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Mentoring Helps American Girls Succeed in Careers, Life

Leadership skills, sports training important for adolescents

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Girls on the Run programs for young adolescent girls culminate in a five-kilometer run. (Anissa Freeman/Girls on the Run)

Washington – Girls who are coached in sports, leadership and academics from as young as 8 years old are better equipped to combat social pressures and enter adulthood as healthy individuals, says social worker and triathlete Molly Barker, founder of Girls on the Run, a nongovernmental organization (NGO).

“Peer pressure plays a big role in a child’s development in the middle school years,” Barker told *USINFO*. “Girl-only groups provide a ripe environment to discuss the challenges that peer pressure can bring and an opportunity to create coping strategies to handle this pressure before it actually exists.” In the United States, middle school usually

refers to grades six, seven and eight.

According to published reports by the American Psychological Association, young girls in the United States are vulnerable to some of the same mental health problems facing some women today, including low self-confidence and depression. Programs designed specifically to help adolescent girls stay mentally healthy and obtain tools to be successful at school, at home and in life are becoming increasingly important, said Anissa Freeman, executive officer of Girls on the Run.

Girls on the Run sponsors programs in the United States for girls 8 to 13 years old that combine training for a five-kilometer running event with confidence-building workouts.

Because the before- and after-school programs provide lessons that enhance emotional and social health, the benefits are more than physical.

For example, at an early morning practice in February at a primary school in Arlington, Virginia, girls learned the importance of making and keeping promises. Coach Jenn Brown used cue cards to prompt discussions related to keeping promises and then incorporated lessons into relay races. Even simply placing the cue cards at poles around the track field and having the girls race to find them and discuss them in teams drove the point home.

“If you keep your promise, people will trust you,” said Isabel, age 10, who has participated in Girls on the Run for three years. “The [Girls on the Run] practices really push you to do all you can do.”

“The running makes me feel good about myself, respect myself,” said Elise, age 11. “If you take the practices seriously, it’s not hard to run the race.”

LEADERSHIP TRAINING

Summer mornings at another program for young girls in North Carolina begin peacefully at dawn with yoga classes, but by the time the girls fall into their beds close to midnight, their minds are racing with ideas.

“Born to lead” is the theme of the Power Girls Global Summer Leadership Institute for girls of color, aged 14 to 17, from around the world at Bennett College for Women in Greensboro. Targeting African-American, Asian-American, Hispanic-American and American Indian girls, the two-week residential leadership training program uses education and training to bring opportunities within reach of young minority women.

“By the time some girls go to college, it is too late to orient them to the idea that they can be the CEO [chief executive officer] of a business or even start their own business,” said Bea Y. Perdue, president of the Johnnetta B. Cole Global Diversity and Inclusion Institute at Bennett College for Women. “Part of the problem is that many young women of color do not have access to women who look like them, who are successful in church, government and industry.”

Participants work with mentors to develop oral, written and interpersonal skills and to examine issues affecting minority women within the global marketplace. Team experiences in developing and implementing business plans teach marketing along with managing conflict.

The goal of Power Girls is to show girls how to attain the skills they will need to be successful rather than just telling them what to do. The program exposes the participants to leaders in government and industry who mentor them in all-day activities. Students visit the North Carolina state capital, where they meet key women in government, and career sessions introduce them to successful women in an array of jobs with local and national companies.

"We have to reach these girls early on and we have to make them aware of the possibilities while encouraging them to make their own personal growth and education a priority," said Perdue.

MENTORING UNDERSERVED GIRLS

It is widely accepted that girls between the ages of 8 and 12 still are receptive to adult influence while beginning to feel peer pressure. The nongovernmental organization Girls Inc. recognizes the importance of adult mentoring during these years.

"We know that girls have the capacity to do or be whatever they want, but they are often limited by external expectations and by their lack of confidence," said Joyce M. Roche, head of Girls Inc., which provides after-school mentoring to adolescent girls.

Girls Inc. programs teach girls to tackle math and science in school and to learn fundamental economic concepts so that they can make the right financial decisions for themselves, according to Roche. The programs teach girls how to be economically self-sufficient and provide basic information about the stock market. They also examine peer pressure and violence.

Girls Inc. centers allow girls to "try new things they may be less likely to try with boys around," Roche said.

Girls Inc. was founded as the Girls Club of America in 1864 to help young girls who were migrating from rural communities to cities. Today, most Girls Inc. clubs help American girls in high-risk, underserved areas confront social pressures and prepare them to lead successful and fulfilling lives, Roche said. The organization changed its name to Girls Inc. in 1990.

Both Girls on the Run and Girls Inc. receive public funding from agencies authorized by the U.S. Congress, and the local clubs associated with the NGOs receive significant community support from businesses and large corporations.

Additional information on [Girls on the Run](#) and [Girls Inc.](#) is available on the groups' Web sites. More information about the [Power Girls Global Summer Leadership Institute](#) is available on the Bennett College for Women Web site.

For more stories on women's issues, see [Women in the Global Community](#) and [National Women's History Month](#).

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