

Decoding the Digital Girl

Defining and Supporting Girls' Digital Leadership

For many, leadership in the digital space is synonymous with technological expertise. But a richer definition of digital leadership is far-reaching, incorporating not only what a person *knows* but what they *do* with their knowledge.

The Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI) recently conducted national research with nearly 2,900 girls and boys ages 5–17 and their parents to better understand the digital experiences of girls and their use of technology to lead in their own lives and beyond. What we learned shows that many girls exhibit leadership in the digital space—an impressive number of them to a degree that, by the high standards of Girl Scouts of the USA, qualifies them as digital leaders.¹ Girls are out there navigating, learning, and creating online with enthusiasm and a love of technology, and using tech to teach others and improve their communities and the world. This is crucial, because in a few years the current generation of girls will enter a workforce in great need of tech talent, as well as the confidence and innovator skills that Girl Scouts helps girls develop.

Key Findings

- **More than half of girls (52%) are digital leaders.**

Many girls are showing their digital leader stripes: confidence; enthusiasm and love for learning; the ability to consume information online with a critical lens; and interest and aptitude in creating, innovating, and connecting with social issues and causes digitally—and inspiring others to do the same.

- **Girls are as likely as boys to be digital leaders.**

They're more likely to use technology to create something new through an app or online program (45% vs. 38% for boys), to discover a new talent or interest (68% vs. 59% for boys), and to connect to social issues and causes (60% vs. 51% for boys). However, boys are more likely to be confident in their tech skills (84% vs. 77% for girls).

- **Girls who are digital leaders are more likely than other girls to be interested in STEM fields and future tech careers.**

Girls who are digital leaders (67%) are nearly as interested in STEM fields as boys (70%), and 51 percent of girls who are digital leaders are interested in tech careers (vs. 46% of all girls), compared to 69 percent of boys. This suggests that as more girls become digital leaders, the gender gap in STEM field and tech career interest will continue to decrease.

- **Girls in lower-income households are less likely to be digital leaders and to have interest in STEM fields and tech careers,**

compared to their higher-income peers. Lower-income girls have less access to technology in the home (e.g., laptops, tablets, desktops) and spend less time engaging in educational activities online.

- **Girls who are digital leaders are more likely than other girls to be able to regulate their own screen time, to have parents with a positive outlook on technology, and to have grown up in a tech-supported environment.**

- **Girl Scouts are more likely to be digital leaders than boys and non-Girl Scout girls.**

Girl Scouts stand out in their ability to, in the digital space, find reliable information, use technology to create something new, connect to social issues and causes, and connect others to social issues and causes.



¹ Defined as girls ages 11–17 who responded affirmatively to eight of the ten digital leadership survey items used in the research (see chart on next page).

■ **Girl Scouts are also more likely than non-Girl Scout girls to be interested in STEM fields and tech skills**, including app development, robotics, coding, cybersecurity, and engineering.

To help more girls become digital leaders, parents/care-givers, teachers, and other adults who work with girls can:

■ **Emphasize to girls that they have what it takes to lead in the digital space**, as girls are often given less of this encouragement than boys.

■ **Find out what exactly girls are doing on the internet**. Talk to them about their online activity and help them engage safely and meaningfully. And remember to treat daughters and sons equally when it comes to establishing rules about tech use.

■ **Teach girls to be skeptical about information they find online**—to consider various sources and evaluate their legitimacy—in order to build media literacy.

■ **Encourage girls to, starting at a young age, take healthy risks and learn from setbacks in their online activity**, reminding them that some of the best innovation comes from trying, failing, and trying again (and again!).

■ **Give all girls a range of opportunities to explore STEM topics and potential STEM careers throughout childhood and adolescence**—for one, by integrating tech education across subjects in school and in after-school programming.

Girls’ potential as digital leaders is vast. In the digital space, girls are our world’s current and future innovators, designers, advocates, and community connectors. And with the right access, adult support, and awareness of opportunities in the digital space, all girls can become digital leaders. Out-of-school-time activities—Girl Scouting in particular—that cater to girls’ specific learning and leadership styles may reflect the most promising practices for developing ever more girls who are not just comfortable engaging digitally today, but who are primed to lead us into the digital future.

Study Methodology

The GSRI partnered with FROM and Touchstone Research to conduct qualitative and quantitative research with 2,894 participants across the U.S., including 944 girls and 503 boys ages 5–17, and 1,447 of their parents. These national samples aligned with U.S. Census data for youth ages 5–17 with respect to race/ethnicity, urbanicity, geographical region, and household income. Current Girl Scouts (35% of the girl sample, n=323) and non-Girl Scout girls were matched demographically, holding certain factors constant (household income, race/ethnicity, and age) to make equal comparisons between these groups of girls.

Digital leadership survey item	Girls	Boys
I love to learn or try new technology.	85%	88%
I have helped other people (friends, family) use their phone or computer.	77%	79%
I am confident in my tech skills.	77%	84%
When I have a question, I can usually look it up and find the answer online.	76%	81%
I can find reliable information online for school assignments.	59%	60%
I learn more about news/current events and issues in the world [online]. <i>11- to 17-year-olds only</i>	83%	84%
I have discovered a new talent or interest [by exploring online]. <i>11- to 17-year-olds only</i>	68%	59%
I am more connected to social issues and causes [because of the internet]. <i>11- to 17-year-olds only</i>	60%	51%
I have gotten my friends and/or family connected to social issues and causes [through the internet]. <i>11- to 17-year-olds only</i>	49%	44%
I have created something new through an app or [online] program. <i>11- to 17-year-olds only</i>	45%	38%

Takeaway: 52% of girls and 50% of boys are digital leaders.

Note: Percentages indicate youth who responded “totally agree” or “kind of agree” to the survey items; bold numbers indicate statistical significance.