

EDUCATION, TRAINING, SKILLS AND CAREERS

Introduction

Girlguiding UK is the largest organisation for girls and young women in the United Kingdom. Around half a million girls and young women take part in our dynamic, informal learning programmes and benefit from time spent in a safe, girl-only space. For 100 years the organisation has adapted and moved with the times to remain relevant to each new generation of girls. Now, at the start of our Centenary year we have completed our largest piece of research to date. For the first time, we have broadened our scope beyond surveying our members and have instead undertaken a comprehensive study of the attitudes of girls and young women across the UK to the world around them. In doing this, we are not only providing a platform for girls' voices to be heard, but also ensuring that as a youth organisation we continue to remain relevant to the needs of girls today. Find out more about guiding today at www.girlguiding.org.uk.

All the results from the *Girls' Attitudes Survey* can be found on a new interactive website, where you can search the results by theme, region and age group, access spreadsheets of individual datasets, as well as read in detail about the research methodology and download pdf versions of these reports. www.girlguiding.org.uk/girlsattitudes.



Research findings

How do girls feel about school?

Girls aged 7-11 and 11-16 years were generally positive when asked about their feelings towards school, with around 70 per cent describing school as 'important for my future'. Around a third of girls across these two age groups described school as 'challenging' and their favourite subjects were broadly the same, with Art and PE being the most popular, and foreign languages, maths and science the least.

However, here the similarities end. The very youngest girls surveyed were much more likely to describe school as 'fun' (55 per cent of 7- to 11-year-olds) and 'cool' (24 per cent), whereas almost half of girls aged 11-16 find school 'stressful', a figure which rises to two thirds of girls from non-white ethnic backgrounds. Only one in five of these older girls referred to school as 'fun' and around a third also described it as 'boring'. Finally, whereas only 4 per cent of 7- to 11-year-olds described school as 'pointless', this doubles to 8 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds.

What worries girls about school?

Across the 7-16 age range, around 90 per cent of girls could identify an issue that worried them about school. The youngest (7- to 11-year-olds) worry most about relationships with their peers, with 49 per cent concerned about being bullied and 47 per cent worried about falling out with friends. Aside from friendship, the next most significant cause of anxiety is sitting exams (41 per cent), followed by going to secondary school (36 per cent), being given more homework (30 per cent) and teachers who are unfair (24 per cent). A small minority of this age group worry about their journey to and from school (6 per cent).

Sitting exams is the top concern for girls aged 11-16¹. The results across the age groups show clearly how worrying about exams comes to dominate girls' concerns about school: 29 per cent of 7- to 9-year-olds, 54 per cent of 10- to 11-year-olds and 68 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds cite exams as being their top school worry. This is particularly acute in Scotland, where 90 per cent of girls aged 11-16 cite exams as their top concern. Aside from exams, girls in this older age group worry about getting a job when they leave full-time education (44 per cent) and unfair teachers (42 per cent). Peer relationships, while not so much of a concern as for younger girls, remain a worry, with 'falling out with friends' and 'being bullied' causing anxiety for around two in five girls of this age. Broadly speaking across the 7-16 age group, younger girls tend to be more worried about falling out with their friends, whereas older girls are more concerned about future job prospects. A similar number of these older girls (6 per cent) in this age group are concerned about their journey to and from school.

Qualifications

Despite, or more probably linked to, concerns about sitting exams, around three quarters of girls aged 11-16 years hope to achieve AS/A-levels and the same proportion want to get a university/college degree (73 per cent each). A third of girls hope to achieve a vocational qualification such as a BTEC/NVQ, or a diploma (a new diploma for 14- to 19-year-olds is currently being introduced). Overall, girls' aspirations tend to become more focused as they get older and their options become narrower. 83 per cent of 16- to 21-year-olds hope to, or have already, achieved GCSEs, and around two thirds hope to, or already have, A-levels. Like 11- to 16-year-olds, 72 per cent of this age group would like to have an undergraduate degree. Fewer of these older girls have, or still plan to get, a vocational qualification, compared to their younger counterparts.

Only a minority of girls aged 16-21 who have left full-time education have gained A-levels or a degree, or plan to do so, but around one in three hold vocational qualifications. The majority of girls who are still in education aspire to achieve A-levels/degree-level qualifications. There is a strong socio-demographic element at play here, as those 16- to 21-year-olds who expressed an ambition to achieve A-levels and university degrees were far more likely to be from socio-economic group ABC1, whereas those whose ambitions focused on the vocational route (NVQ/BTEC/National Diploma) were most likely to be from the C2DE group.

Career aspirations

No one career came out as a firm favourite across the full age range. However, the results do suggest that, despite the influence of the feminist movement over the last forty years, and with girls surging ahead of boys educationally, gender-stereotyped careers remain popular choices for girls. Hairdressing/beauty therapy is the most popular choice for girls up to the age of 16, with 17 per cent of 7- to 11-year-olds and 14 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds choosing this as their top career. By the age of 16-21 only 2 per cent choose this option. For the youngest girls (7-11 years) two very different options take second and third places: being a vet (13 per cent) or an artist/fashion designer (12 per cent). One in ten 7- to 11-year-olds chose acting as their preferred career, and teaching is the choice of just 7 per cent of girls of this age.

Exams are the top concern for 68 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds.



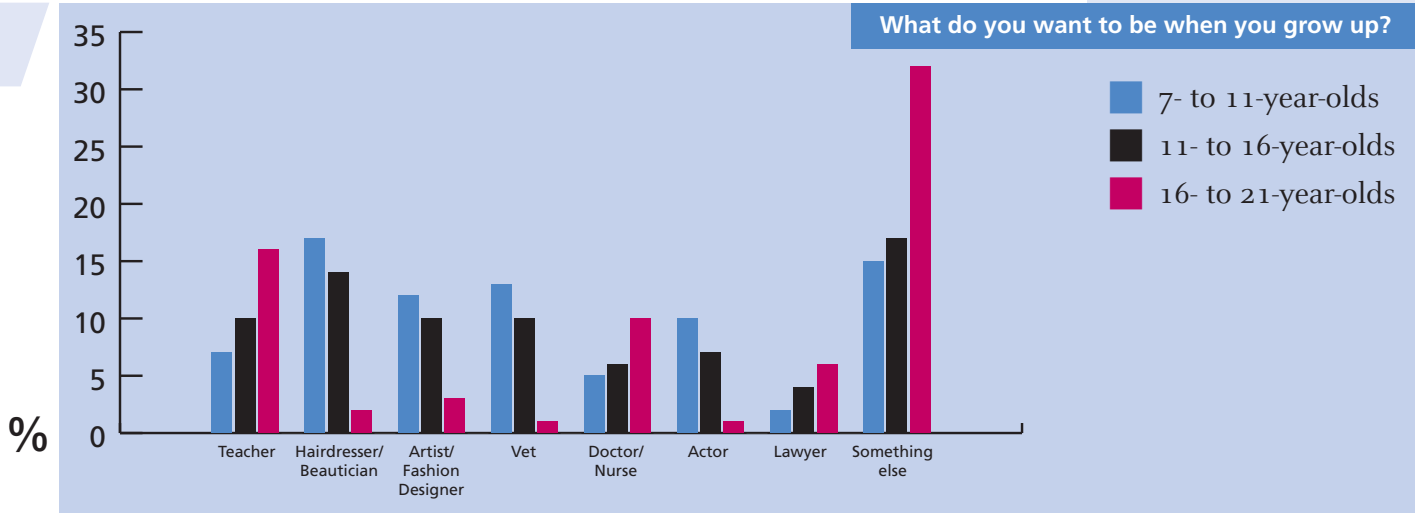
73 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds hope to get A-levels and a university degree.

Girls' Attitudes

Careers as vets or artist/fashion designers retain their appeal for 11- to 16-year-olds but being a teacher now becomes equally popular, with one in ten girls choosing each of these options. Around one in twenty would like to join the medical profession, but this rises significantly to 15 per cent of girls from an ethnic minority – making medicine their most popular career option.

Among 16- to 21-year-olds teaching is the most popular profession overall. One in six girls aged 16-21 aspires to be a teacher, including 44 per cent of those who attended a school for their work experience. Careers in medicine also gained in popularity, with one in ten saying they would like to be a doctor or nurse. No other choices were mentioned by more than 6 per cent of girls of this age, showing a diverse and eclectic mix of aspirations among the young women surveyed. For those who are currently unemployed, childcare (16 per cent) and hairdressing/beauty (12 per cent) were the top career choices. Girls from working-class backgrounds were consistently less likely to see themselves undertaking a professional career, and more likely to choose to become a childminder, hairdresser/beautician or artist/fashion designer, although the differences compared to their middle-class counterparts were not significant. This indicates that for these girls, the reality of their future careers is more determined by traditional assumptions based on personal circumstance, rather than by active choice on their part to pursue these more stereotypical careers, supporting research published in June 2009 by the Equality and Human Rights Commission².

Finally, girls from ethnic minorities were more likely to mention one of the professions as their top choice (eg accountant, doctor, lawyer).



Educational policy and external concerns

We asked girls across the two older groups what they felt about certain aspects of educational policy, starting with the school-leaving age. Over half of all girls aged 11-21 felt the current school-leaving age of 16 was the right one. Among the younger girls (11-16 years) one in eight felt that the school-leaving age could be even younger, but generally across the entire group most girls felt that, if it was not left at 16, the leaving age should be raised to 17 or 18 (which is consistent with current Government plans). Among the older girls (16-21 years) 57 per cent of girls from non-white ethnic backgrounds favoured raising the school-leaving age to 18 or above, whereas only 32 per cent of their white counterparts agreed with this, the majority (55 per cent) feeling that it should remain at 16.

With regard to financing their education, more than one in three girls (37 per cent) aged 11-16 claimed the credit crunch had not affected their views on staying on in full-time education. 33 per cent said they were in fact more likely to continue in education

33 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds say they are **more likely to stay in education because of the credit crunch.**

Girls' Attitudes

as a result, with only 5 per cent claiming they were less likely to do so. The oldest girls share these attitudes, with half claiming that the credit crunch hasn't affected their plans for the future, and a third saying that they are more likely to continue in education. Just one in ten girls aged 16-21 said they were less likely to remain in education as a result of the current economic situation. A shortage of job opportunities, especially for those with limited qualifications, is almost certainly the major influence here.

Work experience

Our final area of questioning on this topic focused on work experience. We asked the oldest girls (16-21 years) about the work experience they undertook when they were aged 14- to 15-years-old. 91 per cent of girls could recall having a placement, with around a quarter (24 per cent) visiting a school, and a further 11 per cent visiting a playgroup or nursery. Other work-experience placements included retail (10 per cent), solicitors' firms, accountants and banks (8 per cent) and medical establishments (7 per cent). 25 per cent of girls gave a long string of different responses, which varied widely from offices to museums and nursing homes to local authority offices.

Over half of those who undertook a work-experience placement received help from their school (44 per cent) or their parents (24 per cent). Overall, their opinion of the experience was positive, with three quarters describing work experience as 'useful', including a third who described it as 'very useful'. Interestingly, over half of girls who are currently unemployed described the experience as 'very useful'.

When asked to provide advice for other young people considering work experience, many girls were keen to stress the importance of choosing placements in good time, finding something that was enjoyable and related to future career aspirations. They also highlighted the importance of choosing a placement where it is possible to get hands-on experience.

Conclusions

Our findings show that the vast majority of girls aspire to achieve educational qualifications and acknowledge the value of education and the role it plays in assisting them to achieve their ambitions. However, there is still work to do in order to ensure that the experience of formal education does not become unnecessarily stressful for some, and that girls from all backgrounds are encouraged to break away from traditional gender- and class-based career paths.

The move from primary to secondary education is both a formidable transition period and a formative experience for girls. Understandable worries about making friends, new journeys to school, different teachers and increased homework expectations go hand-in-hand with an anxiety about examinations and testing that remain with girls and young women throughout their time in the education system. This pressure appears to be most acute amongst girls from non-white ethnic backgrounds, who are more likely to find school stressful and feel pressure to excel academically in order to pursue careers in more traditional professions.

There is a stark contrast in the breadth of ambition between girls who remain in education post-16 and those who leave after GCSEs, as well as between girls from working-class backgrounds and their middle-class contemporaries. Girls leaving full-time formal education at 16 are unlikely to aspire to join a profession or achieve higher-level academic qualifications. This is reflected in their preferred choice of employment, with careers such as hairdressing, beauty therapy and childcare scoring highly, and in their desire to achieve vocational qualifications over academic ones. However, this focus on stereotypical 'careers for the girls' is also present to some degree amongst those staying in education – teaching is both the most common work-experience placement and the preferred choice of profession for girls over 16.

'Think about going to a company where you can be involved and not just make the tea and coffee.'

(21-year-old)



Girls' Attitudes

For a generation accustomed to the idea of leaving higher education with personal debt – the oldest girls in our survey were still in primary school when higher education tuition fees were introduced – the current economic climate does not appear to be discouraging them from continuing on to higher education, with a significant minority in fact saying they are more likely to stay on. Similarly, policy issues such as the school-leaving age elicit a pragmatic, if not very passionate, response, with most feeling that the current leaving age is appropriate. Education seems to be an issue that affects girls much more on a personal level, and they focus their attention accordingly on exams, workload and future prospects, rather than on wider issues of educational policy.

The way forward

A panel of young women aged between 15 and 24 from within the guiding movement came together to review the findings of the survey and to make their recommendations to both Girlguiding UK and other interested audiences.

What girls said...

- The education system currently offers a good level of choice both through the school curriculum and in terms of the variety of qualifications available. In the panel's experience, the problems lie first of all in accessing those opportunities, and then in the level of support given to girls in pursuit of their goals.
- More could be done to make school fun by introducing a broader range of extra-curricular activities beyond sports and drama.
- To prevent school from seeming pointless, lessons could be made more practical and related to real life. More relevant teaching in subjects like as Maths could also help girls to understand why they need to study these subjects.
- Schools and other providers need to do much more to ensure quality of provision in careers advice. Too often advice is tailored towards the gender of the pupil rather than to their interests, so much so that many girls are unaware of the wide range of career options open to them. The panel suggested inviting speakers into schools from as wide a range of professional careers as possible to ensure that girls are aware of the extent of choice available.
- Schools could also do more to inform girls of the full range of GCSE subjects available and make sure this information is available at the point when girls are selecting their secondary school.
- Our value-laden perceptions of vocational courses such as diplomas, as opposed to A-levels and university degrees, are hampering girls' ambitions. Schools and employers should do more to challenge the stereotype that vocational courses are an easy option for less academic students and encourage more young women to take up them up.

Methodology

Girls' Attitudes is a survey of girls from across the United Kingdom aged 7-21 years exploring their attitudes towards key social, political and economic issues.

The survey consisted of five categories, which girls within the guiding movement had previously identified as the most interesting areas to question their peers on:

- education, training, skills and careers
- the environment
- family and relationships
- health and wellbeing
- society, culture and community.

The cohort was divided into three age groups: 7-11, 11-16 and 16-21 years, with an age-appropriate questionnaire devised for each. Certain common questions were also asked of all groups.

One in six 16- to 21-year-olds hopes to be a teacher.



Girls' Attitudes

The girls surveyed form a representative sample of girls and young women across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and were not chosen specifically from within the membership of Girlguiding UK. Booster interviews and data weighting have been employed where necessary to adjust imbalances during fieldwork.

Fieldwork took place between 11 May and 15 July 2009 through 1,109 questionnaires predominantly completed online by the girls.

TOP JOB, TOP TIME

Guiding is definitely nothing like school, but there is no doubt that being a member of guiding, even for the youngest girls, can make a difference in other areas of their lives, including education. We provide opportunities, develop skills and interests, offer support and give girls the confidence to reach their full potential in whatever they choose to do.

Guides (girls aged 10-14) can work towards an award called *Go For It! Top Job*. To achieve their award, they get to think about their skills, talents and interests and then step into the shoes of a range of different professionals, designing logos, learning the skills to build a website, and putting their journalistic skills to the test.

And as girls get older, the opportunities and experiences guiding offers – from leadership opportunities at home to volunteering in developing countries – can make all the difference to both university applications and job prospects.



Endnotes

1 Many of the girls surveyed will have been preparing for/sitting exams during the period this research took place.

2 Benetto, J (2009). 'Staying On'. Equality and Human Rights Commission.

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