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THE NEED FOR GENDER AND AGE SPECIFC LIFE SKILL GROUPS

A project based upon an independent investigation, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Social Work.

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ABSTRACT

Adolescent life skill groups can strengthen self-esteem, develop appropriate body image, and improve peer and adult relationships while providing a sense of unity and support for its members. By separating boys and girls, adolescent life skill groups encourage the easeful gender specific discussions. This research investigated the effectiveness of adolescent girls' life skill groups on increasing self-esteem, developing appropriate body image, and improving both peer and romantic relationships. This research evaluated the results of a pre-test and post-test administered to 174 participants in a life skill group ran by Big Sisters of Rhode Island. This study found that the average pre-test was score was 74% and post-test score was 82%. This research also evaluated if, when asked, "What is the most important thing you learned", the participants answered something that was a positive self-attribute such as, "believing in myself", "not letting a boy tell me what to do", "to have positive self-esteem." Out of 269 participants, over a third responded to the question declaring a positive self-attribute.

I. Introduction

A. Problem Formulation

1) Life skill groups are necessary to inform and provide successful choices for specific life decisions the members will face.

2) Gender specific groups are significantly important because studies have found that women's groups go through different stages then men's.

3) The material presented in the life skill groups must be interactive and engaging.

B. Problem Justification

1) Adolescents face a number of challenges and the way they react to them depends on their developmental assets. Group work provides and strengthens various developmental assets.

2) KIDS COUNT of Rhode Island found that negative and positive developmental assets would directly affect the adolescent's outcome of development.

3) Social organizations and agencies are pulling back from offering life skill programs. Given the data that has been found, it is imperative to keep adolescent group work as an essential part of social work practice.

II. Main Points

A. There is a need for life skill groups for adolescents

1) Groups can provide a support system for adolescents. This is especially crucial for youths who do not have a supportive external system such as, a family, friendship group, or responsible adults who serve as mentors.

2) Life skill groups provide adolescents with a safe place to explore and discuss issues that they are experiencing.

3) Group work provides a sense of universality and "oneness". This cohesion is important to youth so they can feel that they are welcomed, accepted, and understood.

4) Group members have a safe place to try out different aspects of their personality and learn how to center their energy and omnipotence constructively.

B. Groups are more beneficial when they are gender specific because women's groups are modeled differently then male groups.

1) Adolescent girls are going through issues that are unique to their gender.

2) Girls recognize support from external sources more than boys do. Groups provide a safe place for females to connect with others and feel validated.

C. There are many issues that effect groups that need to be addressed.

1) Adolescents go through an intense period of adjustment where they encounter positive and negative experiences.

2) Experiences and challenges can make adolescents more likely to participate in problematic behavior.
3) Adolescents face a number of issues that are prevalent to their age group. Also, some issues are different among genders.
a. Overall issues
b. More specific issues
i. Drug and alcohol use and abuse
ii. Bullying/Cyberbullying
iii. Self-Esteem
iv. Body Image
c. Gender specific uniqueness of issues

D. Group work is more effective than individual work in some cases
1) Group work fulfills people's need for belonging.
2) Group work can inspire, motivate, and empower people, especially women.
3) Adolescents have their needs validated by a system which is not something prevalent in their lives, yet, something that is essential.

E. It is important how groups are run for them to be effective
1) Programs must identify and respect adolescent's individual needs.
2) Programs must engage and influence the youth.
3) Lerner's 11 essential features for group work.
4) Meanwhile, the group facilitator must expect challenging times and understand the developmental stages of adolescents.

III. Opposing Points
A. There are enough life skill groups and they are operating excellently, there is no need for change.

B. It is better to mix men and women's groups so they can learn from each other and share with the other gender group their challenges and strengths.
1) It gives men and women to discuss one topic and be able to learn about situations form the other point of view.
2) Gives a chance for men and women to have an open discussion on the struggles they face with their own gender, as well as with the other gender.

C. Life skill groups do not directly influence the life decisions youth will make.

D. Schools, parents, and other resources in the child's life provide enough information and life skill work for the children.
1) Children might become overwhelmed by the information.
2) Information may contradict each other, leaving the child to not believe either one.
3) Children might receive so much information that they are no longer interested in the program, which is a waste of time, money, and ideas.

E. Individual work discusses the specific issues with the client.

1) Group work can target the specific problems with self-esteem or body image, for instance, and explore where they originated, and using the client's strengths and weaknesses to work on the issue.

2) Group work gives a specific overview of the issue and positive ways to deal with them, not specifically addressing the issue.

3) Individuals may not have the type of personality that strives in groups and uses group discussion and activities as significant learning tools.

IV. Hypothesis

Life skill groups must have a fun and interactive curriculum to make an impact and be an influence to the group members. Material must grasp the member's attention so they retain the information and will use it to make positive life choices.

V. Methodology

A. Sample

B. Data Gathering

C. Data Analysis

D. Findings

VI. Conclusion

A. Group work is an essential aspect of social work practice

B. Adolescent females significantly benefit from life skill group programs.

Preface

Group work, such as in female adolescent life skill groups, has been shown to be effective in bringing about positive change such as strengthened self-esteem and improved relationships. Although this type of group work is doubted by some, it is usually criticized for each individual aspect, such as the female membership, adolescent population, or the overall group structure, rather than viewed as a whole. It is important to recognize the separate challenges that these aspects present so that they can be properly addressed by future female adolescent life skill groups. By learning from these weaknesses, a group can truly positively impact its members.

Introduction

The thesis explores the aspects and problems of gender specific life skills groups for middle and high school girls. Life skill groups are used to inform members of topics such as friendship, relationships, and body image and how to use that information to make positive life choices. Life skill groups cater to different populations and one population that has gained increasing attention is adolescent female groups.

Adolescents have a multitude of advice, myths, and information being thrown at them from school, family, friends, and community resources. Girls especially face specific challenges that differ from males their age such as body image, puberty, female-to-female friendship, and self-esteem. Adolescences are left with a choice of whom to listen to, therefore, what choices and decisions to make. The person or group who is most significant in the youth's life and makes the most impact is most likely the source the youth will use to develop their life skills, whether they are positive or negative. Group work is an opportune chance to suggest positive life choices from many different angles.

Group work must be informative, engaging, and meaningful for the youth in order to make an impact and be a prominent source of knowledge of life skills, which is relied upon to make positive life choices. (Malekoff, 1007)

Gender specific group work is also increasingly popular because women and men relate to issues of power, status, and conflict differently (Schiller, 1993). Adolescents are beginning to adjust more to their gender roles and boys and girls are continuing to be differentiated. Youth in middle and high schools are beginning to form cliques and the way they are viewed by peers becomes more important during these years then they previously had been. It is important to look at the ways males and females begin to think of each other during the adolescent years.

For instance, the pivotal role of friends during adolescence and the intensity of the relationship are more evident in girls then boys. Trust among friends is a powerful factor in women's lives. Friends can be "instigators" who frequently promote positive change in each other's lives (Goodman & O'Brien, 2000 as cited in, Lesser, et al., 2004).

The most popular type of group for adolescent girls are life skill groups. Life skill groups cover any issue, which could affect the way they accept themselves, their relations with others, and society. Such life issues include, but are not limited to, bullying, peer pressure, friendship, popularity, career aspirations, body image, self-esteem, puberty, diversity, and stereotypes. Life skill groups also focus on the forces that are impacting the decisions adolescents make such as friends, family, and community sources.

Once life skill groups are established and the adolescents' needs and topics for discussion are identified, it is important to focus on the most effective way to present the material. The girls should not only stay interested in the group but also retain the

information, not forgetting it once the group is over. The material that is used by facilitators in life skill groups should reach the members on their level; it should be something they will enjoy, in words they will understand and appreciate. The group facilitators or curriculum creators must do so by creating activities that directly target outside forces and pressures that influence their decision-making. Program activities must deliver information that is pertinent to group members through hands-on or mind-activated activities that will teach them successful life skills so they will go on to make wise life choices (Lerner, 1998). Institutions or organizations that are providing life skill groups for adolescent girls must realize the critical need for a program which addresses the issues young girls face. Failure to do so, will lead to destructive decision making amongst their generation.

An educational intervention is extremely important to do at this phase of life considering the number of issues an adolescent faces during their development into young adulthood. Many of their issues are so challenging, youth often times do not know how to deal with it, and therefore, exhibit problematic behavior to deal with the issues. A lot of teens are uneducated in positive behavior, which would constructively allow them to face the trials and tribulations of adolescence.

The 2007 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook provides data regarding youth in Rhode Island and the issues they face educationally, economically, in the family and community, as well as identifying risk-taking behaviors and physical and mental health issues. The Factbook indicates that “adolescent risk behaviors such as substance use, violence toward themselves or others, eating disorders, gambling, and problems in school such as school failure and dropping out, can be lessened or prevented by protective

factors, sometimes referred to as “developmental assets.” (Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook, 2007). The Search Institute of Minneapolis defined 41 developmental assets that have a demonstrated relationship to healthy adolescent development. Such developmental assets include; self-esteem, sense of purpose, positive view of personal future, peaceful conflict resolution, resistance skills, personal power, youth programs, integrity, caring, and interpersonal competence. These developmental assets can either be provided by the group experience as a whole or by members learning and strengthening skills through the group work. (2005)

The Kids Count 2007 Factbook also found that research has shown that the more developmental assets one has in multiple settings, the less likely they are to use or abuse alcohol and illegal drugs. Another finding that is significant to the need for an adolescent life skill group, led by an adult, is that only 17% of youth in Rhode Island feel that they can talk to a teacher or other staff member at school about personal or family problems most of the time. That is an extremely low number, which reflects the lack of positive adult role model relationships with adolescents.

Unfortunately, some social agencies and organizations have decreased their adolescent group programs. Social workers struggle with agencies to legitimize and include social group work as an essential method of practice (Drumm, 2006). “The decrease in social group work visibility and presence in social work curricula may have led to fewer social workers who view group work as an effective response to client needs.” (Cohen, 1995, as cited in Drumm, 2006)

It is vital to the social work profession to continue using group work as an essential method of practice. Research shows the issues that adolescents currently face,

the internal and external factors that motivate both negative and positive behavior, and the effectiveness of group work. For the well being of adolescents, it is crucial that social agencies and organizations develop group programs that explore life choices and skills with adolescents and be a positive influence in their life. Adolescent issues are not limited to a specific population and programs are needed in virtually every school; youth around the nation are struggling in their development and need programs which can tackle the issues and learn how to deal with them constructively.

The need for gender specific adolescent life skill groups

The benefits for adolescents

Life Skill groups serve a specific purpose to adolescents. A group provides a relational framework that offers many opportunities for shared exchanges toward growth and development (Lesser, O'Neill, Burke, Scanlon, Hollis, & Miller, 2004). A support group is made up of people, in this case, adolescents, that are going through the same issues and trying to figure out the best way to adapt to them. Support groups provide a structural setting that can strengthen self-esteem, develop positive body image, and improve relationships with others (Steese, 2006). Members concentrate on their commonalities and use each other as support, either to give or accept it, and to develop positive ways the youth can deal with issues he or she is struggling with. The peer group serves as a safe haven for members due to the feeling of safety in numbers. The mutual feeling of support that members sense while going through the experience together can make on feel secure (Aronson, 2004).

Peer groups are especially helpful for all age groups, both male and female, that are going through a specific experience. Particularly for adolescents, group therapy is beneficial for many reasons:

> The adolescent peer group serves a crucial role in the developmental tasks of this age group. Such tasks include: formation of identity, promotion and enhancement of self-esteem, incorporation of bodily changes into one's self-image, the development of intimacy, and separation from the family. (Aronson, 2004)

As adolescents are going through this intense period of individual growth, they desire a sense of belonging, yet wish to detach from families and parents, both of which a group can provide. "This natural propensity for group affiliation, together with adolescents' strong need to detach from the adults around them, makes group therapy a practical and sensible treatment modality for this age group" (Aronson, 2004). Ultimately, as adolescents are detaching from their family, a peer group can serve as a developmental tool to promote social learning and self-esteem enrichment (Aronson, 2004).

The dynamics of a group is powerful in an individual's life. Group work provides many elements that adolescents, specifically, adolescent girls, need at their time of development. Trust among friends is a powerful factor in a female's life. Friends can be "instigators" who frequently promote positive change in each other's lives (Goodman & O'Brien, 2000 as cited in, Lesser, et al., 2004). A life skill group's intentions are to aid the girls in realizing what factors influence their views, the impact of those views, and the power of their personal choices and decisions. Such awareness and skill development has been associated with "better psychological and social adjustment, lower levels of depression and anxiety, greater hope, better physical health, and better coping with adversity" (Benard, 2004, as cited in Steese, Dollette, Phillips, Hossfield, Matthews,

Taormina, 2006).

Within a group's development, there are many factors and phases that determine the overall success of the group. Aronson 2004 discusses how the group development positively develops an adolescent's autonomy:

> Within the secure confines of the group, as youth enter the middle "working" phases of group development, members can begin to safely express difficult feelings. Individuals can even regress, while also trying to learn how to "captain their own ships", that is, achieving some degree of separation and autonomy.

Groups need to appreciate each individual while working together to get a sense of "oneness" of the group members. A pivotal factor in group work is that of cohesion and the fostering of universality (Aronson, 2004). There are many benefits that an adolescent girl can gain from group work, which displays how important it is to provide her with such a group. In group work, youth's develop a sense of oneness, fulfill their need for belonging, develop healthy friendships, and become empowered.

Program develop as a way to achieve benefits

When a group is developed, a curriculum and agenda must be created so the group knows the direction it will be going in. The group needs to target what issues or problems it wants to discuss and develop their skills in. In terms of adolescent group work, curriculum creators must identify the problems that are affecting group members. Adolescents go through intense periods of growth and develop and are faced with "adult" problems that are fairly new to them. Youth struggle with positive ways to handle issues while they are trying to figure themselves out and where they fit among society and their peers. "Various aspects and levels of identity speak to the fluidity of developmental levels exhibited by adolescents, which can make the transference-countertransference

matrix in adolescent groups quite a challenge" (Aronson, 2004). Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1992, as cited in, Lerner, 1998, identified how academic and extracurricular activities can change potentially destructive adolescent behaviors:

> School underachievement, failure, and dropout in adolescence are linked to the sets of individual and contextual variables discussed in regard to substance abuse and sexual risk behaviors. That is, the basis of the influences of schools on a youth's development are associated with…social support for learning (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993, Levitt et al. 1991), and programs providing wholesome activities to youth during nonschool hours.

As adolescents begin group work, it may be challenging for the facilitator maintain a balance because the members are in a state of trying to balance their energy and new-found independence while respecting others in the group. It is imperative that adolescent group members develop the skill of tuning into their aggression and realize the potential consequences of their behavior (Aronson, 2004). By practicing social skills in the group, members can carry the skills with them while they are interacting with others individually, in a group setting, or externally.

One aspect of group development is the roles that members take on. For instance, one member may act as the clown of the group; others may be the monopolizer, facilitator's assistant, or scapegoat. It is helpful for the group facilitator to be aware of the member's roles so if an intervention is needed, it will be easier to determine what road to take (Aronson, 2004). A group not only provides an extra-curricular activity, but also becomes a positive influence in the youth's life. It is first in the hands of the facilitator to develop a structured, yet welcoming environment which promotes respect in order to lead the group in a successful direction.

The importance of gender specific groups

Adolescents in general can benefit from life skill groups but girls especially highly benefit from group work. Research has shown how group work can positively impact the lives of female adolescents. Although boys go through a lot of change and challenge while they are developing, girls face issues that are unique to their gender. Adolescence is the most pivotal and vulnerable time for females (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Boswell, 1999, as cited in Steese, et al., 2006).

Also, it is important to have gender specific life skill groups because group work has a different meaning for females then it does for males. Groups are extremely fundamental in giving women a place to validate other's developments (Lesser, et al., 2004). When a female is experiencing a difficult time, she searches for support externally, rather then males who internalize their feelings. Girls rate the importance of support from friends, teachers, and classmates, higher then boys do (Kilpatrick-Demaray & Kerres-Malecki, 2003 as cited in, Steese, et al., 2006). Girls recognize and value social support more than boys do, especially once she reaches high school age (Steese, et al., 2006). Girls need a safe place where they can externalize their feelings and emotions without ridicule or embarrassment, whereas boys may not feel comfortable in those situations.

Adolescents face serious issues, which need to be addressed

Adolescence is a time of dramatic challenge where children struggle to adjust to the changes in themselves, their family, and their peer group (Lerner, 1998). There are a lot of positive experiences that happen during this phase of life. Such experiences should

be celebrated and used as motivation during difficult times. Unfortunately, adolescence can be a time of ying and yang; when there is happiness, there is also turmoil. "Adolescence is a time of enthusiasm and of anxiety; of happiness and of troubles; of discovery and of bewilderment; and of breaks with the past and of links with the future" (Lerner, 1998)

Adolescents can take the aggression and frustration of their developmental period and let it out by engaging in risk-taking behavior. Youth that are going through internal turmoil and external or environmental stressors often take out their aggression in unhealthy ways. Environmental factors include peers who model such behavior, decreased amount of support or guidance from significant adult figures, and social pressures from their delinquent peers (Lewis & Lewis, 1984). Negative, or problem behavior that is influenced by environmental factors, is expressed in different ways, depending on factors that persuade youth.

Adolescents face the challenge and prevalence of violence, substance use and abuse, sexual relations, poor nutrition, and poverty. Those who get caught up in such things risk school failure and dropout, general underachievement, criminal involvement, teenage pregnancy, absence of job skills, limited or no healthcare, and emotional crises such as, depression, hopelessness, and a feeling he or she will amount to nothingness just like their parents (Lerner, 1998).

There is a multitude of other specific issues that adolescent females encounter.

> Adolescent girls face numerous challenges during the transition from childhood to adulthood (Feldman & Eliot, 1990; Gunnar & Collins 1988; Lerner & Foch, 1987). Threats to adolescent females' health and well-being include suicide, substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, dieting, eating problems, and eating disorders (Millstein, Petersen, & Nightingale, 1993). Girls are three times more likely than boys to have experienced sexual abuse, a major pathway to delinquency (Office of

> Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP, 1998). Ten percent of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 become pregnant (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003). Female adolescent peer relationships have been the source of numerous books and studies in recent years. Delinquency cases involving girls increased by 83% between 1986 and 1997 (OJJDP). Depression remains disproportionately high among adolescent girls, with about a 2 to 1 ratio of girls to boys. (Marcotte, Fortin, Potvin, & Papillon, 2002, as cited in Steese, 2006)

In the United States, there are approximately 28 million youths between the ages of 10 and 17 years. About 50% of these adolescents engage in two or more risk behaviors. Moreover, 10% of youths engage in four categories of risk behaviors (Dryfoos, 1990). This data indicates that risk behaviors are highly interrelated among adolescents. Other research also finds a tendency for diverse risk behaviors such as drug use and unprotected sexual activity to co-occur (Farrell et al. 1992, Ketterlinus & Lamb, 1994, as cited in Lerner, 1998). Throughout the 1980's there was a decrease in the use and abuse of illegal drugs. Since 1992, there has been a significant increase among eighth graders in the use and abuse of marijuana, cocaine, LSD, and other hallucinogens (Lerner, 1998). Alcohol use among adolescents can be attributed to self-destructive thoughts and behaviors, more likely to participate in risky behavior, personality problems, and lack of school adjustment (Lerner, 1998).

Most issues affect both male and female youths but some adolescent issues seem less prevalent in girls than boys, but the opposite is actually true. One issue, for instance, is bullying. The majority of female bullies will target their close friends, but have a delightful attitude around adults. Therefore, on the surface, bullying does not seem as important for girls as it does for boys who are very open and aggressive in their bullying tactics (Bright, 2005). Youth are aware of, victims to, or offenders of bullying.

> The US Department of Education reports that a large majority of students from Grade 6 through 12, 71% report having knowledge of bullying, physical attack or robbery at their schools. Elementary (29%) and middle and junior high school

students (34%) said youth worried about becoming victims of bullying at school. (Bright, 2005)

Children, now more than ever, have opportunities to be on the Internet at both school and home. A majority of their communication with friends happens over the Internet via e-mailing, blogs, instant messaging, and sites that allow them to post pictures or videos. Adolescents use the various aspects of the Internet to harass, threaten, and embarrass peers. This type of bullying is referred to as "cyber-bullying" (McKenna, 2007). Cyber-bullying is becoming more detrimental than the typical school-yard bullying (McKenna, 2007) because bullies can target more victims and involve more people in the bullying.

Another issue that is evident in adolescent girls is lack of self-esteem. Adolescent girls experience a quick decrease in self-esteem. Girls who suffer from low levels of self-esteem have a higher chance of "teenage pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, suicide, depression, social anxiety, and alienation (Gurney, 1986). Self-esteem has also been shown to be related to adolescents' body image dissatisfaction and dieting" (Steese, 2006)

A low sense of self-esteem in a girl directly affects their body image. Body image is the way one views their physical appearance, which are derived from many different influences. Girls' body image is most often distorted because of peer influence and self-esteem levels (Steese, 2006). Self-esteem affects body image more among girls than among boys (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003, as cited in Steese, 2006). There becomes a cycle which can create the fate of the youth in the future; during adolescence they experience the good and the bad, have triumphs and struggles. Both positive and negative influences impact the way the youth think about their experiences. The impact those

influences have on them will determine how one will behave; either constructively or destructively, which will have long-term effects, in some cases, life-long effects. A program must intervene to become a strong positive influence in the youth's life so the future generation can live happy, successful lives.

Group work is more effective than individual work

Certain issues or concerns are better discussed in groups then a one on one therapeutic session. The main goal of group therapy is to promote healthy relationships between others and themselves (Federici-Nebbiosi, 2003). Adolescents and women benefit from group work because it fulfills their need to belong and find a connection in others by finding similarities among them. In group therapy, members feel as if he or she is not alone and can relate to each other by sharing similar situations and issues (Aronson, 2004). "Adolescents use the group to learn how to function- with others and with themselves- and thus can learn to develop intimacy" (Aronson, 2004).

As noted, women benefit from group work because of the unique way they interact with each other that is different then male interactions. "Because of the frequent devaluation of women's need for connection to others in the larger society, groups provide an important need for connection in the lives of women" (Lesser, et al., 2004). When women are in a group, youths experience a sense of empowerment and impact. The camaraderie helps women develop awareness of their gender expectations in society and provide a safe place to challenge such norms (Lesser, et al., 2004).

The same need for "oneness" is evident in adolescents, as it is in women. Adolescents, specifically, find safety in numbers and their need for group affiliation or

"belongingness" can make group therapy extremely empowering (Aronson, 2004).

Adolescents have certain needs that contribute towards their successful development into adulthood. Those needs include, feeling valued as a person, forming meaningful relationships with others, establishing a place in a productive group, being useful to others, utilizing support systems, making informed decisions, and believing in their future and realistic opportunities (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1995, as cited in, Lerner, 1998). As previously discussed, youth benefit from group work. Women also benefit from group work, making adolescent girls the most in need for a peer group. For an adolescent female, a group can provide connection, belongingness, and validation

It is important how groups are run for them to be effective

There must be an appreciation of each member's individual differences with regard to their development as a product of their family, community, and sociocultural setting (Lerner 1993b, 1995, & Lerner & Miller, 1993, as cited in, Lerner, 1998). Other individual differences that are specific to the adolescent's internal development include knowledge of risk-taking decisions, self-esteem, self-competence, beliefs, values, able to engage in productive social support and prosocial behaviors.

When an adolescent's behavior problems become prevalent, it is not only important to understand the youth's school problems but design a program that is effective in keeping adolescents in schools. A program must promote the beneficial aspects school can provide, such as, "knowledge, abilities and skills, self-esteem, social relationships, and the opportunity to contribute productively to self, family, community, and society" (Dryfoos, 1994, as cited in, Lerner, 1998).

Group programs must engage the extent of influences that affect an adolescent's life. Group work and activities should be designed to enable the members to effectively develop themselves in a healthy manner, even facing the adversity of external influences (Lerner 1995, as cited in Lerner 1998). Such external influences or issues that directly affect adolescent group members may include; alcohol or substance use and abuse, violence, delinquency, sexual relations, school problems, or dealing with poverty and the issues that arrive from being "lower-class" (Lerner, 1998).

> The most effective programs emphasize the strengths and assets of young people that is, their capacities for positive development, and their possession of attributes-protective factors-that keep them from moving forward in a positive developmental path. Protective factors-individual attributes, such as self-esteem, religious values, and knowledge, skills, and motivation to do well; and contextual attributes, such as the experience of having authoritative parents and a social supportive, prosocial peer group-have been identified as integral in the healthy development of young people. (Feldman, 1995, Jessor et al. 1995, Schulenberg et al. 1997, Stiffrman at. al 1992 as cited Lerner, 1998)

Once a program identifies the needs of the members and the internal and external factors in their lives, facilitators or those who create the curriculum, must concentrate on the best way to run a group. Certain factors must be present in order for group work to be effective. One extremely important attribute a group must have is a sense that the group is one. It must be a balanced, stable, and united group dynamic. Cohesion must be established before the group "plays" and discusses issues (Aronson, 2004).

Not only are the group's topics important, but also the way a topic is presented will determine their effectiveness. Adolescents appreciate groups that use role-play to teach them how to make positive life decisions and constructive ways of self-assertion (Aronson, 2004). "Research shows that approximately 75% of the time, peers reinforce

bullies' behaviors by watching passively or by partaking in the bullying themselves." Therefore, if students participate in role-plays or discussions regarding how to intervene in the situation, he or she could act as a mediator and resolve the issue between their peers (Bright, 2005). It is important for group facilitators to work with the group to develop a safe, secure environment where hopes, feelings, wishes, and issues can be openly discussed (Aronson, 2004).

There are eleven essential features that adolescent programs should be focused on (Dryfoos, 1990, as cited in, Lerner, 1998). Programs should be offered during the earliest periods within adolescent's course of development, as an effort to address issues at their onset and members should be part of the same type of peer group, for example, same age or same grade. A responsible adult who can be a positive role model and who will appreciate each member's individuality and needs must facilitate the group. Potential negative influences should be discussed and group members should be given skills to cope or resist such influences.

Facilitators who are well trained and have developed the curriculum with colleagues from multidisciplinary backgrounds must lead the successful groups. Programs, in realizing the needs, issues, and potential problems facing youths, should collaborate with other programs available to youth to provide a well-rounded experience. Also, in order to provide a community-wide, multi-agency collaboration, programs should be offered by agencies or organizations that are separate from the school system but still set in a school. Due to the significant relationship between school performance and expectation and the important role it has in decreasing risk behavior, programs are most effective when it is offered in schools.

Although every member of the group is equally important, the person who sets the initial tone and has the responsibility for leading the group in the most productive direction is the group facilitator. A group facilitator's role is exciting yet risky. The members, while respecting the members and appreciating their individuality, must respect the group leader. The facilitator can become a scapegoat when there is trouble in the group. The facilitator is responsible for creating activities or making decisions. In an adolescent group, the facilitator serves as a knowledge database for the youth. Although members participate in group discussions, when members have questions to be answered or seek guidance, they turn to the facilitator members. In having such a delicate yet substantial role in the group, the facilitator has many responsibilities when taking the leadership role.

The group facilitator must enable members to explore and appreciate their own energy and creativity that goes along with their sense of grandiosity and omnipotence. It is the leader's responsibility to take this energy and harness it to be used constructively in the adolescent's life. The youth would then learn to appreciate this intense developmental period as a time of growth and self-appreciation while respecting internal and external boundaries (Aronson, 2004).

In groups where the facilitator is an adult and the members are adolescents, there are boundaries that are put up, which can be difficult to knock down. Facilitators may have stereotypes or pre-conceived judgments regarding youth. In turn, youth may not trust or want to be open with the adult. Especially youths who have previous negative experiences with adults, teachers, parents, or coaches, may be apprehensive when developing a relationship. The group facilitator must support youths by asking non-

judgmental questions and comments that will create a bond between members who share commonalities (Aronson, 2004).

Throughout the ups, downs, challenges, accomplishments, and frustration the group facilitator may feel during the group lifespan, he or she must remember the influence he or she has in the adolescent's life. He or she provides support and nurturance. Group facilitators are not afraid to address uncomfortable issues that put themselves or others in the "hot seat". It may be difficult to stay in the moment and explore the issue but it is an important process for the group. The ultimate purpose of exploring such issues is to take those skills and continue in their developmental tasks to make positive life decisions while dealing with internal and external forces (Aronson, 2004). Programs require money in order to run and those that are providing the money want to see positive outputs. The way for a group to achieve positive outputs is to have successful inputs such as a well-developed curriculum and a well-suited facilitator.

There is no need for female adolescent life skill groups

Boys and girls should not be separated

Gender specific life skill groups shelter girls from facing problems with the opposite sex. Males and females need to be integrated and work together on issues both genders face. Peer pressure is not only gender specific but cross-gendered. Life skill groups that are female-only may tend to teach girls how to fight peer pressure against their own gender. Learning how to stand up for themselves against boys is beneficial as well because it will teach girls how to fight for a gendered equal society.

Therefore, peer pressure can be a beneficial aspect of a child's life. Erikson's

theory of normal psychological development, states, “adolescence (his Phase V) is concerned with acquiring a sense of identity while overcoming a sense of identity diffusion” (Lerner, 1984). Erikson also underlines transformation of parents as sources of support and values and is replaced by adolescent’s peer group. Erikson continues by stating that, “Role playing and verbal exaggeration of the ‘I dare you’ and ‘I dare myself’ variety are a form of social play and a legitimate successor to childhood play.” (Lerner, 1984) Considering peer pressure that happens is also between boys and girls, not gender to gender, groups should be co-educational in order to discuss such issues with both sexes. Therefore, if girls and boys were in the same group, members could explore this aspect of adolescence, which Erikson states is an important part of their development, in a non-violent, safe environment (Lerner 1984).

The basis of peer pressure and certain role models among the youth’s external influences, acts upon weak individuals. Peers direct the weak individual’s susceptibility for transferring problem behaviors into specific actions (Jessor, 1977, as cited in Lerner, 1984). Erikson sees dares, a form of peer pressure, as a part of a normal developmental practice to clarify group ideals and memberships (Lerner 1984).

The continued separation of boys and girls only lead to more issues between the genders. “Throughout the years of elementary school, children’s friendships and casual encounters are strongly separated by sex” (Thorne 1992). Separating the gender into groups will only continue the inequalities between the sexes, as well as encourage them not to work together towards one common goal.

Group members will either be extremely introverted or extroverted

Members that “exert control over the evaluative implications of their group

memberships [maintain] differentiation both between and within groups." Identifiers attempt concurrently to sustain group separation and to search for legitimacy for in-group norms. The outcome of these dynamics will create critical judgments of intergroup deviants and positive judgments of out-group members who support group norms. Marques, Abrams, Paez, and Martinez-Taboda (1998).

Children change their appraisal and individual judgment of group members, both popular and unpopular, by their simple preference for certain members. This leads to the phenomena of the black sheep effect, which happens when deviant out-group members are more favorable among group members then similar in-group members (Abrams, Rutland, Cameron, and Ferrell, 2007). Therefore, people who are more popular are forced to adhere to group norms, which results in loss of identity. Out-group members are not highly regarded so their deviation of group norms does not matter much to the group.

Findings show that 62% of popular members felt a sense of belongingness to the group as a whole. Researchers also found that 42% of out-group members felt a sense of belongingness to the group as a whole. These findings show that there is a significant difference between unpopular and popular members, which determines their feelings toward belonging to the group as a whole. (Marques et al., 1998).

Group members evaluate other group members by their aspiration to obtain a genuine sense of positive social identity within the group. When members do so, he or she develops a complete willingness of conformity to group norms, mostly caused by other member's pressure for the group to conform to certain norms (Marques et al., 1998). A child will not concentrate on differences within the group which maintains, not reduces, intergroup distinction and bias because prejudices turns into certain individuals

becoming a target (Abrams et al., 2007). The older the child, the more sensitive he or she is to group norms. “When accountable to their peers, youth showed more general intergroup bias and related expected inclusion of normative and deviant members more strongly to evaluations of those members.” By 12 years old, a child’s psychological process is established enough to support social rejection of group members’ behavior and assist in the peer rejection and bullying within the group (Abrams et al., 2007). Even if a program is established and has an excellent curriculum, the group norms will be decided by one or a few members and the rest will adhere to them, creating no personal developments.

Life skill groups may not change the issues that face youth and encourage them to participate in risk-taking or problematic behavior

There is no significant change in self-esteem for members in an all girls group (Steese, Dollette, Phillips, Hossfeld, Matthews, and Taormina, 2006). Most groups only run for a series of weeks. It is questionable whether or not ten weeks is an acceptable amount of time for change to take place in an adolescent’s psychological and psychosocial well-being. (Steese et al. 2006) Other influences are in the youth’s life for a significant amount of time or for most of their life. For example, children are in school for approximately 12 years, at the least, and their parents are most likely a part of their life until the parent’s death. There is no significant improvement in self-esteem when a girl participates in a group (Royse, 1998, as cited in Steese et al., 2006). Only those who attend the group over a long period of time have an increase in self-esteem (Marmorosh and Corazzini, 1997, as cited in Steese et al., 2006).

Six factors are attributable to the beginnings of adolescent risky and problematic behaviors, which cannot be changed by group work. Although the behaviors are identified to the youth as external influences and certain ways adolescents can react to them, it does not change the fact that the factors are present. As previously discussed, most group work only occurs for a few weeks period. Therefore, when the group has ended, the youth face these problems, which have the ability to overpower the skills learned in the group. "Because adolescents are so different from one another, one cannot expect any single policy or intervention to reach all of a given target population or to influence everyone in the same way" (Lerner, 1998).

The first factor is age; age does change overtime but it cannot be changed by group work. The earlier the age of the introduction of risk behaviors during adolescence, the more likely it is youth will engage in such behavior. The second factor is expectations for education and school grades. There is a probable chance that education will not be discussed in life skill groups which focus on self-esteem, bullying, drugs, etcetera. In contrast, schools endlessly work to encourage students to work to their potential, do well in school, attend school, and do well in their classes. Therefore, school becomes a significant influence in a youth's success in life (Lerner, 1998).

A third factor is the general behavior of an adolescent. Two important influences may affect a child's general behavior. The first is that a youth may have a behavioral or a mental disorder, which affects their potential for involving themselves in risk behavior, due to impulses. There is a chance that a child is not diagnosed or wrongly diagnosed, which leads to the absence or wrongly prescribed medications that could control their behavioral issues. Another influence could be what adolescents have learned by their

parents or other family members. In their homes, youth may have learned that certain behaviors are acceptable but some behaviors may go against the overt and covert norms of society. Adolescents have developed since infancy that it is permitable to act a certain way which is not acceptable in other systems such as schools, extracurricular activities, or among peers. It is unlikely that a ten-week program can undo years of development (Lerner, 1998).

The fourth factor is the influence of peers. If they have friends who engage in risk-taking behaviors, youths are more likely to engage in the behavior themselves. Even though peers may develop a group of friends within the group, friends outside of peers may be closer to them, thus, having a greater influence.

A fifth factor is the influence of parents. Parental influence was previously discussed to explain learned behavior. Lerner (1998) finds that:

> Particular styles of parenting-that is, authoritarian or permissive styles, as compared with an authoritative one (Baumrind, 1983)-place a youth at risk for problem behaviors. Similarly, if parents do not monitor their children, or do not supervise, guide, or communicate with them effectively, there is a strong likelihood that an at-risk status will be actualized (Crouter et al., 1990). In addition, if adolescents are not positively affectively tied to their parents, risk behaviors are also likely to occur.

The sixth and final factor is the influence of the neighborhood. The youth's community plays a role in increasing the possibility of risk-taking behaviors. Risk behaviors increase when attributes include; poverty, urban environment, and close living proximities. People living in these communities are more likely to be a minority, such as Hispanic or African American. Therefore, an added influence to the potential of engaging in risk-taking behavior could be race (Lerner, 1998).

In addition to the physical, emotional, and social factors that influence youth decisions, specific external sources may make a positive or negative impact. Resources

that are provided for youths decrease the likelihood of them partaking in risk-taking behavior, for example, religious beliefs or well developed self-concepts may have a positive influence on youth. Also, social controls, for example, social support or authoritative parents, which are against the occurrence of problem behaviors, may decrease the chance that youths participate in problem behaviors (Lerner 1998). With the increase of protective factors, there is a decrease in adolescents' involvement "not only in alcohol and drug abuse but in delinquency and sexual precocity" (Jessor et al., 1995 as cited in, Lerner, 1998).

As previously discussed, an array of influences are associated with variables that influence a youth's development. There were factors that supported life skill groups but some factors are not present in such groups (Lerner, 1998). The following factors will only be listed to provide evidence that such factors were found to influence a youth's engagement in risk-taking behavior. An explanation and application of each variable has been previously examined. The factors that influence such behavior is associated with; individual variables, "relating to cognitive abilities" (Fuligini et al., 1995, as cited in, Lerner, 1998), as well as, "family variables, pertaining to the nature of parenting (i.e. child raring)" (Baumrind, 1983. Lamborn et al., 1991, as cited in Lerner, 1998), "socialization practices" (Crystal & Stevenson, 1995, Feldman et al., 1992, Gjerde & Shimizu 1998, Phinney & Chavira, 1995, Weller et al., 1995, as cited in Lerner, 1998), "and types of behavioral interactions between the youth and his or her parents" (Brody et al. 1996, Ge et al., 1996, Lord et al., 1994, as cited in et al. Lerner, 1998). Other factors include; poverty and a lack of social support that encourages learning, and, lastly, the school setting which concerns the structure and curriculum specific to the school, peer

and teachers a youth encounters and the interaction which occurs between them. A life skill group can not have a greater influence on a youth than other consistent, strong influences that came before and will be around after the group.

Hypothesis

Life skill group for adolescent girls provide a support system in a safe, confident place in which group members can discuss important, yet personal, issues. Group work fulfills an adolescent's need for belonging, which is especially important for youth who do not have a particular peer group they identify with. More specifically, a gender specific group can discuss specific issues that their gender is going through. When girls are thrown into new situations that can be harmful, they need the skills to make the most positive decision.

In some ways, a gender specific adolescent group is not the most effective program. Girls and boys can learn from one another and learn how to work with one another. Also, being in a group can deplete a member's individuality and can make members feel as if they have to follow the group norms. Lastly, a life skill group may not necessarily make an impact on the youth. Long-term, influential influences teach a person how to act and think. A program that lasts a few weeks may not have the impact on a youth as other influences do such as, peers, family members, or society.

Therefore, if a life skill program is offered, it must have a curriculum, which inspires and impacts the group members. The material must get through to the members and have a long lasting effect. If material is not presented in a fun, interactive way, youth will most likely forget what they have learned shortly after the group is over.

Methodology

Data collected over the past ten years will be analyzed and reviewed. The data was gathered from the Life Choices program run by Big Sisters of Rhode Island. The Life Choices program was an afterschool program that brought together a group of girls, usually 6th to 8th grade, and discussed topics that were relevant to their current development. The goal of the Life Choices program was to bring together groups of adolescent girls (6th-8th grade) after school and talk about topics that were relevant to their development. Such topics included; puberty, friendship, peer pressure, conflict resolution, love and relationships, career decisions, diversity, and drugs and alcohol abuse.

Participants

The study used a convenience sample from participants in Big Sisters of Rhode Island's Life Choices program. In total, there were 174 pre-test and post-test participants and 269 open-ended questionnaire participants. Big Sisters of Rhode Island kept records of the Life Choices groups, beginning in 2000 and continuing throughout 2008. Big Sisters of Rhode Island is a social service agency that matches Big Sister volunteers with Little Sister girls who are in need of a mentor. Their Life Choices program is a unique part of their agency, which services the state of Rhode Island, targeted at sixth, seventh and eighth grade girls. Data was complied at Big Sisters of Rhode Island's Warwick, Rhode Island office. Data was collected from the evaluation, which included findings, of the program, compiled by the group facilitator.

When group members joined the group, they filled out a group membership form

that asked questions regarding basic demographic information including their ethnicity and their age. Participants were from diverse ethnicities such as; Latina, Caucasian, Native American, African American, Cape Verdean, and Asian. They were ages 10, 11, 12, and 13. They were all from the state of Rhode Island and attended a Rhode Island Public School. The only requirement to participate in the group was that the member was female.

Data Gathering

The evaluations that were gathered consisted of qualitative and quantitative data. During the last session, group members filled out a qualitative questionnaire that asked open-ended questions about the group and the facilitators. Open-ended questions consisted of the following questions:

1. What I liked about the group
2. What I did not like about the group
3. My favorite topic
4. One thing I wished we'd done or one thing I wished we had learned about
5. The three most important things I learned in group
6. What I liked about the group leaders
7. Something you wish was different about the group leaders
8. Other questions/comments/suggestions

Over the ten years the program has been implemented, the pre-test and post-test questions have changed but the structure has stayed the same. Pre-test and post-test questions ask participants to answer “True” or “False” to ten questions. The specific questions have varied over the years but the topics remain the same. The pre-test and post-test asked participants questions regarding friendship, relationships, body image, self-esteem, and puberty. After the data from past Life Choices programs were collected, quantitative data was analyzed using the SPSS program. Qualitative data was taken from the open-ended questions and grouped together to examine changes and consistency of the group member’s feedback over eight years.

Data Analysis

The group member’s score's on the pre-test and post-test were analyzed. Due to the questions varying throughout the year, subjects were grouped together such as; views on relationships, conflict resolution, puberty, etcetera, instead of listing the actual questions. Examples of the specific questions are located in the Appendix. While taking the pre-test and post-test, group members may answer the questions as a guess without actually reading the question, resulting in a threat to internal validity. An in-depth look at the qualitative data gave a more personal look at how the members felt about the group.

A threat to internal validity was that participants may not have read or considered the question but instead guessed if it was "true" or "false". Also, participants may have looked at another person’s paper to copy their answer instead of working independently. The post-test is often administered during the last session of Life Choices which is

commonly a good-bye party. The girls may feel that they are rushed by peers or the facilitator to finish the test and questions in order to join the party. Lastly, another threat may be that the participants did not want to upset the group facilitators if they provided negative feedback while answering the open-ended questions. Instead, participants may have responded with positive answers just to satisfy the group facilitator.

Findings

There was a significant increase from the pre-test to post-test. The mean score of the pre-test was 74% and the post-test was 82%. These findings show that girls who complete a life skill group learn valuable information that is reflected in the pre-test and post-test. The first chart, "Pre-test Post-test Findings" show the means of the pre-test and post-test. The second chart, "Paired Samples Test" is the two-tailed test which shows that the findings are statistically significant with p<.00 which rejects the null hypothesis.

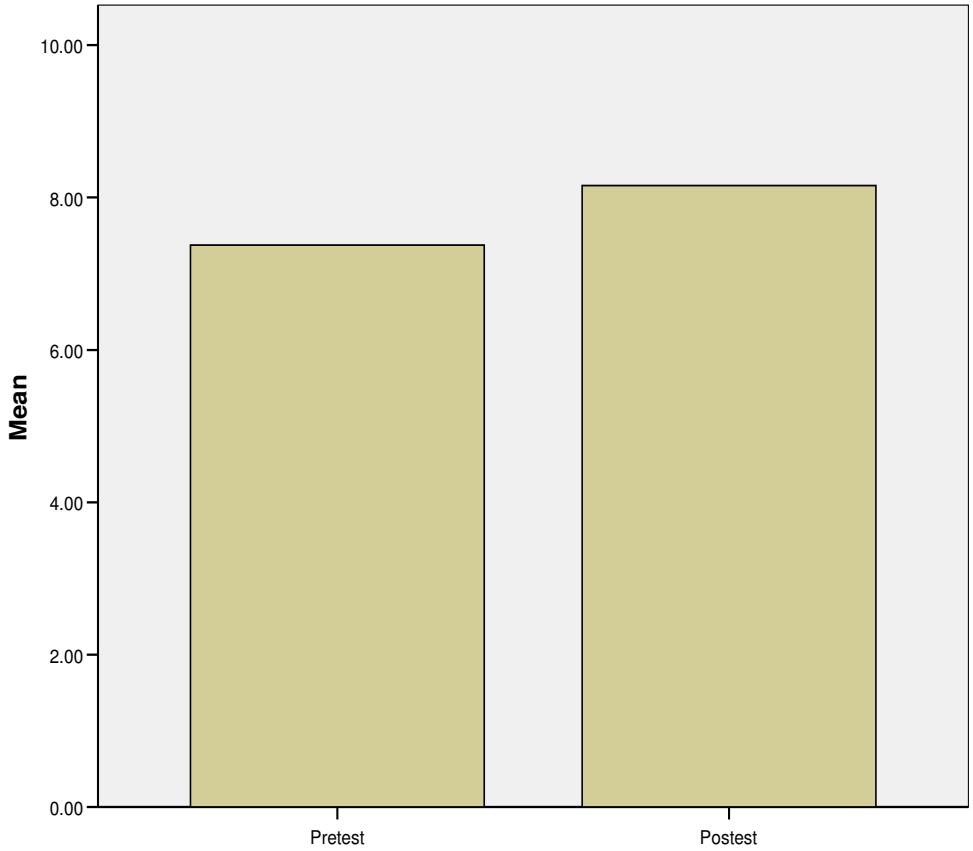
Pre-Test Post-test Findings

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest	7.3736	174	1.45990	.11068
	Postest	8.1552	174	1.41995	.10765

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	Pretest - Postest	-.78161	1.29405	.09810	-7.967	173	.000

This bar chart is a visual tool which displays the increase in test scores.

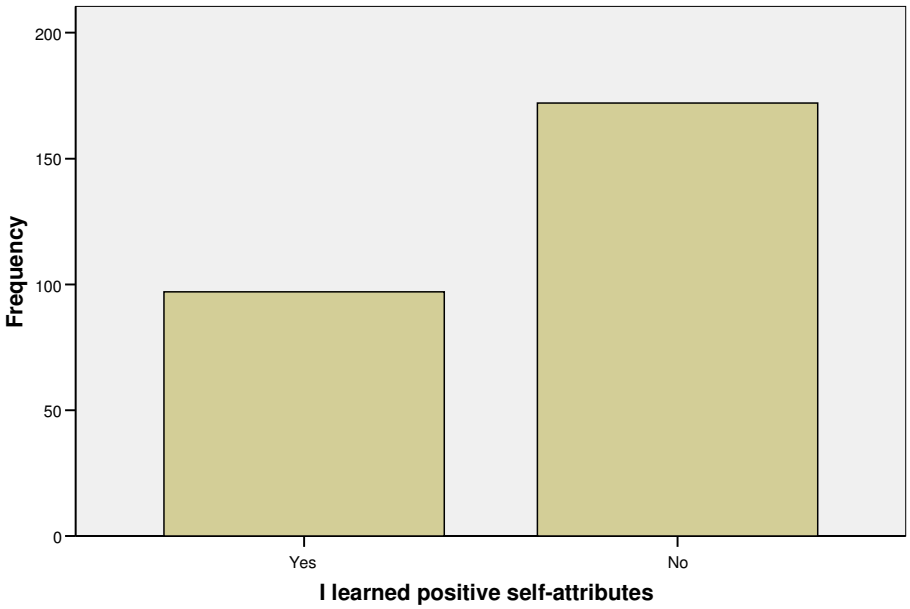


The next set of data analyzes the responses to the open-ended question, “What are the three most important things you learned.” The participants were able to write any three things they wanted to. Out of the 269, 36% answered that they learned a positive self-attribute. Such attributes included; respecting their body, being kind, not worrying about looks, to think positively, to have a positive body image and self-esteem, and not letting a “boy tell me what to do.” Therefore, over a third of participants first thought of a positive self-attribute when they reflected on an important thing they learned. The second chart, the bar graph, is another visual display of the amount of girls who answered that they learned a positive self-attribute.

I learned positive self-attributes

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	97	36.1	36.1	36.1
	No	172	63.9	63.9	100.0
	Total	269	100.0	100.0	

I learned positive self-attributes

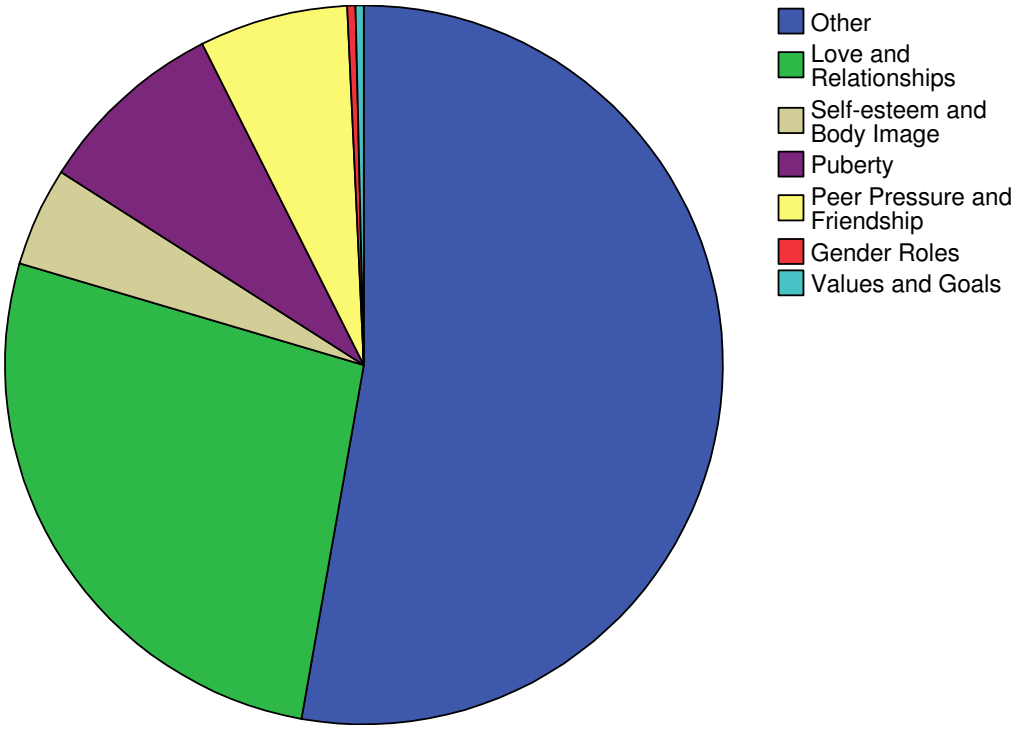


The third set of data analyzed was the favorite topics among the girls. Out of these topics, the favorites were; Love and Relationships, Self-esteem and body image, Puberty, Peer Pressure and Friendship, Gender Roles, and Values and Goals, respectively. This data is significant because when future group facilitators are planning life skill groups, they will know what is of interest to the girls. Therefore, the girls will be engaged in the group and more interested in the material and be more likely to retain the information. The first chart shows the percentage of girls that picked each topic. The pie-chart is a visual display of the percentages of girls that chose each topic.

FavoriteTopics

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Other	142	52.8	52.8	52.8
	Love and Relationships	72	26.8	26.8	79.6
	Self-esteem and Body Image	12	4.5	4.5	84.0
	Puberty	23	8.6	8.6	92.6
	Peer Pressure and Friendship	18	6.7	6.7	99.3
	Gender Roles	1	.4	.4	99.6
	Values and Goals	1	.4	.4	100.0
	Total	269	100.0	100.0	

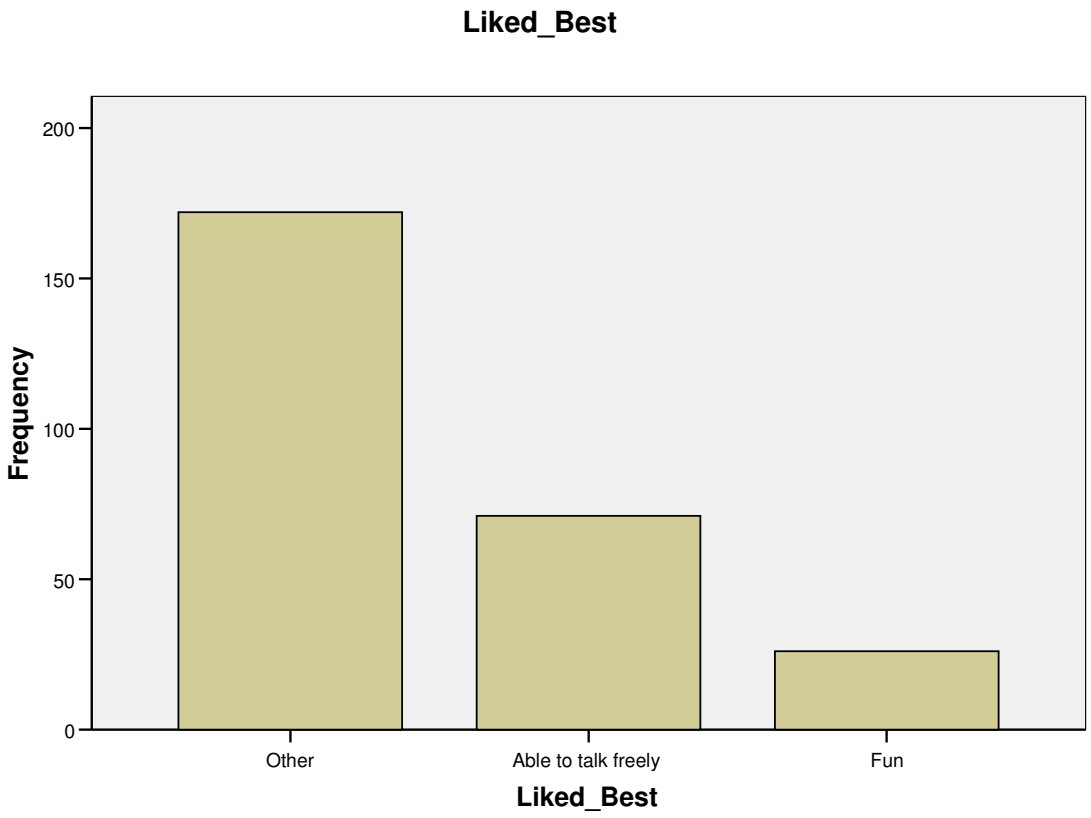
FavoriteTopics



The fourth and final set of data analyzes what aspect of the group the girls liked best. The answers were taken from the open-ended questionnaire. The girls could have answered anything they wanted to and the two most common were “able to talk freely” and “fun.” The data shows that 26% of the girls enjoyed the fact that they could talk freely.

Liked_Best

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Other	172	63.9	63.9	63.9
	Able to talk freely	71	26.4	26.4	90.3
	Fun	26	9.7	9.7	100.0
	Total	269	100.0	100.0	



Conclusion

The problem is that there are not enough life skill groups for adolescent girls. Organizations or agencies that fund afterschool programs need to realize the positive impact a life skill group can have on an adolescent girl. The study hypothesized that girls who participated in a life skill group for a number of weeks will score higher on a post-test than on a pre-test which asked questions regarding friendship, relationships, puberty,

and body image. The study also hypothesized that when asking open-ended question, they data will show that the girls in the program learned valuable information regarding friendship, relationships, puberty, and body image. The girls would have positive things to say about the group; such as they enjoyed it and learned a lot of valuable life skills.

The data showed that girls who participated in the life skills program learned valuable information that will lead to a better life for them such as, being proud of who you are, what being a true friend means, identifying healthy and unhealthy relationships, and what affects their self-esteem. Qualitative data showed what the most important lessons the girls learned was. Answers included; self-esteem, puberty, relationships, friendships, responsibility, the difference between negative and positive body image. The qualitative data is an extensive list that reflects how important the material was to the girls and the impact it made on their lives.

The data shows that it is imperative to offer adolescent girls the opportunity to take part in a life skill group. Social workers should work with their agency or organization to create a program similar to Life Choices, develop a curriculum, and offer the program to the girls they serve. Social work practice needs to target the needs of adolescent girls and work with them on learning how to make positive life choices. However, creating a program is not adequate enough. The curriculum must be compiled with interactive materials that will grasp the girl's interest and be presented in a way that will be remembered by the girls long after the group has dismembered. Social workers need to take the time to think of what problems, issues, or stressors are impacting adolescents and the best approach to discussing the topic and presenting materials to teach the girls how to respond to such issues.

To adequately measure the effectiveness of life skill groups, more research needs to be done on the results from adolescent life skill girls groups. Life Choices facilitators administer pre-tests and post-tests to group members. Along with the post-test they ask open-ended questions. Both qualitative and quantitative research is imperative in any program. Results from which can determine the effectiveness of the group. The results should be published so other facilitators can see what worked and what did not work and make it relevant to their group.

The findings of this study are important for any agency or organization that serves adolescent girls. Social service agencies should work into their policy or mission that they value the needs of adolescent girls and will create a program to meet these needs with a dynamic, impacting program that will work with adolescent girls to develop their skill of making positive life choices.

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