



SUMMARY REPORT

Girls on the Run: A Longitudinal Study of Program Impact

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Introduction

Afterschool programs have the potential to teach positive social, psychological, and physical skills to youth participants, but these benefits are not an automatic consequence of mere participation. Evidence-based research evaluating programs is necessary to determine magnitude of impact and explanations for positive season-long change. This study used a rigorous approach to evaluate the effectiveness of Girls on the Run on youth development, including competence, confidence, connection, character, caring (5Cs), and health outcomes. Because Girls on the Run (GOTR) is a positive youth development program, it was also important to assess if life skills were learned and transferred to other social situations. To accomplish study purposes, we asked two main questions:

1. Do Girls on the Run participants differ from a comparison group of girls not in Girls on the Run on developmental outcomes and life skills?
2. Do Girls on the Run participants show improvements from pre- to post-season on developmental outcomes and retain improvements three months after season's end?

How Was the Study Conducted?

We selected 3 GOTR councils based on several criteria such as: (a) offering at least 5 years of delivering the curriculum as intended, (b) requiring all coaches to attend annual training, and (c) serving youth diverse in race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Study participants came from 15 schools and 25 GOTR teams.

The sample included 907 girls in 3rd to 5th grade—215 girls in GOTR and 692 girls who had never participated in GOTR. Girls completed a survey at pre- and post-season. The comparison group reported on experiences in an organized sport or physical education. Girls in GOTR also completed a survey 3 months after the season to determine if season-long improvements were retained. Surveys assessed the 5Cs, physical activity, screen time, coach autonomy support, and life skills learned. Life skills items (assessed at post- and follow-up) asked whether girls credited GOTR (sport/PE for comparison group) with their ability to manage emotions, resolve conflicts, help others, and make intentional decisions at home, at school, and in day-to-day situations.

Focus group interviews were conducted at the end of the season to complement survey data. A subset of girls (17), coaches (19), parents/guardians (10), and school personnel (14) separately, and in small groups, responded to questions about whether and how change occurred as a result of participating in GOTR. Sample questions include:

1. Girls: What kinds of things have you learned at Girls on the Run? Adults: What kinds of things do girls learn at GOTR?
2. Girls: Have you changed in how you think, feel, or act because of participating in Girls on the Run? Adults: Have you observed changes in girls' social, emotional, or physical behaviors as a result of participating?
3. Girls: Have you changed in healthy habits since participating in Girls on the Run? Adults: Have you heard or observed whether girls changed in their healthy habits since participating in GOTR?

Planning started one year before data collection, and assessment occurred prior to, immediately after, and 3 months beyond the spring 2016 season. Pre-assessment activities included: (a) selecting councils, schools, and teams; (b) obtaining school principals' and Institutional Review Board approvals; (c) conducting a pilot study; and (d) visiting and communicating with schools to prepare meticulous travel itineraries. A team of researchers was responsible for collecting, screening, coding, entering, verifying, and analyzing data that spanned an entire year.¹

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What Did We Find? What Do These Findings Mean?

Question #1: “Do Girls on the Run participants differ from a comparison group of girls not in Girls on the Run on developmental outcomes and life skills?”

Findings: Girls in GOTR scored higher than the comparison group at post-season on:

- ❖ **Caring.** GOTR girls expressed greater empathy and sympathy toward other girls (e.g., “It makes me sad to see a girl who can’t find anyone to play with,” “I feel upset when I see a girl getting her feelings hurt”).
- ❖ **Connection.** GOTR girls reported a stronger relationship with their coach (e.g., “I get along with my coaches,” “my coaches care about me,” “I like my coaches,” “My coaches are friendly towards me”).
- ❖ **Coach autonomy support.** GOTR girls more strongly agreed that their coaches understand them, show confidence in their ability, encourage them to ask questions, listen to them, and provide them with choices.
- ❖ **Life skills.** Strongest differences emerged for girls reporting that, *because of participating in GOTR*, they are able to **manage emotions** (e.g., “I calm myself down when I get frustrated”), **resolve conflict** (e.g., “I listen to my friend when we have a disagreement”), **help others** (e.g., “I comfort a friend when they are upset”), and **make intentional decisions** (“I stop and think before deciding who to be friends with”).

These group differences are even stronger given that GOTR girls averaged nearly 2 years less participation time than the comparison group did in PE or sport (GOTR girls = 1.57 years; non-GOTR girls = 3.35 years).

Question #2: “Do Girls on the Run participants show improvements from pre- to post-season on developmental outcomes, and retain improvements three months after season’s end?”

Findings: We analyzed the survey data in two ways: (a) the entire sample of girls, and (b) those scoring below average at pre-season. The main results were:

- ❖ **Entire sample:** significant improvements emerged for **confidence** (perceived physical appearance and global self-esteem) and **connection** (perceived classmate support). Girls were happier with the way they look, liked the kind of person they are, and said classmates were more likely to pay attention to them.
- ❖ **Entire sample: for life skills at post-season,** girls credited GOTR for learning how to **manage emotions** (“I take a deep breath to calm myself down”), **resolve conflict** (“I try to work out a disagreement with my friend”), **help others** (“I stand up for others when they need support”), and **be intentional with decisions** (“I stop and think about what might happen before making a big decision”). **At 3 months follow-up,** scores for all life skills remained stable indicating **sustained ability** to use life skills learned in GOTR.
- ❖ **Girls starting below pre-season average:** girls significantly improved on **all developmental outcomes**—competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, and physical activity. Those scoring above average on screen time (TV and computer games) decreased in time spent. These results mean that girls who need a PYD program like GOTR benefited the most on social, psychological, and physical outcomes.

Focus group responses complemented and strengthened survey findings for skills learned as a result of participating in Girls on the Run. Quotations also illuminate the findings. In response to the question, “**what kinds of things have you learned at Girls on the Run?**” the following themes emerged for girls’ responses:

- **Standing Up for Self and Others** (being a stand-byer; helping others who are bullied)
- **Managing Emotions** (taking a breather; staying positive; expressing feelings)
- **Self-Acceptance** (be yourself; everyone is unique; inner beauty)
- **Positive Social Behaviors** (thinking of others; working together)
- **Making Good Choices** (choosing the right friends; knowing who to trust)
- **Gratitude** (be thankful for own life)
- **Empowerment** (empower ourselves)

One girl shared how to use the “stop and take a breather” strategy in response to being bullied:

“If you’re having a problem and someone is like picking on you, or making you feel bad about yourself and angry, you just need to like stop and then think and then breathe and then respond, so that kind of helps when you don’t really want to backfire with them.”

In response to the question, “**have you changed in how you think, feel, or act because of participating in Girls on the Run? (Have you observed any changes in girls’ social, emotional, or physical behaviors as a result of participating?)**”, similar themes emerged for girls, coaches, parents/guardians, and school personnel:

- **Increased positive emotional behaviors** (be positive about self; be non-judgmental)
- **Emotion management** (express feelings; take a breather; be collected/calm)
- **Increased positive social behaviors** (consider others’ feelings; be more outgoing; act nicer to others)
- **Developing positive social relationships** (improve friendships; accept others; be more inclusive)
- **Improved running and motivation to run** (faster runner; strive to do more physically)
- **Standing up for self and others** (standing up for new kids; supporting others who are bullied)
- **Setting and accomplishing goals** (complete each task before moving on; it’s not about winning)

A coach shared how a girl’s social competence and caring behaviors changed over the season:

“... there’s one girl ... she was very much ‘wants to be the center of attention’ and wants everybody to do what she does, and she can sometimes kind of peer pressure others into following her, and not always in the best ways ... when we were doing ‘beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ ... she still talks about it ... something clicked with her [with] that lesson, and I really did see a difference in her, like not worrying so much about herself ... she started looking at other people’s opinions and would let others lead ...”

Learning healthy habits was an important lesson we asked about in focus groups. In response to the question, “**Have you changed in healthy habits since participating in Girls on the Run?**” (**Have you heard or observed whether girls changed in their healthy habits since participating in GOTR?**) girls responded with many examples of physical health (e.g., exercising, taking care of body) and nutrition (e.g., healthy eating, more veggies/fruit), whereas coaches and parents/guardians provided evidence that Girls on the Run is having a positive impact on promoting holistic healthy behaviors—physical, nutritional, emotional, mental, and social health.

This mother shared how her daughter has grown emotionally from her experiences:

“[girl’s name] is in special education ... they’re kind of separated from the general population ... and with Girls on the Run they’re introduced into the general population. She lives without a label in Girls on the Run, and that’s really important, not to be labeled. In Girls on the Run, even with the volunteers, the coaches, the teachers, everyone kinda takes it away. It’s gone. It’s lifted.”

Conclusions

1. Collectively, findings using a matched comparison group, a longitudinal design, and quantitative and qualitative methods provide strong evidence that Girls on the Run is effective in promoting positive youth development, including season-long and lasting change in competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, physical activity, and life skills.
2. Ability to transfer life skills learned in GOTR distinguished participants from the comparison group, demonstrating that strategies such as those for managing emotions, resolving conflict, helping others, and making intentional decisions are optimized when they are explicitly taught.
3. The intentional life skills curriculum and coach training program offer strong explanations for findings of program impact—running and life lessons are integrated and taught concurrently by caring and compassionate coaches who are trained to deliver the curriculum with fidelity.