



Girls on the Run Alums Study: Summary Report of Findings for 8th Grade

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Preface

This cutting-edge study explores teenagers' recall of lessons learned in Girls on the Run and whether they are engaging in learned behaviors and skills as adolescents. This report summarizes findings for the first phase of our longitudinal project assessing Girls on the Run's long-term impact on former participants over the childhood and adolescent years. We are grateful for the many Alums who have participated in this study.

Why is the Alums Study Important?

Girls on the Run is a physical activity-based positive youth development program whose mission is to make a difference in girls' lives. Lessons are designed to enhance social-emotional (e.g., confidence, peer relationships) and physical life skills (e.g., activity level, running skills). Coaches are trained to teach the lessons within a positive and welcoming environment. Our initial studies showed that Girls on the Run is having a *lasting positive impact* on behaviors and life skills that show *transfer* to school, family, and other domains.

The Alums Study extends our previous research by exploring whether the behaviors and skills young participants learned in Girls on the Run continue to help them as they navigate the late childhood and adolescent years. This aim is important, as research shows that the transition from elementary to middle school, and from middle to high school, is associated with declines in self-esteem, body image, and physical activity, as well as a higher incidence of peer pressure, negative emotions, and social isolation.

How Are We Conducting the Alums Study?

Our sample in 2024 consisted of 8th graders in middle school who were in Girls on the Run as 4th graders during the 2019 Fall season. A total of 807 Alums completed an online survey assessing life skills learned in Girls on the Run and their confidence (e.g., in schoolwork and sports), peer and adult support, and physical activity level currently as 8th graders. Interviews with a subset of 52 girls provided in-depth information about skills learned in Girls on the Run and the extent to which they apply these skills in their interactions at school, with peers, and at home.



What Did the Survey and Interview Findings Reveal?

Positive Impact and Enjoyment. Two survey items asked about girls' overall feelings about their experiences: "Girls on the Run had a positive impact on my life," and "I enjoyed my experience in Girls on the Run." Among response options of *really not true, not true, sort of true, true, and really true*, over 9 of 10 girls (97%) responded *sort of true, true, and really true* for positive impact and for enjoying their experience in

Girls on the Run. These are very favorable memories from middle schoolers who are four years removed from participating.

Life Skills. Survey scores showed the level of agreement to statements about whether life skills Alums currently use are *because of participating* in Girls on the Run. Over 80% responded *sort of true, true, and really true* for managing emotions, goal setting, and making intentional decisions, and over 90%, responded similarly for resolving conflicts, helping others, standing up for others, and respecting others who are different than me.

An interview question, "Do you currently use any skills or strategies learned at Girls on the Run for situations at school, at home, or in other situations?" resulted in 85% of Alums saying yes along with examples of life skills usage. Three major themes emerged: (a) *interpersonal skills*, such as improved social communication skills; treating others with kindness and respect, (b) *emotion regulation* skills, such as reducing anxiety in academic situations; managing emotions with siblings, and (c) *personal life skills*, such as resolving conflicts; adopting a persistence mindset; improved athletic skills. Interview themes and survey scores show that Girls on the Run has had a *positive and lasting impact* on Alums' ability to *maintain and transfer life skills* learned in the program. We share just a few example quotations from interviewees:

"I have a really bad time taking exams. I get really stressed out ... we learned the breathing method for Girls on the Run that helps me out. You breathe in, hold, breathe out, hold, breathe in, hold, breathe out. That works out pretty well. It calms you down a little, it just gets me to answer the questions."

"My brother makes me angry a lot. We fight sometimes, but I try to take deep breaths and think before I speak so I don't upset him more. Girls on the Run has really helped me with my thinking before I speak because as a younger kid I was pretty impulsive."

"Perseverance and determination. Whenever the classwork gets a little bit overwhelming, being determined in my schoolwork was such a big skill I learned from Girls on the Run. Girls on the Run taught me how to never give up and get things done, so that helped me meet the deadline on my assignments. Whenever a project's due the next day, I would choose to not sit there on my phone, and I would choose to just get it done and persevere through it."



Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence. The survey included 5 types of girls' self-views: *self-esteem* ("I like the kind of person I am") and perceptions of *physical competence* ("I do pretty well at many kinds of physical activities"), *academic competence* ("I do very well at my classwork"), *friendship competence* ("I am able to make really close friends"), and *physical appearance* ("I am happy with the way I look"). Over 80% of Alums reported *sort of true*, *true*, and *really true* for physical appearance,

and over 90% for self-esteem, physical competence, academic competence, and friendship competence. This means that Alums view themselves very positively.

An interview question, "Did participating in Girls on the Run affect or change how you see or view yourself?" resulted in 90% of Alums replying favorably, along with examples of how they changed. Major themes included: (a) *developed a positive, strong, and athletic body image*; (b) *enhanced my self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-respect*; (c) *enhanced my communication skills and social relationships*; and, (d) *helped me develop a more positive mindset*. We share a few quotations that exemplify Girls on the Run's impact on Alums' positive self-views:

"Girls on the Run showed me I'm much more physically capable than I realized. I never thought of myself as a runner or anything like that, but then I was running ... I felt like I got so much faster. Then I did track, and I placed, and just made me so much more confident and feeling physically fit."

"I didn't always super pay attention when I was younger and, now that I'm older, I'm looking back at all the skills we worked on, and it definitely helped me become a better person and changed me for the better. Now that I'm older, I feel like a lot more teenage girls have trouble with body image. Learning to love yourself is something that's so hard but if you can do it, it changes so much about the way you carry yourself, and learning that when I was young, growing and keeping that with me now that I'm older, it's definitely helped, especially because of the program."

"I have a more positive outlook about things that I go through. There were a lot of positive thinking strategies, where you look at yourself and instead of looking at the bad things, you look at the positive things ... look for the bright side and that was really helpful in how I see myself."

Social Support. Survey items included Alums' perceived support from *friends* ("I have a close friend who I can tell problems to"), *classmates* ("I have classmates who like me the way I am"), and a *significant adult* ("I have an adult in my life who cares about my feelings"). Over 95% responded *sort of true*, *true*, and *really true* for close friend, classmate, and significant adult support. An interview question asked, "Did participating in Girls on the Run affect or change how you interact with friends and classmates?" Forty-seven girls (90%) discussed how they improved in their social



relationships. Key themes included: (a) *helped me understand what qualities define a good friendship*; (b) *emphasized supporting and treating others with kindness and respect*; (c) *encouraged me to become more social, outgoing, and open to others*; and (d) *taught me how to build and maintain strong and supportive friendships*. Here are a few quotations that highlight these themes:

“I remember we talked about qualities that made a good friend, and right about then my best friend had suddenly decided to just kind of turn, so I think that without what we learned in Girls on the Run, I would not have been brave enough to say, ‘I can't do this, like if you're going to treat me like this, I don't want it ... like bye, goodbye.’”

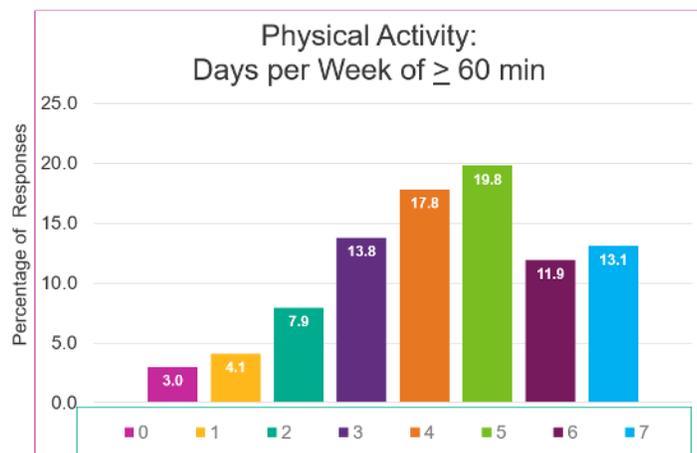
“I had friends do Girls on the Run every year, and I made new friends doing it. That was when I realized how powerful a compliment was and how powerful praise was. Because people were encouraging me and I was so grateful, I just started doing the same to others and that's paid off for me and obviously it has helped my peers.”

“Girls on the Run improved me socially. It made me more outgoing, more willing to talk to people, and letting me come to them instead of letting them come to me. It was easier for me to make more friends after that ... it definitely improved the way I talked to my friends and the way I made friends.”

Physical Activity. Interviewees were asked, “what did you learn about the importance of physical activity in Girls on the Run?” Forty-seven girls (90%) gave examples of learning the importance of physical activity, with the most frequent theme being, *physical activity can enhance physical and mental health now and throughout life* (88%). Other themes: (a) *learned how to adopt a healthy lifestyle*, (b) *physical activity makes you feel happy and good about yourself*; and (c) *physical activity enhances social connections with friends and peers*.

A survey question, “Name any programs or activities in which you currently participate,” revealed that 88% of Alums participate on sports and physical activity teams or clubs. This high percentage indicates a commitment to remaining physically active as adolescents. Frequent activities named were track/running, volleyball, soccer, basketball, and swimming. Among interviewees, 90% stated that Girls on the Run influenced their continued interest and participation in sports and physical activities, such as improving their athletic skills, gaining confidence to try out for a team, and finding a love for being physically active.

Another survey question asked, “During the past 7 days, on how many days were you physically active for a total of at least 60 minutes per day? Add up all the time you spent in any kind of physical activity that increased your heart rate and made you breathe hard some of the time.” Response choices included 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, or 7 days. The percentage of Alums marking these responses are displayed in the bar graph below.



Guidelines for adolescents specify at least 60 minutes daily of moderate-intensity physical activity, such as walking, running, cycling, and other aerobic activities. Only 13% of Alums reported at least 60 minutes daily, with the most frequent response of 5 days and an average of 4.3 days. Almost half the Alums (45%) reported 5-7 days, whereas 29% stated only 0, 1, 2, or 3 days, of getting the recommended level of physical activity.

What Do These Findings Mean?

1. Girls on the Run strives to teach physical and social-emotional life skills using an intentional curriculum, which is delivered by coaches trained to teach lessons in a positive, accepting, and mastery climate. Alums learned *interpersonal, personal, and physical life skills* that were maintained and generalized to academic, family, and peer contexts, and they credited these life skills to Girls on the Run. **Findings provide strong support that Girls on the Run is having a long-term impact on life skills learning and transfer to other settings.**
2. Lessons address girl-relevant issues, such as self-esteem and social connectedness. Alums reported favorable self-worth and domain-specific confidence (sports, peers, schoolwork). Interview responses explain the high ratings through improved perceptions of physical competence, body image, self-esteem, and self-acceptance. In addition, scores for peer and adult support were very high, with interviews showing improved relationship skills, such as making strong friendships, being supportive of others, treating others with respect, and becoming more accepting of others. “Helped me understand the qualities that define a good friendship” is an important theme because close and trusting companions during adolescence are essential for developing a positive sense of self and feeling supported by a valued peer group. **Collectively, these findings provide strong support that Girls on the Run is having an enduring positive impact on self-perceptions and social relationship skills.**



3. Although Alums expressed knowledge of physical activity benefits and learned this knowledge in Girls on the Run, most are not being sufficiently active to achieve physical and mental health benefits. This mirrors national trends of declining physical activity among adolescent girls. Alums expressed knowledge of physical activity benefits and learned this knowledge in Girls on the Run. No doubt, they also learned the importance of being physically active from parents, teachers, and community leaders. Most Alums participate in organized sports, so lower physical activity levels suggest that adolescent girls must find other ways to meet at least 60 minutes of daily physical activity. **We recommend that parents, teachers, and community members provide guidance and reinforcement for spending more time being sufficiently active (at least 60 minutes daily of moderate intensity) .** Being active with friends and family is a source of motivation, so identifying mutually enjoyable physical activities is a great way of helping girls meet the recommended guidelines.

Conclusion

Survey and interview findings reinforce one another and provide strong evidence that **Girls on the Run has a lasting, positive impact** on self-views, social support, and social-emotional and physical life skills among middle school Alums. Interviewees displayed fond memories and detailed examples of skills and strategies they learned from coaches who they respected and admired. Strong survey ratings emerged for life skills, self-perceptions, and social support, whereas physical activity level revealed an area in which adolescent girls must strive to improve for attaining the health benefits afforded from participation. The many adults (parents, teachers, community members) and peers (classmates, best friends) in girls' lives can encourage and reinforce ways for accomplishing this goal.

Next Steps

The impact of the Alums Study relies upon the continued tracking of girls' self-perceptions, social support, and life skills at critical periods of their lives. Navigating the high school years can be associated with fluctuations in self-esteem, peer relationships, academic demands, and physical activity. We again surveyed and interviewed Alums in their transition to high school and will do so again in their senior year. Following Alums' perceptions and life skills from middle school through the high school years provides valuable information about the long-term impact of Girls on the Run and developmental trends as girls transition from childhood to adolescence and beyond.