Gender Responsive Programming for Girls

Summer Institute Sedona 2007

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THE EVIDENCE

Beginning in 2004, Florence Crittenton was a participating member in a project called the Arizona Interagency Girls Initiative, which grew out of the need to address the growing number of girls in the juvenile justice system. Over the last 10 years, the number of incarcerated girls has increased markedly. From 1992-1996, the number of girls arrested increased in some areas by as much as 25%, while arrests for boys remained static (Shephard, 2006). The juvenile justice system recognized the need for gender-specific programming to address this phenomenon, and the Arizona Interagency Girls Initiative was formed. Their goal was to build an infrastructure that will support a comprehensive continuum of gender-specific treatment services for system-involved girls.

In a report from Copia Consulting (2004), the typical girl involved in the criminal justice system shares the following characteristics with girls in Florence Crittenton:

- Family fragmentation – the families of these girls are fragmented by multiple and serious stressors including poverty, death, violence, and a multigenerational pattern of incarceration.
- Victimization – most of the girls have a history of violent victimization.
- Victimization in the system – once they enter the system, girls are vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, similar to and sometimes worse than at home.
- Serious physical and mental illness – the majority of the girls are diagnosed with one or more serious physical and/or mental disorders.
- Separation of mothers from their children – a significant number of girls are mothers who have been separated from their young children.
- Academic failure – schools are failing girls in multiple ways. These failures include suspension/expulsion, repeating one or more grades, and placement in a special classroom.
- The breaking point in early adolescence – girls appear to be most vulnerable to their first experiences of academic failure, pregnancy, juvenile justice involvement, or out-of-home placement between the ages of 12 and 15.
- Non-violent offenders – a majority of girls in the juvenile justice system are non-violent offenders charged with relatively minor status, property, or drug offenses.
- Resiliency – girls in the system have significant strengths that they can draw upon to overcome the multiple stressors that challenge them.

In its commitment to the development of new and innovative programs and services to meet the changing needs of the community, Florence Crittenton conducted a meta-analysis of best practices in the treatment of adolescent girls. Based on this research, it has enhanced its program to incorporate evidence-based treatment modalities to better serve the girls placed in their care. These treatment modalities are based on the principles of gender-specific, relationship-centered, culturally-sensitive, and resiliency-focused and strength-based treatment.
**Gender-Specific**

Research tells us that society’s messages about gender challenge girls’ innate value and capacity. Western cultures tend to devalue feminine gender traits while placing value on male traits; socialization dictates the way girls think, feel, and act (Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995; Anderson, 2002). This socialization process must be confronted and the focus placed on the developmental domains that support girls in their search for a positive identity and sense of personal power.

A wide body of research suggests that a successful gender-specific program must acknowledge and address the fact that the needs of girls are different from the needs of boys, and must take those differences into account. To meet girls’ needs, gender-responsive services intentionally allow gender to affect and guide service delivery. Environments that are responsive consider location, Staff, program development, content, and material that reflect an understanding of the realities of girls’ lives. Girls, for example, face eating disorders, depression, violence and abuse, homelessness, prostitution, and run away more frequently than boys. Positive outcomes in the context of gender-specific programming means that girls learn how to manage their assets, develop the skills to negotiate assets in relationships, and learn skills that enable them to live as autonomous, self-directed human beings.

**Relationship-Centered**

Relationships are important and fundamental to girls’ lives. To this end, they must be taught relationship-building skills.

Carol Gilligan’s book, *In a Different Voice* (1982), asserts that relationships are at the center of girls’ lives, making them a fundamental aspect of positive social development.

In the context of gender development:

- Relationships give girls a sense of connection.
- Girls relate and work better one-on-one.
- Girls tend to internalize failure and externalize success.
- Girls look to external sources in building their self-esteem.

Therefore, it is imperative that a relationship-centered program must be maintained in which girls focus on establishing and building connections with others.

**Culturally-Sensitive**

Cultural sensitivity can be defined as the ability of individuals and organizations to respond respectfully to people of all cultures, races, ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and religions in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the individual, family, tribe, and community, protecting the dignity of each.
The needs and experiences of families in our country are diverse and impacted by race, ethnicity, and economics. The United States’ assimilation policies create dual oppression for girls who come from families of color; these girls not only experience gender-stereotyping, but they are subjected to racial and ethnic stereotyping as well. Alienation and estrangement from their culture of origin may find girls rejecting their family as well as aspects of the culture. Not only should girls of color be provided with opportunities to explore their historical and gender roots, they must be encouraged to do so.

Cultural sensitivity affirms the need to consider culture when planning interventions, interactions, and solutions. In its efforts to value diversity, Florence Crittenton actively recruits and trains staff, selects program approaches, and utilizes program activities that address racial and ethnic issues that are culturally-sensitive. Florence Crittenton believes that it is important to engage actively and directly in creating conditions in which girls can reclaim their cultural identity. While adolescents may not understand the role of racism, discrimination, sexism, and classism in their lives, Florence Crittenton understands that it is relevant and important to acknowledge these factors. This guides the program in providing support for girls in their endeavor to reconnect with their family, cultural beliefs, and traditions.

Resiliency-Focused and Strength-Based

Resiliency is defined as “the capacity to spring back, rebound, successfully adapt in the face of adversity, and develop social and academic competence despite exposure to severe stress” (Henderson & Milstein, 1996). According to the International Resilience Research Project, resilience is influenced by temperament and personality style, which affects how an individual will react to a stressor; culture – some cultures encourage independence and problem-solving while others promote dependence on social support and the community; age – the younger the person, the more dependent he or she is on others for support; and gender – females seek help, express emotions, and are empathic toward others, whereas males are generally more pragmatic and solution-focused (Grotberg, 1999).

Adolescents who lack resiliency have difficulty overcoming obstacles, and therefore, become victims of the stresses and challenges they face (Goldstein, Brooks, & Weiss, 2004). However, research has shown that adolescents have the innate ability or the capacity to develop protective factors, internal attributes that include talents and interests, personal strengths, persistence, and self-efficacy. These protective factors moderate, buffer, insulate against, and thereby mitigate the impact of stress and trauma. The following is a list of individual protective factors that facilitate the building of resiliency (Henderson & Milstein, 1996):
• Relationships – sociability; the ability to be a friend and to form positive relationships.
• Service – gives of self in service to others and/or causes.
• Life skills – uses good decision-making, assertiveness, and impulse control.
• Humor – has a good sense of humor.
• Inner direction – bases choices and decisions on internal evaluation (internal locus of control).
• Perceptiveness – insightful understanding of people and situations.
• Independence – “adaptive” distancing from unhealthy people and situations.
• Positive view of personal future – expectation of a positive future.
• Flexibility – can adjust to change; can adapt as necessary to positively cope with new situations.
• Love of learning – capacity for and connection to learning.
• Self-motivation – internal initiative and positive motivation comes from within.
• Competence – has developed a skill or interest in something.
• Self-worth – feelings of value and self-confidence.
• Spirituality – personal faith in something greater.
• Perseverance – has determination despite difficulty or obstacles.
• Creativity – expresses self through artistic endeavors.

Risk factors that contribute to the increased numbers of girls in the juvenile justice system inform program design. However, what determines program content is the need for a resiliency-focused, strength-based orientation. This is one of the bases of the Florence Crittenton program. Girls are able to learn and change their future by living in an environment that creates opportunities for them to enhance their protective factors. The message that is conveyed to the girls is that they can learn the skills necessary to overcome past and future obstacles. They learn to understand and appreciate their emotional processes; acquire coping skills; learn and rehearse self-expression; develop their internal locus of control; focus on redirecting negative coping characteristics and behaviors to attain positive outcomes; and direct their life plans.

A strength-based approach allows girls time to define themselves. Traumatic life experiences are not discounted; rather, girls’ life experiences are used as a starting point. What is emphasized is that these life experiences can be instructive; they can serve as a growth opportunity where one’s abilities, knowledge, insight, and wisdom can be attained through meeting the challenges of life. The strength-based approach is an integral aspect of the foundation upon which the Community Skill Development Program is based. This orientation impacts every aspect of the program, is based on resiliency research, and suggests that rather than existing in the individual, risk factors exist in the environment.

A strength-based approach has long been talked about in educational and therapeutic settings. Practice, from a strengths perspective, demands a different way of seeing adolescents, their environments, and their situations. Florence Crittenton doesn’t focus on the problems; it focuses on the possibilities. Professional staff are trained to track
psychopathology, victimization, and abnormality usually born from negative childhood experiences. This form of labeling called diagnosis has the power to alter the perception of adolescents, how they are treated, and how they see themselves.

Florence Crittenton employs several interventions to foster a resiliency-focused and strength-based approach:

- Engage adolescents in acts of helpfulness.
- Be optimistic and caring; establish genuine self-regard for adolescents and communicate this clearly.
- Provide more intensive intervention for those most “vulnerable.”
- Focus on assessing protective factors, competencies, strengths, and sources of environmental support in addition to assessing weaknesses, deficits, and risk.
- Assure that caring connections continue once an adolescent leaves the program.
- Avoid referring to adolescents as “high risk;” use the terminology “from high risk environments” if identification is needed.
- Provide a bonding relationship similar to a healthy extended family.
- Encourage participation in activities.

**GENDER RESPONSIVE SKILL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM**

**Program Goals**

A recent Child Welfare League of America (Mallon, in press) report revealed that residential treatment centers with long-term positive outcomes include the following:

- High levels of family involvement, supervision, and support from caring adults
- A skill-focused curriculum
- Coordination of services
- Individualized treatment plans
- Positive peer influence
- A strict code of discipline
- A focus on building a sense of self
- A family-like atmosphere
- Academic support
- The presence of community networks
- A minimally stressful environment
- Comprehensive discharge planning

Florence Crittenton strives to provide these key components in developing a model program that is gender-specific, relationship-centered, culturally-sensitive, resiliency-focused, and strength-based.
At Florence Crittenton, the environment provides safety, fosters opportunities for bonding, and values the expression of voice. The goals of the program are to create a social learning context that is supportive and nurturing, and is guided by girls’ developmental needs. Participants in the program are referred to as “Students” to convey the message that this is a learning environment.

Florence Crittenton staff, referred to as “Allies,” serve as role models for dealing with adversity in girls’ lives by setting realistic expectations and emphasizing that mistakes are accepted, expected, and are an opportunity for learning and personal growth. In they are committed to and personally invested in the development of each student.

Florence Crittenton provides a holistic community, addressing girls’ lives in the following contexts:

Florence Crittenton recognizes the need for each girl to build competency in developing healthy relationships. This involves the family in programming, allowing her to connect with family in a safe environment to work on problems and develop skills. Furthermore, developing healthy relationships with others, such as friends, boyfriends, neighbors, teachers, and church members, is also addressed.

From a systems perspective, Florence Crittenton addresses issues regarding a girl’s school environment, curriculum, and relationships with school personnel and fellow students, including barriers to education. Issues that involve the juvenile justice system and social service systems are also examined.

Within society, Florence Crittenton addresses the cultural issues in a girl’s life, offering services within the context of her community and culture. The influence of the media and how it affects girls’ lives is also addressed, teaching them to become critical consumers.

**Theoretical Rationale**

A person’s ability to self-regulate and inability to form and maintain relationships is limited by a history of trauma and abuse. This inability is based on mistrust of others and poor self-soothing skills that inhibits emotional self-management. Providing responsive interactions in the context of a safe and predictable relationship can help develop one’s capacity to adapt. Greenspan (2001), Perry (2001), Schore (2001), and Siegal (1997) suggest that people can develop these abilities even into late adolescence.

“Self-regulation refers to those processes, internal and or transactional, that enable an individual to guide his/her goal-directed activities over time and across changing circumstances (contexts). Regulation implies modulation of thought, affect, behavior, or attention via deliberate or
When children learn to self-regulate, they are able to deal with stress and frustration. “Self-regulation comprises emotional regulation” (Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2003, p. 155) and enables individuals to gain control when they are overwhelmed and ruled by emotional impulsivity.

Self-regulation begins with adult direction. Children initially learn how to tolerate, manage, and cope with negative affective states through the support of the parent-child relationship. As children learn to identify triggers for their emotions, they begin to understand them; as they understand and accept their emotions, they learn to cope with them. Children increasingly learn to control their emotional states while acquiring independence from parental monitoring. They are then able to participate as collaborative partners in building mutuality in relationships.

Children who can self-regulate develop their ability to face new tasks and incorporate new skills. When they do not learn self-regulation, they miss instructions on how to behave. Misbehavior, then, is the result of a lack of skill to manage the challenges of life rather than a lack of motivation. When children do not have adequate parental support or poor parent-child relationships, they have greater difficulty learning basic life skills.

**Core Competencies**

Florence Crittenton’s Community Skill Development Program emphasizes the need for girls to learn core competencies and self-efficacy skills, and is based on engaging in behavioral change (Boal, 1979) and reflecting upon that change (Freire, 1970). Participants in the program gain skills in three areas: self-management, relationship development, and self-direction. Development in one area permits girls to develop and expand their knowledge in the other areas.

The Community Skill Development Program offers an empowerment approach focusing on the role of gender socialization and using the power of voice to change their world (Freire, 1998; Bernard, 1996; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995; Brown, 1991). Power of voice is defined as effectively communicating one’s needs and building connections using the resources necessary to obtain what one wants in life. A girl must learn to trust herself as the person with the most expertise about her personal needs, and believe that what she has to say is valid and valuable. The first step to effective self-expression, however, is learning to regulate emotions and actions through self-management.
**Self-Management**

Self-management skills involve an understanding of and appreciation for internal emotional processes and the behavioral consequences. One of the desired outcomes of the Florence Crittenton program is that students become powerful and empowered when they internalize self-management skills that enable them to connect with others in mutually satisfying relationships.

**Relationship Development**

Relationship development skills are necessary to build trusting, healthy relationships with others. Mutuality is important for relationships and is supported when each girl is able to stand on her own and be independent.

**Self-Direction**

Self-direction skills involve the acquisition of self-sufficiency to evaluate, plan, and execute one’s future. These skills provide girls with the ability of look into their future with a purpose, a mission, and direction.