

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

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 our reports. www.girlguiding.org.uk/girlsattitudes.

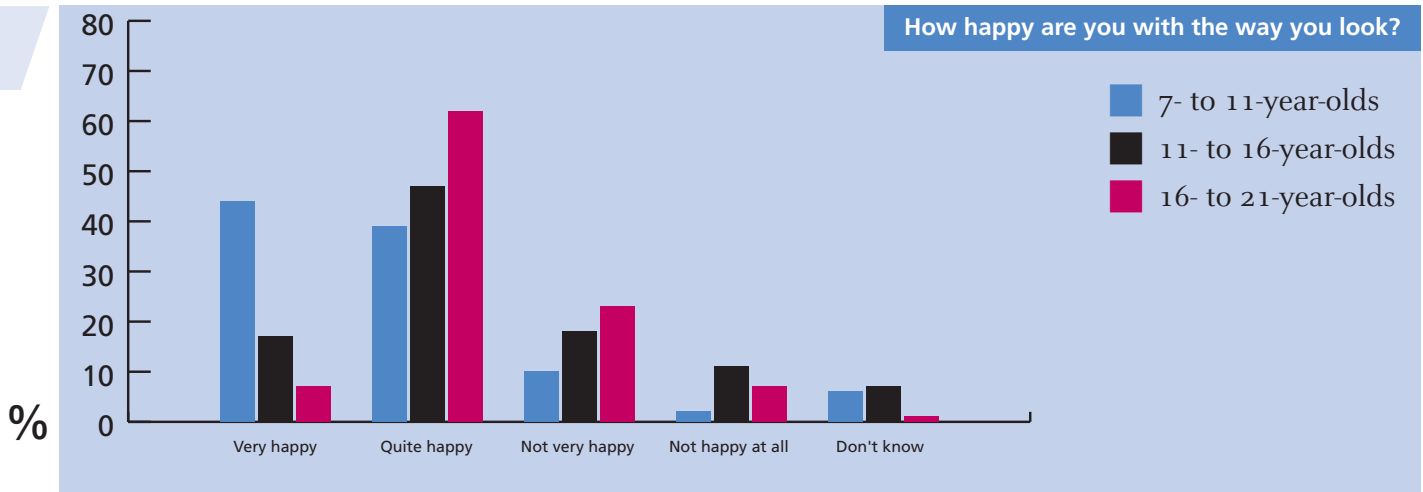


Research findings

Appearance and body image

Among the youngest girls, the majority were happy with the way they looked (82 per cent of 7- to 11-year-olds). Older girls were significantly less happy with their appearance – 64 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds and 69 per cent of 16- to 21-year-olds. In fact, 60 per cent of the youngest girls surveyed, those aged between 7-9 years, said they were 'very happy' with their appearance, dropping sharply to just 27 per cent of 10- to 11-year-olds, suggesting that from the age of ten upwards girls start to judge their appearance more harshly. More than one in ten 11- to 16-year-olds said they were 'not at all happy' with their appearance (compared to only 2 per cent of girls aged 7-11 and 7 per cent of those aged 16-21), indicating that self-esteem – high in the primary school years and starting to rise again in the later teens – appears to drop significantly during the early teenage years.

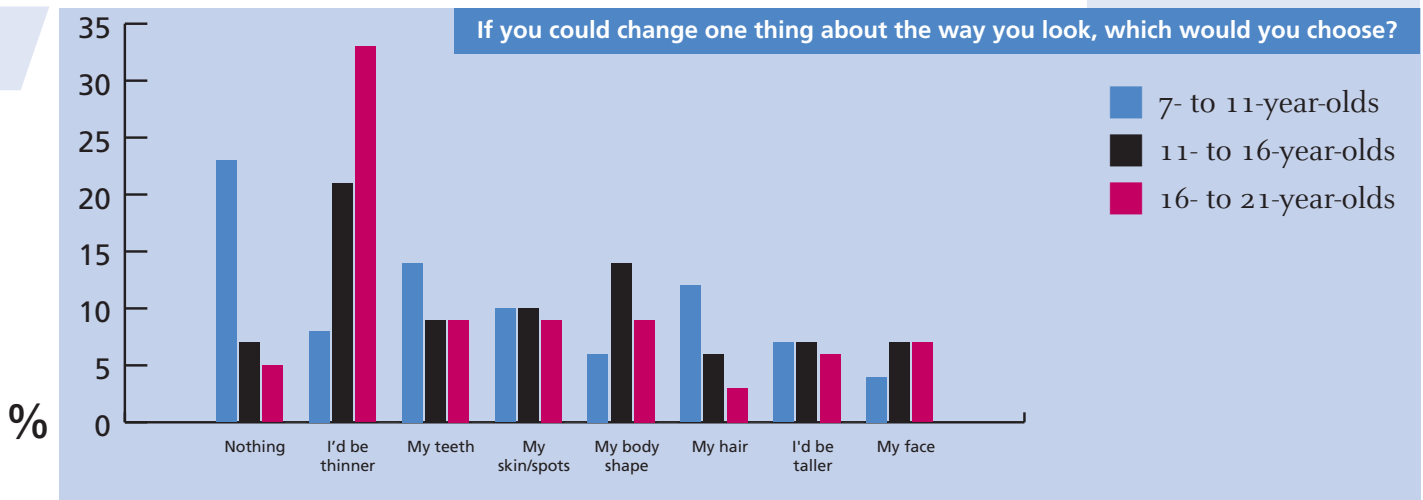
Girls' Attitudes



A significant number of girls across the entire age range could identify at least one thing they would like to change about their appearance. 72 per cent of 7- to 11-year-olds would like to change some aspect: 14 per cent would like to alter their teeth in some way, 12 per cent their hair and 10 per cent their skin/spots. However, it is clear that even by the age of 10-11 years, something has changed: 79 per cent would like to change some aspect of their appearance, with 12 per cent of girls wishing to make themselves thinner (compared to only 5 per cent of 7- to 9-year-olds). Being thinner is the most popular choice for the 11- to 16-year-olds (21 per cent) and 16- to 21-year-olds (33 per cent) and is far more of a concern than skin/spots (10 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds; 9 per cent of 16- to 21-year-olds) or body shape (14 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds; 9 per cent of 16- to 21-year-olds).

41 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds categorically said they would not consider surgery to alter the way they looked, and a further 13 per cent were unsure. However, those attending a school whose performance was rated outstanding or good were twice as likely to say no compared to those at schools rated satisfactory or poor (43 per cent compared to 19 per cent). Of those who would undergo some form of procedure, the most popular was a dental brace (cited by 21 per cent). A further 12 per cent would consider more invasive procedures, such as gastric band or cosmetic surgery, and 5 per cent would consider having Botox.

43 per cent of girls attending a school whose performance is good or outstanding said 'no' to surgery compared to 19 per cent of girls at schools rated satisfactory or poor.



Among 16- to 21-year-olds the picture changes - one in two (50 per cent) would consider surgery to change their appearance. Of the options presented, the most popular was cosmetic surgery, with a quarter of girls now prepared to consider it. This figure was highest in Scotland, where 39 per cent of girls are keen, compared to just 11 per cent in Northern Ireland and 24 per cent overall. Older girls are also more likely to consider laser eye surgery (17 per cent). A similar number would consider a dental brace, and one in ten would consider weight loss surgery.

Health-related behaviours

When asked to consider their own experiences of health and wellbeing issues, one in two girls aged 11-16 (50 per cent) claimed to have been really stressed at some point in their lives, rising to 54 per cent of girls from non-white ethnic backgrounds. When asked about the potentially harmful activities they had engaged in, 42 per cent had watched what they ate or cut down on certain foods to excess, 22 per cent had drunk so much alcohol that they had thrown up or lost control, and 20 per cent had smoked cigarettes. Overall, 84 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds had experience of at least one of these issues. Interestingly, girls in Wales were the least likely to have engaged in any of these activities and girls in Northern Ireland were the most likely to have done so.

By the time they reached the 16-21 age group, 94 per cent had experienced at least one of the health-related issues presented to them. Most predominant was stress, with 75 per cent of girls of this age claiming to have been really stressed at some point. 66 per cent have watched what they ate or cut down on certain foods and 58 per cent have drunk so much alcohol that they have thrown up or lost control. Overall, 40 per cent have smoked cigarettes, rising to 64 per cent of those girls who are unemployed. Over a third of girls in the oldest age group (16-21 years) admitted that they have had unprotected sex, with the number rising to around half of girls who have left education and are working (47 per cent) or unemployed (56 per cent).

Peer pressure and external influences

One in three girls aged 11-16 years claimed to feel pressure from their friends and other people to do things they wouldn't normally do (31 per cent), and 7 per cent claimed that they often feel this way. Girls in Wales were most likely to say they often feel pressure (18 per cent) and girls in Scotland most likely to claim never to do so (56 per cent). Across the 11-21 age group, just two in five girls (40 per cent) feel that there is enough support and advice on these topics for girls their age.

The big issues

The final question to the 16- to 21-year-olds focused on their views about the most pressing issues affecting girls their age. More than one in five (22 per cent) felt that binge drinking was the most serious health issue facing their peers. Anorexia and eating disorders, teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections were all cited by around one in six. Mental health/depression were identified as serious issues by only 7 per cent. Even fewer – only 4 per cent overall – cited drug abuse as a serious health issue. However, this figure rose significantly to 11 per cent of girls who had already left education and are working or unemployed.



Only two in five girls think there is enough advice available on health and wellbeing issues.

Conclusions

Our findings show that when girls reach the age of ten, they start to develop insecurities about body image that continue to affect their health and wellbeing for at least the next ten years of their lives. However, deep unhappiness about self-image does appear to peak among 11- to 16-year-olds, and then begins to decline again as girls move upwards through the 16-21 age group. This highlights the need for targeted intervention during the latter stages of primary education and early in the secondary school experience to ensure that girls are equipped with the skills they need to face puberty and develop positive body confidence.

A significant number of all the girls surveyed could name at least one thing they would like to change about the way they look. The youngest girls are preoccupied with aspects of their appearance that are commonly experienced at this life stage – dental braces, spots, hair etc. However, at the age of ten or eleven, a preoccupation with being thin sets in and dominates the next decade of their lives. Few girls up to the age of 16 consider using surgical methods to change their appearance, but once that becomes a genuine option at the age of 18, cosmetic surgery far outstrips all others as their procedure of choice.

Girls aged 16-21 demonstrate a high level of self-awareness when it comes to risky behaviours. They identify alcohol, eating disorders and irresponsible sexual behaviour as the biggest issues affecting girls of their age, often basing their opinions on experience, as a significant number of 11- to 21-year-olds had engaged in each of these. Smoking, while common among their age group, is not seen as one of the big issues. Considering that in 2004 some 26 per cent of 15-year-old girls were regular smokers (compared to only 16 per cent of boys of the same age), and that teenage alcohol consumption, which has stabilised among young men aged 11-15, continues to rise amongst young women², there is an urgent need to identify and tackle the causes of these behaviours. Peer pressure, while clearly an issue for some, appears to be less of a factor in influencing behaviour than we might imagine, whereas a lack of support for girls and young women when it comes to health and wellbeing issues is identified as a serious issue by the majority of girls.

Interestingly, while stress is cited as the most common health issue experienced by 16- to 21-year-olds, mental health/depression is not identified as a big problem. Media coverage of sex, eating disorders and alcohol could have influenced respondents' choices, or it is possible that the highly personal nature of mental health issues means that girls are unaware that they are not alone in feeling this way.

Finally, it is clear that the experiences of those girls outside education can be substantively different to those of girls who remain within the education system. For the former, drugs and other risky behaviours form a greater part of their general life experience, and targeted support for this group is essential to ensure that they receive the same advice and support as those remaining in education.



Three in five girls aged 11-16 say that they have been really stressed at some point in their lives.



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...

Based both on their own experiences and the findings of the survey, girls had strong feelings on this subject. These are some of their key points.

- Building up self-esteem from a young age is vital for developing a healthy approach to life. Youth organisations can play an important role by providing a safe space for girls to gain personal achievements, which in turn build up self-esteem, and schools should start focusing on self-esteem at a younger age, eg by introducing high-quality PSHE provision earlier.
- The pressures of modern society inevitably lead girls to pin their sense of self-worth on their appearance unless they are given other reasons to feel good about themselves. All those working with young women should be encouraged to provide opportunities for girls to achieve personally through any activity they enjoy doing.
- The continued focus on peer pressure as the root cause of unhealthy behaviour is actually narrowing the breadth of support available on health issues. Those people working with young people should address issues of access, which prevent young women, particular those no longer in formal education and those living in rural areas, from getting impartial advice and support.
- While the content of magazines etc has improved significantly on issues surrounding body image and self-esteem, the panel felt that free gifts of make-up items and advertising from cosmetic surgery clinics often undermine these positive messages.

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.

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.



11 per cent of 16-to-21-year-olds who have left education think drug use is a serious health issue, compared to only 4 per cent overall.

GUIDING PROMOTES HEALTHY LIVING

Girlguiding UK is committed to enabling girls and young women to develop the confidence and resilience they need to succeed in the modern world. Our supportive, girl-only space is the ideal place for girls to explore some of the issues and emotions they face – and the goal of emotional health and wellbeing informs our programme of activities for all age groups.

Just one example is our new activity resource for older girls, *Me in Mind*, dedicated to fostering good emotional health. The activities encourage girls to take a step back, think about how they live, and take simple steps to live healthy, balanced lives – and all, of course, whilst having a lot of fun with their friends.



Endnotes

1 Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among Young People in England in 2004 (National Centre of Social Research/National Foundation for Education Research for Department of Health).

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