



The New Normal? What Girls Say About Healthy Living

Research Study Summary

Girl Scout Research Institute

Background

Child and adolescent obesity and weight control are among today's top public health concerns. Approximately 9 million children over age six are obese and since 1980, the percentage of overweight girls ages 6–19 has more than doubled. The medical community, government, food industry and others have been vocal about the psychological and physical risks for children who are overweight and the consequences of carrying poor health behaviors into adulthood. While a wide array of research about healthy living exists in the field, there is little specific information about girls' attitudes about health, body image, diet, weight and exercise and the role of these issues in their lives.

The New Normal? What Girls Say About Healthy Living bridges this gap by bringing the voice of girls to the forefront of the conversation on childhood obesity. Findings suggest that efforts to address this problem among girls that focus solely on nutrition or physical activity will miss the mark. The study finds that girls today are using a varied and complex set of norms to define health. For girls, being healthy is more than just eating right and exercising; it is also about feeling good about oneself, being supported by friends and family and appearing "normal."

Major Findings

Finding #1: Aspiring to be "Normal Healthy"

For most girls, being healthy has more to do with appearing "normal" and feeling accepted than maintaining good diet and exercise habits.

Girls often described their health goals as being "healthy enough" or "normal healthy," a concept they often associate with appearing normal and being supported by peers and family. But while girls want to look normal, what that means can vary depending on a girl's age, race, household income, peer group, adult role models and self-perception.

- ◆ In general, physical appearance is of greater concern to girls than what they eat or how much they exercise. Girls aspire to be "healthy enough" or "normal healthy." **Sixty-five percent of girls said their lifestyle was "healthy enough for my age."**

*"I want to be someone who is just in the middle. They look happy and normal, and I want that experience."
- Girl Study Participant*



*"Health isn't always about weight, health is about your friendships with other people and how social you are."
- Girl Study Participant*

- ◆ Although about two-thirds (65 %) correctly identify themselves as being either normal weight or overweight, one in three girls has a distorted idea about her weight. Specifically, **45 percent of girls who are overweight by BMI standards, and 61 percent of girls at risk for overweight, see themselves as normal weight, while 14 percent of normal weight girls believe they are overweight.**
- ◆ African-American and Latina girls who exhibit higher rates of overweight tend to be more satisfied with their bodies than White and Asian girls who have lower obesity rates. Older girls also tend to be less satisfied with their weight than younger girls.

Finding #2: Emotional Health Is Central

Emotional health, self-esteem and body image play a critical role in girls' attitudes about diet and exercise.

Most girls have a holistic view of health and believe physical and emotional health are of equal importance. This connection is reflected in girls' behavior.

- ◆ Virtually all girls agree that "emotional health is as important as physical health," and **88 percent of girls ages 11–17 believe that feeling good about yourself is more important than how you look.**
- ◆ Girls are generally more worried than boys about everything from getting along with friends and doing well in school, to how they look and whether they are too fat or too thin. **One in four girls (26%) has some dissatisfaction with her weight compared with 19 percent of boys.**
- ◆ Girls' view physical and emotional health as closely connected. For example, **more than a third of girls ages 11–17 reported eating more when they are "stressed out" and overweight girls are more than twice as likely as girls who are not overweight to report eating more in times of stress.** Because girls also tend to be more prone to stress and worry than boys, they are more susceptible to overeating.
- ◆ The more physically active girls are, the greater their self-esteem and the more satisfied they are with their weight, regardless of how much they weigh. Similarly, inactive girls are more likely to be dissatisfied with their appearance and perceive themselves as overweight. **Eighty-three percent of very active girls say that physical activity makes them feel good about themselves.**
- ◆ **Many girls ages 11–17 say they do not play sports because they do not feel skilled or competent (40%) or because they do not think their bodies look good (23%).**

Finding #3: Tension Between Health Awareness and Behavior

Although girls demonstrate basic knowledge about healthy foods and eating behaviors, they often do not put this knowledge into practice, and it is "normal" for many girls to make poor choices with respect to diet and exercise.

“Sometimes, instead of getting lunch, I’ll get chips and cookies. I go to the vending machines.”

– Girl Study Participant

“At dinnertime, we all get our own food and then go sit in front of different TVs so we can all watch the program we want.”

– Girl Study Participant

“When you said [healthy], I said energetic. Because my mom, she’s healthy so she’s energetic.”

– Girl Study Participant

“Like my mom, she’s always – a health person so she doesn’t buy a lot of sugar. So when I really can’t find a lot of sugar in the house – and if we do have sugar I really like it – I’ll choose something healthy and eat that instead.”

– Girl Study Participant

Girls already know what’s healthy, but many don’t use the information they have to make healthy choices. In addition, girls tend to think about health as the absence of negative behavior, rather than what they can do to empower themselves to be healthy. Obstacles at home and in school discourage many girls from adopting healthier habits.

- ◆ Meal skipping, particularly breakfast and lunch, is not uncommon among girls and occurs more frequently as girls grow older. **More than 60 percent of teenage girls skip breakfast at least once a week and nearly 20 percent skip it every day.**
- ◆ At home, decline in the frequency of family meals and increased television watching and computer use as girls get older and make poor health choices easier. For example, **four in 10 teenage girls eat in front of the TV at least three times per week and more than 30 percent sit down for dinner with their entire family not more than twice a week.**
- ◆ At school, reliance on vending machines, poor taste and quality of school lunches, optional physical education classes, and a lack of access to more informal physical activities were all cited as barriers to making healthier choices.

Finding #4: The Influential Role of Mothers

Mothers were the most frequently cited source of information on healthy living, and they clearly function as role models for their daughters.

Parents, and especially mothers, have the ability to strongly influence their daughters’ health habits, both positively and negatively. A mother’s weight, body image, attitude, and health habits are strong indicators of whether or not her daughter is overweight, satisfied with her body, physically active, and looks to her mother for advice on healthy living.

- ◆ Girls cite their mothers not only as role models but also as leading sources of nutritional information and emotional reinforcement. **Eighty-nine percent of girls report that their mothers make positive comments about how they look.**
- ◆ Girls with active mothers are more likely to be active themselves; girls with overweight mothers are more likely to be overweight; and girls whose mothers have a negative body image are more likely to feel dissatisfied with their own bodies regardless of what the **daughter actually weighs. In addition, daughters of overweight mothers were considerably less likely to mention their mothers as positive role models for healthy living.**
- ◆ A daughter’s dissatisfaction with her weight is *greater* if her mother is also dissatisfied with her own weight, in spite of how much a daughter *actually* weighs.

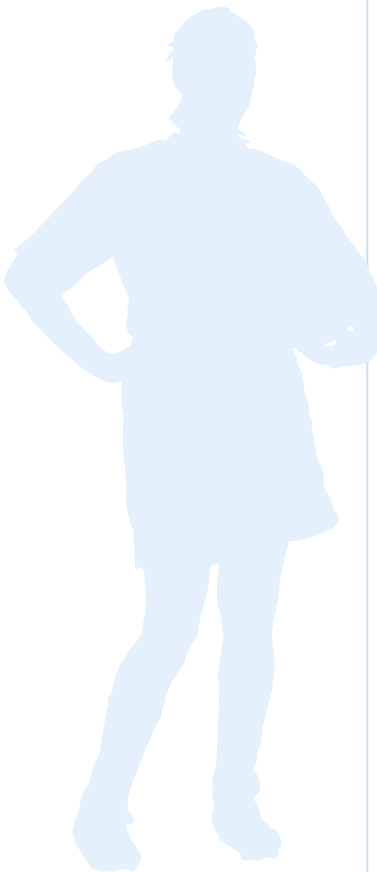
Conclusions and Recommendations

What Girls Say: Going Beyond “Normal”

The issue of healthy living is difficult terrain for girls to navigate, and they need help in making the connections that will form their attitudes and lead to healthy lifestyle choices.

To encourage all girls to adopt healthier habits:

- ◆ **Give “health” social relevance.** In order to become a priority in girls’ lives, health and healthy habits need to be framed not as ends in themselves, but as a means to achieve ends that are socially significant to girls of all ages, ethnicities and backgrounds.
- ◆ **Embrace a holistic definition of health.** Girls believe being healthy has many components and dimensions. Health messages need to acknowledge what is important to girls and help them address the issues in their lives: stress, peer pressure, feeling good about themselves and feeling safe.
- ◆ **Emphasize physical activity.** The research shows that physical activity, in particular, is one of the strongest predictors of both physical and emotional health. Girls need access to more opportunities for informal, less competitive physical activities in safe environments where they do not feel self-conscious about their looks or ability; where they can choose the activities they want; and be active in ways that make them comfortable.
- ◆ **Demonstrate positive outcomes that result from healthy behaviors.** To motivate girls to make better health choices, the positive outcomes that result from healthy behavior – higher self-esteem, reduced stress, and increased energy for school and extra-curricular activities – must be clearly conveyed. Helping girls draw connections between their choices and the impact of those choices on their short and long-term health in ways that are meaningful to them can help instill healthier habits.
- ◆ **Make good health an attainable goal.** Girls receive many conflicting messages from home, school, peers, and popular media. Efforts to encourage a healthy lifestyle must acknowledge girls as they are – valuing the different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of girls and acknowledging their different self-perceptions and abilities. Healthy living must be viewed as both a desirable and ultimately achievable goal.
- ◆ **Target adult role models – especially mothers.** Parents – especially mothers, in the case of girls – are important influences and role models. Efforts to inspire and motivate girls to make healthier choices must focus on helping parents support their daughters, and teaching them to understand that their choices model behaviors for how to live a healthy life.



Study Methodology

This study combined qualitative and quantitative research from the Girl Scout Research Institute and the Michael Cohen Group, a New York-based research firm. From December 1–15, 2004, researchers conducted 16 focus groups representing approximately 160 girls 8- to 17-years-old in four regions across the country. A quantitative survey of more than 150 questions was also administered online to a national stratified random sample of 2,060 girls and 461 boys. In addition, a subsample of 599 girls' mothers was surveyed at length about their daughters, families and personal health and nutrition. The sample closely resembles the U.S. population on a variety of demographic characteristics, including race, education, marital status and geography.

Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA) is the preeminent organization for and leading authority on girls with 3.8 million girl and adult members. Now in its 93rd year, Girl Scouting builds girls of courage, confidence and character, who make the world a better place. The organization strives to serve girls from every corner of the United States, as well as Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

The Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI), formed in 2000, is a center for research and public policy information on the healthy development of girls. Its main goal is to elevate the voices of girls on key issues that affect their lives, such as their emotional and physical health and safety. The GSRI originates national projects and initiatives, synthesizes existing research and conducts outcomes evaluation to support the development of Girl Scout programs and to provide information to educational institutions, not-for-profits, government agencies, public policy organizations, parents seeking ways to support their daughters and girls themselves. The GSRI includes staff and advisors who have expertise in child development and also includes advisors from academia, industry, government and not-for-profit organizations.

GSUSA's Public Policy and Advocacy Office, located in Washington, D.C., educates representatives of the legislative and executive branches of federal, state and local government and advocates for public policy issues important to girls and Girl Scouting.

