



More than S'mores: Successes and Surprises in Girl Scouts' Outdoor Experiences

Executive Summary

Girl Scouts has a long history of getting girls outdoors. However, parental protectiveness, increased use of technology devices, and a host of structured activities competing for children's time have led to girls spending less and less time outside. Both parents and policymakers have expressed concern that girls are getting outdoors less. This report from the Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI) explores two basic questions: ***Are Girl Scouts still getting outside? And what difference does it make if they do?***

Based on a 2012 national study of nearly 3,000 fourth-through eighth-grade Girl Scouts, the report reveals findings that are cause for both celebration and reflection, and it describes implications for both Girl Scout and non-Girl Scout audiences. Among the chief findings of the report are:

1. **Girl Scouts helps girls get outdoors.** Ninety-seven percent of girls who completed the survey said that they had done at least one outdoor activity in Girl Scouts during the last year. Nearly 40 percent had participated in an outdoor activity at least once a month in Girl Scouts. The activities girls did most frequently were playing outdoors, walking outdoors, field trips to outdoor places, camping, and volunteering for causes related to the environment. Through these outdoor experiences in Girl Scouts, 72 percent of girls said they had improved at a skill and about one-third (29 percent) said they had overcome a fear of the outdoors. Fully half of the girls indicated that they could not have done a particular outdoor activity (such as archery, horseback riding, or canoeing/kayaking) were it not for Girl Scouts.

Despite the benefits of frequent outdoor exposure, however, about 60 percent of girls are not getting such regular contact with the outdoors in Girl Scouts. This finding is examined in more depth in the report, and it forms the basis of many of the report's recommendations.

2. **Girls really enjoy outdoor activities in Girl Scouts.** A majority of girls indicated they enjoyed almost all the outdoor activities they did in Girl Scouts, with the greatest degree of enjoyment reported by Hispanic girls and girls with less outdoor exposure in Girl Scouts. Girls' enjoyment revolves primarily around hard fun (with its opportunities for challenge, mastery, and accomplishment) and people fun (with its opportunities to build and strengthen social bonds and to hang out with friends).
3. **Monthly exposure, high adventure, and repeat camp attendance are key drivers of girls' leadership and satisfaction.** Monthly involvement in the outdoors contributes substantially to girls' leadership development and to their satisfaction with Girl Scouts. Experiences such as playing and walking outdoors and taking outdoor field trips do not demand much specialized equipment or training, but they may provide girls with a socially supportive context in which to improve their health, practice cooperation and teamwork, and try things they thought they couldn't do.



- 4. Different groups of girls report different outdoor experiences and outcomes.** Findings from this study revealed striking variances in outdoor experiences and outcomes among different groups of girls. Most pronounced were those based on girls' socioeconomic status (SES) and self-esteem. Girls of lower SES—that is, those who have moms with less than a college education—experienced less outdoor exposure in Girl Scouts than their higher-SES peers, and they reported having fewer camp-related outdoor experiences. These girls were also significantly less likely than girls of higher SES to report that they had improved their skills or enhanced their enjoyment of outdoor activities because of Girl Scouts. Despite such outdoor deficits, these girls reported significantly greater benefits from Girl Scouts. In contrast, girls with low self-esteem experienced levels of outdoor exposure in Girl Scouts on par with peers who had higher self-esteem. However, they benefitted far less from these experiences than their Girl Scouts peers. Both findings are explored further in the report.
- 5. Girl Scouts helps girls connect with and care for the environment.** Compared to a national sample of girls, Girl Scouts reported much higher levels of environmental stewardship. They were, for instance, twice as likely to say that they take actions to protect the environment. Much of this difference seems related to the Girl Scout organization's dedication to environmental service, which may provide girls with a sense of purpose and socialize them into an environmentalist mindset—one that promotes connection with, concern for, and conservation of the environment.
- 6. Camping experiences create memories and build leadership.** Girls said that camping was their number-one most memorable outdoor experience in Girl Scouts. The ultimate effects of such memories are not known, but they are important, as we do know that memories are key components of both learning and consumer choice. In addition to the memorability of camping experiences, repeat attendance at Girl Scout resident camp supports girls' leadership development.