

# An introduction to Girlguiding UK

Girlguiding UK is the largest organisation in the UK that provides a safe, girl-only space for girls and young women at the most formative time in their personal and social development.



We are privileged to have over half a million young members, aged between five and 25, throughout the UK. One in four eight-year-old girls is a Brownie and one in ten 11-year-old girls is a Guide. More than 80,000 trained adult volunteers already give their time to our organisation, contributing some ten million hours every year.

Our aim is to welcome even more members and supporters, particularly from a wider spectrum of cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. Our recently launched Project SWITCH is now reaching out to new communities in England.

We remain relevant to today's girls, introducing into our programme challenges that extend beyond badges to encourage girls to develop their potential. Today's Guides – as well as Rainbows, Brownies and Senior Section members – are involved in an incredibly diverse range of projects, from girl-led community projects to volunteering in developing countries.

As we approach our centenary in 2010, guiding is still about helping girls to achieve more than they ever thought possible.

# Foreword

Welcome to *Teenage mental health: Girls shout out!*, the third research report in Girlguiding UK's *Girls shout out!* series.



As the largest organisation for girls and young women in the UK today, Girlguiding UK has a unique and important opportunity to speak out about issues of direct concern to young women.

It was in this spirit that we launched *Girls shout out!*, to find out more about our young members' views on the issues they tell us matter to them most and to ensure their voices are heard in the public debates that affect their lives.

For our third report we have partnered with a leading UK charity, the Mental Health Foundation, to explore what girls and young teenagers really think and feel about the many different emotions experienced by young women today.

The research was carried out by pollsters Opinion Leader through a series of in-depth focus groups with girls between the ages of ten and 14 and we also ran a survey on our website. Girlguiding UK chose to speak to girls of this age to help shed light on some of the factors and experiences that can help influence girls' outlook and well-being as

they move into their teenage years. All participants are members of Girlguiding UK.

*Teenage mental health: Girls shout out!* is an investigation into girls' experiences of both hard-to-manage and challenging feelings and recognised mental health problems. The report considers a new generation of potential triggers for mental health problems in girls – premature sexualisation, commercialisation and alcohol misuse – and also some of the more longstanding issues like bullying and family breakdown. It examines the impact of such factors on girls' feelings and behaviour at home and in their communities, and asks young women themselves what might be done to help.

Girlguiding UK's commitment to enabling girls of all ages to develop the confidence and resilience they need to succeed in today's world is the reason we help thousands of our members build self-esteem through new experiences, adventures and friendships every day. Our safe girl-only space is a forum for girls of all ages to explore some of the issues and emotions they might find more difficult to manage –

away from the pressures of school, and in a supportive, non-judgemental environment.

We also recognise the importance of providing strong and positive role models who can help younger girls work through some of the more complex issues they face when growing up. Our peer education programme trains hundreds of young women every year to educate girls about sensitive issues, from mental health problems and eating disorders, to alcohol and drug misuse and practising safe sex.

Research has shown that many young people today face mental health problems that risk damaging their life chances and dislocating them from their friends, families and communities. We hope that our report will build greater understanding of how such issues affect young women specifically, helping us all to give them the self-confidence, self-belief and determination they need to fulfil their potential and navigate the complexities of modern life.

Liz Burnley  
Chief Guide

Denise King  
Chief Executive



Somewhere, somehow, our society has taken a wrong turn in our approach to children and young people.

Young women face particular pressures. This report provides evidence of the impact of real and perceived pressures around sexual behaviour, physical appearance and material

values. We are forcing our young people to grow up too quickly and not giving them the spaces and experiences they require to be safe and confident. We are creating a generation under stress. This is our responsibility as adults and adult society to put right. The answer is not more custodial sentences, more high pitched 'hoodie scarers', or more exams.

The answer is two-fold. First, we need to acknowledge that our first job is to love and nurture our young people. Second, we need practical solutions that give young people the spaces and opportunities they need. Girlguiding UK offers one such key opportunity and that is why the Mental Health Foundation has wholeheartedly supported this initiative by Girlguiding UK to hear what affects young women's mental health and well-being from the experts – young women themselves. We must start listening.

Dr Andrew McCulloch  
Chief Executive  
The Mental Health Foundation



# Methodology

Focus groups explore girls' views on mental health and well-being.

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**Focus groups**  
To help Girlguiding UK explore the many complicated and sensitive issues surrounding mental health and emotional well-being, qualitative data was collated through a small number of in-depth focus groups under the guidance of the Mental Health Foundation and leading public opinion researchers Opinion Leader.

All 54 girls who took part were between the ages of ten and 14 – in other words members of Guides. Focus groups were divided by age so that girls could have age-appropriate discussions with their peers.

Eight group discussions were held in three different areas of the country, in order to ensure the views collected reflect a diversity of regions. Focus groups

were held in North Harrow, Rochdale and Lichfield between 19 April and 12 May 2008.

The group discussions lasted approximately 90 minutes each and involved taking the girls through a number of creative and projective exercises to explore their experiences of hard-to-manage emotions and their awareness and understanding of mental health problems.

**Polling**  
Over the same period Girlguiding UK hosted an online survey on its website asking girls a series of questions about emotional well-being. Over 350 girls between ten and 15 years of age took part. The findings of the polling are included in box-out sections of the report.

‘You can see that the way she’s dressing she thinks she’s older than what she is. She’s destroying who she is.’

# Executive Summary

*Teenage mental health: Girls shout out!* reveals a generation of girls and young women who are managing a complex spectrum of feelings and emotions everyday.



Two-thirds of the girls surveyed online feel anger and sadness at least some of the time and half find those feelings difficult to manage. A quarter are often worried, while half find their anxiety hard to handle.

Premature sexualisation and pressure to grow up too quickly emerged as two of the key influences on girls' emotional well-being and mental health. Sexual advances from boys, pressure to wear clothes that make them look too old and magazines and websites directly targeting younger girls to lose weight or consider plastic surgery were identified as taking a particular toll. Girls felt that as the checklist of 'ideals' grew longer bullies were being given ever more excuses to single girls out.

Deciding how much freedom to allow daughters is a difficult balance for parents: too little freedom was seen to isolate girls from their friends, leaving them lonely and frustrated.

Indeed, feeling excluded and left out by friends were among the emotions girls struggle with most. Many talked about bullying or being ignored by friends they had formerly been close to.

Anxiety about exams and schoolwork also preoccupied many – as girls worried about letting down parents and teachers.

Girls specifically associated boredom with negative feelings and behaviour that can get you into trouble. Having nothing to do was linked with aggression, being tempted to break the law and self-harm. As one girl explained: 'if I get bored then I start becoming really aggressive.'

Increased commercialisation and the pressure to have cash for the latest gadgets were also seen to affect many, and girls felt that having less money than others could leave them open to bullying.

Despite the mounting pressures they described, it was revealing that few girls were aware of the term 'mental health problems' or understood the kinds of feelings or behaviour it encompasses. Many confused the term with learning difficulties or conditions like autism, or saw mental health problems as something people are born with that therefore couldn't affect them.

Yet many of the girls questioned have friends or family members who had suffered mental health problems. Two-fifths know someone who has self-harmed, a third have a friend who has suffered from an eating disorder and almost two in five know someone who has experienced panic attacks. In fact many girls felt strongly that self-harm could be within the spectrum of typical teenage behaviour – provided it occurred only infrequently – and was not necessarily symptomatic of a mental health problem. Many also have experience of people around them taking part in substance abuse: a quarter know someone who has

taken illegal drugs, while two-fifths have experienced someone drinking too much alcohol.

Overall, stable and supportive families and friendship groups were seen as the most important factor in helping girls become resilient to mental health problems. Having someone to talk to who would not judge you – whether that be a mother, teacher, or other supportive adult – was seen to be critically important.

The research emphasised the vital importance of having a safe, non-pressured environment where girls are kind to each other and have the opportunity to try out new things they might be good at.

Above all, *Teenage mental health: Girls shout out!* shows the importance of creating space, among supportive friends, for difficult issues to be explored and girls to be reassured that their feelings are 'normal' – and others feel as they do.

‘What makes me feel good is my friends because they don't judge. We're always there for each other.’

# Managing my emotions

Boredom, anger and feeling left out are among the hardest emotions for girls to manage.



‘I get angry at myself if I don’t revise or don’t do the work properly because I’m always pushing myself to do better. I was up until about three just revising one paragraph.’

In the week before the focus groups were set to take place girls were asked to keep an ‘emotions diary’ in which they noted down the different feelings they experienced each day and the situations that had caused them.

The sessions themselves kicked off with an exercise to help the girls explore the emotions they had identified in more detail. In two groups girls were asked to think about feelings they find easy and difficult to manage and to consider the circumstances they associated with each feeling.

Those tasked with identifying more manageable feelings talked about happiness, love, friendship, feeling relaxed, having fun and being included by friends as the easiest emotions to handle.

However, in almost all sessions the girls’ conversations turned quickly to the feelings they find more difficult.

Feeling excluded, unloved, ignored or left out – particularly by peers and at school – were among the most difficult emotions for girls to manage. Most groups cited bullying and teasing as common drivers for such feelings – but arguments with close friends were seen by many as equally difficult, particularly if fallouts led to feelings of betrayal or if girls could not understand why the friendships had broken down. Several girls described being hurt by former friends who had spread lies and rumours about them. Some also talked about the pressures of feeling different, or being seen to be different, for both social and cultural reasons.

Anxiety and nervousness about schoolwork also dominated discussions, with all age groups talking about exam stress – from SATs to GCSEs – as a difficult experience. Girls also reported feeling frustrated when they did less well at school than they felt was expected.

Anger emerged as a common theme particularly if girls felt they were being blamed or told off for things that they believed were not their fault. Anger was also associated with boredom and not having enough to do. Younger girls explained that they found this much harder to cope with if they were tired and things started to get on top of them. Several described how such feelings can get out of hand if girls their age get overexcited or ‘hyper’.

Some girls also talked about feeling guilty about things they had done wrong, especially if they did not know how to apologise. Others felt similarly if they succumbed to peer pressure and got pushed into things they did not want to do.

Feeling self-conscious about appearance and weight was described as difficult by many participants – with several girls citing the pressure of the ‘size zero’ culture.

‘I can get angry at almost anything. Sometimes I can get sad or feel low and not really know why.’

- A sixth of the girls polled often feel anger (16 per cent), while a further half (52 per cent) feel angry some of the time. Meanwhile almost half admit they find anger hard to manage (48 per cent).
- Almost two-thirds sometimes feel sad (64 per cent) while half find sadness difficult to cope with.
- Around a quarter often worry (28 per cent) and feel like no one understands them (25 per cent) while around half find both emotions hard to handle.
- A fifth often feel bad about themselves, while a further third sometimes feel this way and 46 per cent find such feelings hard to manage.

# Getting wise

Many girls had a very limited knowledge of the kinds of feelings, symptoms and behaviour associated with mental health problems.



‘ I think cutting your arm, the first time you do it is ok, it might just be stress. When it happens more than two times I think you’re starting to get a bit of mental health issues. ’

‘ I think my cousin’s got a problem but I don’t know what it is ... she used to play with me a lot and whenever I go around now she just locks herself in her bedroom. ’

At the start of the second discussion, which specifically explored girls’ understanding of the term ‘mental health problems’, several groups suggested the expression might refer to developmental and behavioural conditions or learning difficulties – particularly attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, Asperger’s syndrome and dyslexia.

Some of the younger girls felt that a mental health problem was something you were born with – rather than something that can develop over time – and therefore felt girls with mental health issues would be different from them. Younger girls in two groups were also confused about the difference between mental health problems and physical disabilities. A few also associated the term with phobias.

After the facilitators explained a little more about the kinds of feelings and behaviour that can come under the mental health banner, girls in all groups started to define mental health issues as engaging in different forms of uncontrolled behaviour – particularly anger, rudeness or violence – which indicate someone is having difficulty coping with their feelings. Emotions that were seen as the hardest to handle were depression, unhappiness, feeling unwanted, fear, anger and annoyance.

Many girls had direct experience of actions and behaviour they associated with struggling to manage difficult feelings, for example friends who had self-harmed, contemplated killing themselves or experienced anorexia or bulimia. However, a large number of girls in both age groups felt strongly that

self-harm in particular could be considered as being within the spectrum of typical teenage behaviour – provided it occurred only infrequently – and was not necessarily symptomatic of a mental health problem. Several pointed out that some social groups, particularly ‘emos’, consider cutting yourself as just what you do to fit in.

Other behaviour girls associated with hard-to-manage feelings included not wanting to participate in games and activities they had previously enjoyed, isolating themselves in their bedroom for long periods, not talking to friends or family, avoiding school and social awkwardness.

When asked to identify celebrities who had experienced mental health problems, girls in Harrow and Lichfield named Britney Spears and Mark Speight.

- Half the girls questioned know someone who has suffered from depression (51 per cent).
- Two-fifths know someone who has self-harmed (42 per cent).
- A third have a friend who has suffered from an eating disorder (32 per cent).
- Almost two in five have a friend who has experienced panic attacks (38 per cent).
- A quarter know someone who has taken illegal drugs (27 per cent).
- Two-fifths have experience of someone drinking too much alcohol (40 per cent).

# Causes and concerns

Pressure to grow up too quickly emerged as one of the key issues affecting girls' emotional well-being.

‘If you're bored you're more likely to self-harm or do things that you shouldn't.’

‘When I was eleven I read a teenage magazine for the first time and that is when it kind of clicked, “I should be like this.”’

‘There's one girl in my year and she doesn't eat much and she's really slim, but her mum sort of pushes her to look like that and she already wears makeup.’

In the exercises designed to explore common triggers for mental health problems, girls were asked to think about circumstances that can lead to emotional problems among their peers. Participants were shown pictures and story cards of girls who had adopted particular patterns of behaviour to support their discussions.

Girls of all ages explained that feeling compelled to act older than their age can cause great unhappiness and might therefore lead to some of the mental health problems the groups had discussed together. Many talked about being put under sexual pressure from boys in the playground or feeling obliged to wear clothes that make them look older than they are. The pressure from magazines and websites directly targeting young girls with messages that they should aspire to be thin, take drugs and even have plastic surgery was mentioned by several. Feeling obliged to be in situations where they might be offered alcohol or drugs was a further concern. Girls who had physically matured before their peers were

felt to be under particular strain. The ever-growing checklist of 'ideals' that girls should fulfil was also seen as additional ammunition for bullies looking for excuses to single girls out.

However, too little freedom presents its own difficulties as girls with different boundaries from their peers were believed to experience feelings of isolation, loneliness and frustration.

Bullying, teasing and exclusion were also viewed as potential drivers for emotional difficulties by many girls – particularly if carried out frequently over a prolonged period. Several girls felt cultural differences – such as the types of food you bring into school – can place them under significant pressure, and some spoke directly of racism.

Negative feelings and behaviour that can get one into trouble were also thought to be prompted by boredom. Girls linked having nothing to do with aggression, being tempted to break the law and self-

harm. Pressure to have the money for the latest gadgets was also seen to affect many young girls.

Family breakdown and arguments at home were felt to be upsetting for many girls – particularly if they feel anger or sadness is being taken out on them. Girls described the pressures of feeling caught up in rows and experiencing conflicting loyalties as parents compete for attention and affection. Deaths of pets and grandparents were also seen as causes of unhappiness and difficult behaviour.

Even among the youngest girls academic pressure and the stresses and strains of exams remain one of the greatest causes of anxiety – with several describing fear and sleepless nights before tests. Feeling like they have let down the high expectations of parents and teachers was a marked concern for many, while doing their best and still failing to do as well as they hoped undermined the confidence of others.

## Making matters worse?

Girls participating in the polling were asked whether they feel particular emotions in different situations.

- Under pressure to own cool gadgets – iPods, mobile phones or computers – or to wear particular clothes, a fifth have felt anger (20 per cent) or sadness (23 per cent), and a quarter have felt worried or bad about themselves.
- Looking at pictures of models, popstars and actresses makes a fifth feel sad, two-fifths feel bad about themselves and over a tenth (12 per cent) feel angry.
- Meanwhile, media stories that portray young people in a bad light make half the girls who took part angry (50 per cent), a quarter worried (23 per cent) and almost two-fifths sad (39 per cent).
- Boredom and not having anything to do saddens a quarter (24 per cent), makes 17 per cent feel angry and leaves over two-fifths (43 per cent) feeling lonely.
- Exams and tests leave three-quarters feeling worried (74 per cent) and a fifth experiencing anger (19 per cent) or feeling bad about themselves (19 per cent).
- Changing school worries half, saddens two-fifths (41 per cent), makes a fifth feel angry (19 per cent) and a third feel lonely (34 per cent).
- Family trouble has left over half feeling unhappy (56 per cent), 46 per cent feeling angry and two out of five feeling worried and that no one understands them.

# Reaching resilience

Talking to someone they trust helps girls handle difficult emotions.



What makes girls feel better when they are sad, angry, worried or down?

- Three-fifths say that talking to their friends helps.
- Forty-four per cent like to do something they are good at.
- Two-fifths talk to their families.
- Over a third like to go to Guides (35 per cent) and spend time without any boys around (37 per cent).
- A quarter like to help someone else.

‘Clubs always help, if you have clubs at school because then everyone is really friendly there.’

Girls talked about the importance of stable and supportive families and friendship groups during discussions about why some girls might be more susceptible to mental health problems than others. Several girls talked about friends who did not have a mum around to talk to finding things harder to cope with.

Girls who might be marked out as different from their peers were seen by some as less resilient to ups and downs. Money was also seen to affect resilience if circumstances singled them out from the majority and made them a target for bullies. Living in remote locations – a long way from friends – was also felt to leave girls vulnerable.

When asked what might be done to help girls their age who experience mental health problems, talking

to someone they trust was seen as the best way of tackling difficult feelings. Many girls said friends should be the first port of call, but they also acknowledged that girls their age would be out of their depth when it came to some of the issues that had been discussed. In those circumstances, girls felt talking to their mum or other family member – who might have had similar experiences when they were young – might be helpful. Many felt they could also turn to sympathetic teachers and school nurses if they could be sure they would not be judged for their feelings.

Making sure girls feel included at school and in their friendship groups was also seen as key to tackling problems. Several suggested encouraging girls to do things that they are good at – building confidence

‘That’s why you need to keep in (Guides) because you’re loved here.’

and helping girls to feel proud of themselves. Generally, love, support, hugs, laughter and being made to feel normal were seen as crucial to making girls feel happier.

However, in more serious cases girls felt that having easy access to counsellors or knowledge of organisations like Childline would be key. Girls also talked about the importance of online resources – chatrooms, blogs and MSN – particularly for girls who are nervous or reluctant to talk about their problems.

Finally many girls felt that it was important to have access to a girl-only space – like guiding – where friends can talk issues through without the interference of boys in a safe haven away from the pressures of school.

## Girls shout out!

### A call to action on emotional well-being

A panel of young Girlguiding UK members came together to develop a ten-point call to action for Guide Leaders, parents, teachers, politicians, retailers and friends to help young women suffering from mental health problems.

1. Give girls things to do: from adventure playgrounds to kung fu or street dancing.
2. Create safe places where girls can have freedom without parents worrying.
3. Boost confidence by giving girls opportunities to succeed outside school.
4. Encourage girls to try something new.
5. Make girls feel normal and accepted – whatever problems they might have.
6. Don't overwhelm them with advice – give them space.
7. Help them understand that they can't always help the way they feel.
8. Initiate a young mayor scheme – giving girls a say in important decisions.
9. Make information about where to turn for help easily available.
10. Use the Girlguiding UK website to offer advice and support.



### Thanks

Girlguiding UK would like to thank the following individuals and organisations for their contributions to this report:

- All the Guides, their parents and the volunteer Leaders who took part in the research.
- The Mental Health Foundation for its expertise and advice in developing this research.
- Opinion Leader for conducting the research and analysing the headline findings.
- Champollion Communications Consultancy for assistance with research and the report's development.