their core. Understanding that offering options to replace harmful relationships (e.g., criminal boyfriends, gangs) before eliminating those relationships also needs to be considered.

Adequate Staff Time for Relationships. Create opportunities where a staff and a girl or girls are allowed time to talk and verbally process. Formal mechanisms need to be built into the program to enhance relationships and trust through one-on-one opportunities.

Redesigning Programs from a "Male Relationship" Model. Determine if a program, both its content and approach, is based on how a male views the world and relationships. Traditional programs for juveniles need to be examined to determine if they are incorporating skills that work well for girls. Specifically, do the programs incorporate the importance of and a girl's reliance on relationships? For instance, "Anger Management" groups often focus on a girl managing and controlling her anger, often independent of the other person. Whereas, "Finding Your Voice" groups are based on skill building within relationship connections. Both have the same goal but from a different perspective. Another example is setting a goal of "independence" for a girl. This may be viewed as undesirable since it connotes an existence empty of relationships and connection to others.

Single Gender Programming—Developing Relationships of Trust and Interdependence with Other Females. Create opportunities for girls-only programming. While there is often resistance on the part of girls to be isolated in programs with members of their own sex, girls-only programming is a critical part of a gender-specific approach. It gives young women the time, environment, and permission to work on overcoming their previous socialization that values male relationships over female relationships. It teaches girls to cooperate with and support one another. Unless girls learn healthy ways to interact, they will practice "relational aggression," which includes being competitive, holding grudges, being cruel to each other, gossiping, being passive aggressive/indirect/covert, and emotionally hurtful. If the female population is too small for a single-gender program and is co-ed, girls should be allowed one-on-one time with a female counselor, mentor, or staff person. This will help establish the skills and experience to develop healthy, cooperative relationships with female and male friends, relatives, neighbors, church, and social group members.

Mentors. Develop a mentorship program for girls. Girls need other females who can model and support survival and growth as well as resistance and change. Matching mentors by ethnicity and culture is encouraged. It is also helpful to have mentors from similar backgrounds as the girl or who have overcome similar obstacles. Mentors and role models can help with a girl's success, especially with continual, reliable contact and when not put in competition with the girl's mother/family.

C. Strengths-Based Programming for Girls

Programs Build on Existing Strengths. Develop programs that tap into girls' personal and cultural strengths and provide opportunities to be successful by increasing her sense of her value and competency.

Girls Are Taught New Skills. Create opportunities for girls to learn new skills in areas they have not explored. Competence in new areas can build self-esteem, control, and pro-social behaviors. When girls master new skills that are healthy and legal, they expand their opportunities and become less dependent on old nonproductive, and sometimes harmful ways.

Personal Respect. Develop self-esteem enhancement programs that teach girls to appreciate and respect themselves, rather than relying on others for validation. Self-monitoring skills, such as writing in journals, can be incorporated into girls' programming.

Giving Girls Control. Develop programs to support and encourage girls to have hope, realistic expectations for the future, and the skills to reach their goals. Girls need help developing a plan for the future and an opportunity to practice the skills that will help them realize their goals. Girls need to be shown that they can affect how things happen and in a way that is empowering. It will give them a sense of control over their lives. Programs need to help girls find their voices and to be expressive and powerful in positive ways (e.g., job/career skills need to be taught for a variety of jobs and not just for traditional, low-paying jobs).

Building Girls' Strengths Through Connection to Others. Develop skill-building programs for girls where a person can be there for her (such as a mentor or staff member) and support her efforts to strengthen her skills. Strength-based asset building for girls is not just a cognitive process. It is most successful for girls when it is incorporated in connections to people in programs and in the community.

Victimization Issues. Develop programs that address the sexual abuse, domestic violence, and verbal/emotional abuse many girls have faced. These issues deeply affect many parts of a girl's life and how she sees herself as a female. Girls need help in *not* viewing themselves as victims, in seeing the connection anger has to their acting out or acting in (self-destructive) behaviors, in recognizing their reluctance to trust others, and in their need to be taught how to develop and maintain healthy boundaries.

D. Health-Based Programming

Physical Health and Sexual Health. Develop programs that address physical health as well as sexual health. Girls have four times as many health issues as boys. Information needs to be shared with girls about female development, personal care, exercising, physical strength, menstruation, pregnancy, STDs, contraception, and sexuality. But don't ignore the rest of a girl's body and health.

Emotional and Mental Health. Develop programs that address emotional health and mental health. Information needs to be shared with girls about emotional and mental health issues. This includes eating disorders, body image, depression,

self-care, books to read, counseling, and establishing and nurturing committed and meaningful relationships. Girls need access to mental health professionals who understand female adolescent development.

Drug-Free Health. Develop programs that address the use and abuse of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. Because of the connection between drug use and self-medication by girls in dealing with abuse and depression, addressing issues is most successful if most, if not all, treatment is done in single-sex programming. Staffs of prevention and intervention programs need to understand female adolescent development and incorporate gender-specific programming in their approach.

Spiritual Health. Develop programs that allow time for girls to address their spiritual health. Information needs to be shared and time allowed for girls to understand their spiritual side and inner strength. This could include time for personal reflection, traditions, and discussions about life, values, morals, and ethics.

Rites of Passage. Develop programs that include celebrations, rituals, and traditions. These "rites of passage" are very important in providing stability, connection to a girl's roots, and direction. Recognizing significant physical, sexual, emotional and spiritual milestones for girls is important as they navigate through life. Rites-of-passage celebrations are a way to teach girls about positive womanhood.

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