

SOCIETY, CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

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

Happiness

Despite recent high-profile reports positioning children in the UK as among the unhappiest in the industrialised world¹, the majority of girls classify themselves as 'happy'. 93 per cent of 7- to 11-year-olds say they are happy, but the figure falls to 85 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds and 86 per cent of 16- to 21-year-olds. The very youngest girls (7-9 years) were most likely to consider themselves 'very happy' (66 per cent), compared with 48 per cent of 10- to 11-year-olds, 38 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds and 29 per cent of 16- to 21-year-olds.

When asked to identify what was important to them, girls' values varied little across the age ranges. Having good friends and family relationships, as well as being kind to others, consistently featured as top priorities. As might be expected, achieving success at school featured most highly among girls aged 7-16, with around a third of girls this age placing the most importance on this.

Identity and ethnicity

When asked to describe themselves, girls aged 7-11 were most likely to refer to themselves as either 'English' (38 per cent) or 'British' (37 per cent). 'British' was the single top choice for the two oldest groups (49 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds and 68 per cent of 16- to 21-year-olds).

The majority of girls across the age range in Scotland described themselves as 'Scottish' (75 per cent overall, peaking among those aged 11-16). Of girls living in Wales, 34 per cent overall consider themselves 'Welsh', but this proportion falls as they get older, and they increasingly consider themselves to be 'British'. Girls living in Northern Ireland, by contrast, were more likely to describe themselves as 'British' than any other category, as were girls from an ethnic background other than white. These findings are broadly in line with the adult population, where non-white groups are more likely to describe themselves as 'British', while white groups are relatively more likely to identify themselves as English, Scottish or Welsh².

When asked for their views on the monarchy, 39 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds value it, but almost as many (31 per cent) felt that the Royal Family has little significance in Britain. The strongest negative feelings came from Scotland, where 23 per cent of girls felt that the monarchy should be abolished, compared to only 6 per cent overall.

Over two thirds of girls across the age range claimed they were proud to be British (69 per cent of 7- to 21-year-olds). However, in Scotland, 63 per cent of 7- to 11-year-olds answered 'don't know' to this question and 28 per cent of those aged 11 and over actively disagreed, compared to just 14 per cent of the group as a whole.

Religion

Overall, 33 per cent of girls said they believe in a God, while a further 14 per cent do so some of the time. The youngest girls are the most likely to believe in a God, with 50 per cent claiming to do so, compared to 27 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds and 25 per cent of 16- to 21-year-olds. Belief in a God is strongest among 7- to 11-year-olds from ethnic minorities (87 per cent) and those living in Northern Ireland (86 per cent).

As girls get older, belief in a God becomes less common, with 39 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds and 34 per cent of 16- to 21-year-olds claiming not to believe in a God – including 10 per cent who used to and no longer do so. However, when we asked girls in these two oldest groups about their attitudes to spirituality more generally, 9 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds and 19 per cent of 16- to 21-year-olds claimed to believe in some form of higher power, suggesting that while a belief in a specific God decreases, girls become more open to a wider range of beliefs as they grow older. Overall across the whole 11-21 age group, over a third of girls claim to believe in a God at least some of the time (37 per cent), with this figure again highest among girls of this age living in Northern Ireland and those from ethnic minorities.

Friends and free-time

At odds with the popular perception of today's 'cotton-wool kids', 83 per cent of the 7- to 11-year-olds said they are allowed to go out on their own or with friends to at least one of the four locations they were presented with. 59 per cent are allowed to play in the street/local area on their own and over half go to their local shops (55 per cent) or parks (53 per cent). Just under half travel to school on their own or with their friends (49 per cent), and this figure rises to 66 per cent among those aged 10-11 years.

The majority of 7- to 11-year-olds take part in activities outside of school (87 per cent), with after-school clubs (40 per cent) and dance lessons (33 per cent) the most popular, followed by swimming lessons and Rainbows, Brownies or Guides, both enjoyed by around a quarter. Interestingly, girls who are involved in guiding are significantly more likely to take part in other activities too.



'I am very proud of our country, but I sometimes disagree with all the political views and the wars that are going on.'
(14-year-old)

50 per cent of 7- to 11-year-old girls say they believe in a God.



Girls' Attitudes

For 11- to 16-year-olds dance lessons and gym/fitness are the most popular activities, attended by around one in five. Other popular activities include after-school clubs (16 per cent), youth clubs and horse riding (13 per cent each) and playing sport for a local team (12 per cent). Around one in twenty girls (6 per cent) are involved in guiding. A total of 74 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds take part in at least one out-of-school activity. When asked, most 11- to 16-year-olds prefer to meet their friends at each other's houses (69 per cent), followed by the local park (37 per cent) or shopping centre (35 per cent). Only one in ten say they meet their friends at a youth club and a minority mention 'in town'.

More than four in five girls of this age (83 per cent) have friends from different backgrounds, with 44 per cent overall and 73 per cent of girls from ethnic minorities saying these friends are close. Of those girls with friends from different backgrounds, half have either visited their friend's house, or invited them around to theirs within the last month. In the oldest group (16-21 years) over 90 per cent of girls have friends from different backgrounds, and 50 per cent of these are regarded as close friends.

Future aspirations

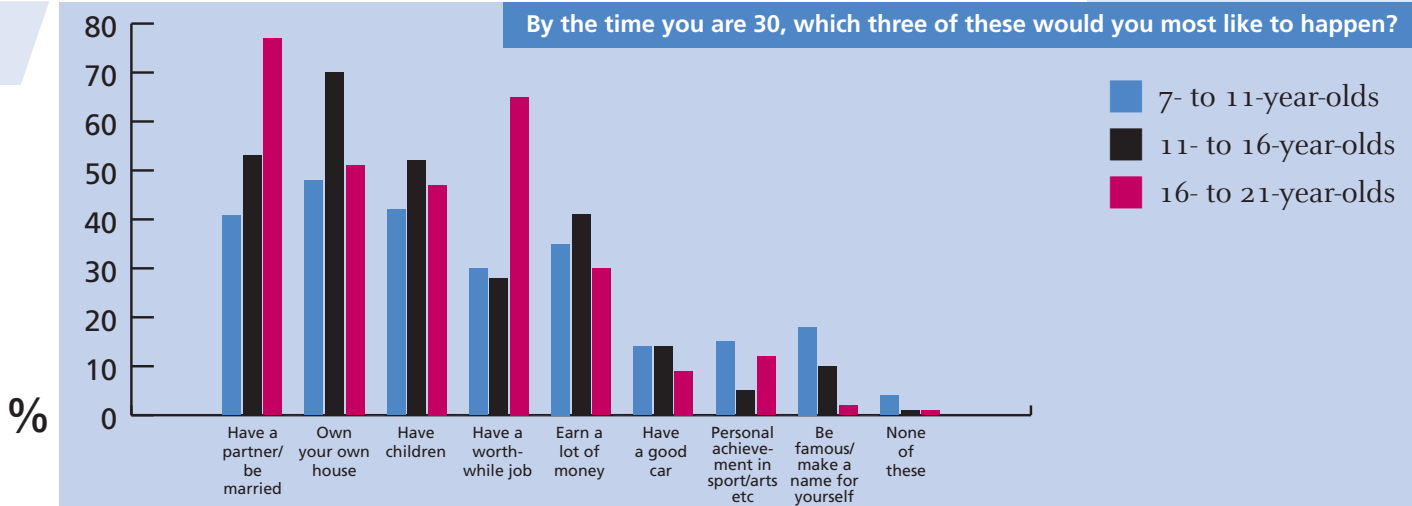
When asked what they would most like to happen by the time they are 30, the choices made by the youngest girls (7-11 years) were the most diverse. They are most keen to own their own home by this age (48 per cent), followed by having children (42 per cent) and then having a partner/being married (41 per cent – but this rises significantly to 52 per cent among 10- to 11-year-olds). Around a third would like to earn a lot of money (35 per cent) or have a worthwhile job (30 per cent), and a significant minority (19 per cent) would like to be famous.

The 11- to 16-year-olds are much clearer in their determination to own their own home, with 70 per cent citing this as their top priority. Around half would like to have settled down with their partner or have had children, four in ten are keen to be earning plenty of money, and only 28 per cent of girls in this age group refer to having a worthwhile job.

By the time they reach the 16-21 age group, girls' aspirations have changed significantly. Having a partner/being married now becomes the most popular priority, with 77 per cent citing this as their key aspiration. Two in three are keen to have a worthwhile job (65 per cent), while earning lots of money is now the priority for only a third of girls (30 per cent). Around half would like to own their own home or have children. Girls who are unemployed are more likely to place importance on owning a nice car (24 per cent compared to a mere 9 per cent of the overall age group).



77 per cent of 16- to 21-year-olds say having a partner is most important.



Role models

A third of all girls across the younger age groups (7-16 years) chose Cheryl Cole as the best role model for girls of their age, making her by far the most popular choice. Among 7- to 11-year-olds, no other candidate was named by more than one in ten girls overall. However, their second choice, with 8 per cent of the vote, was the Olympic swimmer Rebecca Adlington, and JK Rowling and Katie Price/Jordan also scored relatively highly with 7 per cent each.

Katie Price/Jordan was a much more popular second choice for 11- to 16-year-olds polling 15 per cent of their votes. Fewer than one in ten selected any other individual, but US First Lady Michelle Obama was chosen by 8 per cent.

The oldest girls were equally unconvinced by the merits of any one individual on the list. However, Michelle Obama achieved the most votes, with 17 per cent of 16- to 21-year-olds citing her as the best role model. Cheryl Cole remained popular, achieving second place with 15 per cent. The only other women to achieve votes in the double-figures were Rebecca Adlington and JK Rowling.

Being a girl

The majority of girls across the entire age range believe it is better to be a girl than a boy (82 per cent). Reasons given by the youngest girls are relatively simplistic and cluster around images of boys as rough and dirty, in contrast to girls, who have the freedom to wear nice clothes and have sleepovers with their friends.

81 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds believe it is better to be a girl. Like the younger girls they enjoy being able to wear nice clothes and make-up, but they also feel that they are more in touch with their emotions than boys, a view shared by 16- to 21-year-olds.

78 per cent of 16- to 21-year-olds believe it is better to be a girl. Fashion and beauty remain popular reasons, as well as emotional maturity, but the older girls also cite the ability to have children as a factor in their decision.

Interestingly, despite advances in gender equality over the last 40 years, a significant minority of girls in each age group feel that they are at a disadvantage in comparison to boys of the same age. One in six 7- to 11-year-olds feel that they hardly ever, or never, get the same opportunities and this number rises to one in five of 11- to 16-year-olds. However, confidence does increase with age. One in two 16- to 21-year-olds feel that most of the time they are given the same opportunities as men. However, this appears to depend on life experience, as unemployed girls are much less likely to feel they have equality of opportunity (21 per cent) than those in education (54 per cent).

Conclusions

The majority of girls are happy and share common values – good friends, positive family relationships and an altruism towards those around them. They are committed to and see the benefits of education, and are keen to do well at school in order to achieve their future aspirations of having families and homes of their own. The ambition of older girls to find and pursue worthwhile careers is not lessened by their awareness of continuing equality issues such as the gender pay gap.

Girls consider themselves to be British in a country they are by and large proud of (although they are not blind to its faults). They accept the multi-cultural nature of modern British society as a matter of course, thinking nothing of having friends from different cultural backgrounds to their own. In keeping with broader public opinion, they are divided in their views on the monarchy and are open to ideas around faith and religious beliefs. They admire pop culture figures, but also embrace role models with traditional talents who they can see have achieved significance in their chosen field.



‘Girls are statistically more mature than boys and have the most chance of succeeding in life.’

(11-year-old)



Girls' Attitudes

They have a wide range of interests, and once engaged in hobbies tend to go on to take up more. They enjoy dancing and exercise, spending time with their friends and exploring their local areas largely unrestricted by the worries of over-anxious parents and carers. They feel that inequalities between the sexes remain but this does not alter their opinion that they are better off being a girl. They also take pleasure in those aspects of femininity often assumed to be oppressive, like fashion and beauty.

However, our research has highlighted a range of minority attitudes.

- Younger women living in Scotland and Wales have a much stronger sense of their regional identity, which leads them to question the institutions and concepts of 'British' identity.
- Young women from ethnic minority groups, together with girls from Northern Ireland, are more likely to have strong religious beliefs and to be immersed in and influenced by their own cultural heritage.
- The experience of girls who remain in post-16 education is significantly different from those starting employment, or increasingly unemployment, who are more exposed to inequalities in the workplace and who place more importance on demonstrable aspects of earning potential, such as owning a nice car.
- A significant minority of the youngest girls want to achieve fame above all else by the time they are 30 (and household names Cheryl Cole and Katie Price dominate younger girls' choice of role models).
- Around 30 per cent of all girls would not claim to be proud to be British, citing reasons as diverse as immigration, a lack of community cohesion and negative public perceptions of young people.

The way forward

A panel of young women aged between 15 and 24 from within guiding 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...

- More should be done to create an equal perception of the value of male and female roles in society. While the panel values the legislative achievements already in place surrounding flexible working and paternity/maternity provision, it also thought that employers could do more to change the focus of an individual's career development and to avoid gender preconceptions.
- Although girls may become more aware of inequalities as they get older, for example as they join the workforce, there is a danger that inequality can become self-perpetuating. Constant messaging that reinforces perceptions of inequality may in fact only serve to undermine those women in situations where genuine inequality does exist.
- The principle that girls can do anything they like and make it work needs to be instilled in girls as young as possible – before they have even had a chance to internalise any gendered messaging.
- And on a different subject altogether, girls felt that communities as a whole need to work together to address those behaviours that cause young people to lack pride in being British.

One in five 11- to 16-year-olds think they hardly ever, or never, get the same opportunities as boys their age.



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 specifically chosen 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.

GIRLS AS ADVOCATES FOR CHANGE

At the end of 2008, a new piece of Girlguiding UK research revealed that even among girls who are members of guiding, traditionally some of the most active citizens in their age group, there is a deep disengagement – even disenfranchisement – from local and national politics. Although passionate about a wide range of issues, with many giving up considerable amounts of their time to volunteer, girls and young women appear deeply cynical about politics, politicians and the prospects for change.

Partly in response to this research and also because guiding is, and always has been, committed to getting girls' voices heard, for the first time this year, we are recruiting a team of young Guiding Advocates to support our research, policy and public affairs work. Guiding Advocates will take the lead in our research projects, attend and advocate at a party political conference, and train as young spokespeople so they have the skills to lobby at a local and regional level too.

Find out more about youth participation at Girlguiding UK at www.girlguiding.org.uk.



Endnotes

- Bradshaw J and Richardson D. (2009) 'An index of child wellbeing in Europe', *Child Indicators Research*.
Adamson P (2007) Child poverty in perspective: an overview of child well-being in rich countries, Innocenti Report Card 7, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence.
- Social Trends 39: 2009 edition, Office for National Statistics. Crown Copyright.

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