



Research Study Summary—What Latina Girls Say

Girl Scout Research Institute



With one in five Latina girls in this country overweight, parents and the Hispanic community are facing a childhood obesity epidemic with immediate and long-term risks. 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 all girls to the forefront of the conversation on childhood obesity. The study finds that mothers have a pivotal role in the overall health choices of young Latinas and that efforts based solely on diet and exercise may miss the mark. For all 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.”

The study also finds that while Latina girls tend to have a more positive body image and tend to have a broader concept of beauty than their White and Asian counterparts, many are still not embracing healthy habits in their everyday lives.

Finding #1 Tension Between Health Awareness and Behavior

Although Latina girls believe a healthy lifestyle is important and consider themselves healthy, they are often not putting this knowledge into practice and make poor choices with respect to diet and exercise. Age plays a factor in their activity and eating habits.

- ◆ Of all the girls surveyed, **Latina girls are the least physically active—both at school and at home.** Nearly 60 percent of Latina girls do not participate in school sports and 33 percent cite lack of energy as the primary reason.
- ◆ During down time, **11–17-year-old Latinas, like most girls their age, list sedentary activities as their top leisure activities of choice.** 50 percent of Latina girls cite TV viewing at the top of their list, followed by listening to music (30 percent) and using the computer (26 percent). For young Latina girls ages 8–10, playing outdoors came in third on their list of most preferred activities of choice.



- ◆ **At school, 59 percent of Latina girls rely on vending machines purchases for lunch—more than other girls surveyed.** Vending machines, poor taste and quality of school lunches, optional physical education classes, were all cited as barriers to making healthier choices during the school day.
- ◆ The majority of Latina girls consider themselves to be healthy eaters. However, only 5 percent of Latina girls ages 11–17 and 7 percent of Latina girls ages 8–10 say “how healthy [the food] is” guides their decisions for eating. **Taste is the major factor in decision-making for eating.**
- ◆ At home, the decline in the frequency of family meals and increased television watching and computer use as girls get older make poor health choices easier. **For example, 43 percent of Latina girls eat in front of the TV at least three or four times per week.**

Finding #2 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, especially mothers, have strong positive and negative influence on their daughters’ health habits. 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 view their mothers not only as role models but also as leading sources of nutritional information and emotional reinforcement. **Eighty-nine percent of Latina 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**.

Major Findings

Finding #3 Aspiring to be “Normal Healthy”

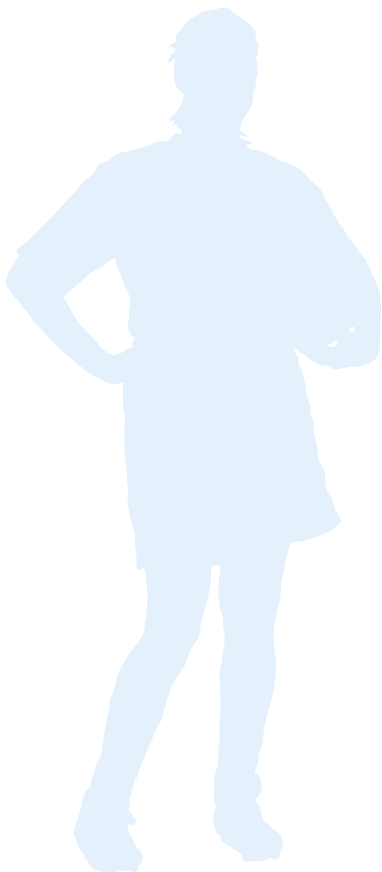
For most girls, being healthy has more to do with appearing “normal” and feeling accepted than maintaining good diet and exercise habits. But while girls want to look normal, what that means can vary depending on a girl’s age, race, household income, peer group, adult role models and self-perception.

- ◆ In general, physical appearance is of greater concern to girls than what they eat or how much they exercise. **63 percent of Latina girls said their lifestyle was “healthy enough for my age.”**
- ◆ When asked about their overall health habits, 37 percent of Latina girls agree that they **“don’t need to be very healthy, just average.”** 72 percent agree that they want to “look great.”

Finding #4 Emotional Health is Central

Emotional health, self-esteem and body image play a critical role in girls’ attitudes about diet and exercise. Most girls 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 86 percent of **Latina girls ages 11–17 believe that feeling good about yourself is more important than how you look.**
- ◆ Latina girls view physical and emotional health as closely connected. For example, **more than a third of Latina girls ages 11–17 reported eating more when they are “stressed out.”** Because girls also tend to be more prone to stress and worry than boys, they are more susceptible to overeating.



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 eight- to 17-year-old girls 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 2060 girls, 400 of which were Latinas, 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 premier 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.

Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI), formed in 2000, is a center for research and public policy information on the healthy development of girls. Through conducting groundbreaking research, the main goal of the GSRI 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.

