



# SUMMARY REPORT

## #Stressed #Savvy: Texas Girls Talk How today's girls describe the unique pressures of girlhood

*Pictured: Girls from Central Texas schools participating in 2016 We Are Girls Conference at Austin High School*

### INTRODUCTION

Created in Austin in 1996, today's Girls Empowerment Network supports and guides girls to make wise choices as they navigate the unique pressures of girlhood. Through its after-school programs, camps, events and conferences, GEN connects girls to each other and to adults who care about them – including parents, guardians and other role models. Through its programs, girls improve their self-awareness and self-esteem; relationship and conflict management skills; and also their critical thinking and media literacy skills, in particular as they relate to portrayals of girls and women in media and society and effect on body image.

GEN was founded to address the systematic decline of self-esteem in teen girls, as documented by researchers including Dr. Mary Pipher, author of a ground-breaking book, *Reviving Ophelia* (1995). Its original participants are now grown women. In its work serving thousands of girls each year, GEN staff and leaders see and hear firsthand the pressures that today's pre-teen and teenage women are facing. But what about girls who are not participating in GEN programs? What is on the minds and hearts of girls beyond GEN's audience?

This Summary Report highlights key findings from a qualitative study of girls ages 11-18 from different parts of Texas, titled **#Stressed #Savvy: Texas Girls Talk**. Researchers asked girls' opinions on their identity, relationships, sources of stress and visions for their future. **#Stressed #Savvy: Texas Girls Talk** points to positive changes in girls' experiences of growing up female, while it also reveals a significant amount of stress and overwhelming feelings that may be contributing to a national rise in depression and anxiety among young women.



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## METHODOLOGY

**#Stressed #Savvy: Texas Girls Talk** was conducted by Girls Empowerment Network with Mosaic Insight Group. Its methodology was an online study with a mix of activities (five activities over a week's time), asking for girls' opinions of themselves, their relationships, their well-being and their futures. Twenty eight girls participated including 17 between the ages of 11 and 13-years-old ("younger" in the report) and 11 girls between the ages of 14 and 17-years-old ("older" in the report). Ethnicities included 2/3 Caucasian, 1/4 Hispanic /Latina and the balance African American and Other. Household income levels were about 1/3 below \$55,000 household income, about half in the \$55,000-100,000 range and the balance (approximately 1/4) with incomes more than \$100,000. Few girls were actively involved with Girls Empowerment Network at the time of the study. All answers were confidential and no names/profile pics were used.

## GEN SAYS...

In its twenty years of working with girls and the adults who care about them, Girls Empowerment Network has developed a strong foundation of expertise on the pressures of girlhood – the personal, parental, social and societal pressures that affect girls' choices and behavior between the ages of 8 and 18. **#Stressed #Savvy: Texas Girls Talk** enhances our understanding of today's girls' experiences. More so than 20 years ago, today's girls are savvy and well-versed in vernacular of empowerment. They are a generation that sees unlimited possibilities for their futures and are familiar with a wide range of accomplishments by their role models. More than their mothers, and certainly more than their grandmothers, this generation of young women believes that the sky is the limit.

However, the empowerment jargon masks some important and troubling problems. The effects of stress on girls and young women is real and measureable, as rates of self-injury, depression, and anxiety increase. This anxiety and stress epidemic concerns us. One perspective to consider is that the pressure to be perfect and "have it all" is affecting women at a younger age than ever before -- from grown adults to teen girls.

Hearing girls share their thoughts on stress and the future affirms that our work is important. Girls Empowerment Network does several things very well that have a measureable, positive impact on girls:

1. We create safe spaces for conversation;
2. We create opportunities for bonding to each other and to adults in their lives (see "Relationships" summary below for insight on how connectedness reduces stress);
3. We teach effective coping skills to manage stress; and
4. We improve their media literacy skills.



*Pictured: Women volunteering at 2016 We Are Girls Conference at Austin High School.*



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It's easy to be complacent about how far women have come in the 21st century. We encourage our communities, our partners, parents and adults that care for teens to pay attention to stress. We believe that by paying attention to identifying and managing stress, we improve girls' resilience and confidence. This can positively affect participation in school and its academic outcomes. It may also increase her satisfaction with her physical appearance.

Stress is normal. But without support and healthy coping mechanisms, girls may turn to behaviors and decisions that are harmful. At Girls Empowerment Network, we work hard to create programs and solutions that effectively improve girls' lives in ways that she can manage and influence. Now that is #savvy.

## HIGHLIGHTS

### What we learned

**In transition:** It was clear that so much happens between middle school and high school. Younger girls were more likely to have challenging friendships and tight relationships with their parents while older girls had learned to limit the obvious "frenemies" and had more tension with their parents.

**Two Worlds:** Most seemed to live within a dual reality – the first level exists in places/with people where they're comfortable and can be themselves. These are within themselves, with family/friends and part of immersive activities. The second level is outside this bubble where they don't feel as safe, and worry and wonder about how they are seen and what people think.

**Stressed:** Participants talked about a fairly high level of ongoing stress in their lives. **Performing well at school** is the primary source, along with **getting everything done**. There seems to be a *grind it out* mentality and some worry (often as they go through high school) that the expectations and stress will just continue, or even get worse, as they make the move to college.

**Savvy:** Most girls seemed fluent in today's "empowered" vernacular, talking about being "healthy" and "having boundaries" while still obviously trying to figure out how to do those things. For instance, few mentioned appearance as a "wished for" description, instead using words like confident. However, it's clear appearance is a big deal to them. Perhaps they've learned not to say looks are a primary concern or talk about certain celebrity role models, even if those are a part of their lives.



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## IDENTITY & WORLD VIEW

The top two self-descriptive words revealed the tension between wanting to be connected and a desire to stand out as an individual. When asked to describe themselves, they choose words showing their desire to be connected to and different from others. **Connected** – kind, caring, loving, sweet and **Different** – weird, cool, creative, artsy.

*As girls mature (ages 14-16), they describe themselves more often in terms of their values (determined, hard-working, trustworthy).*

Girls feel pride in their own accomplishments but value feedback from others relating to who they are, not what they have achieved. **Their self-esteem is at its best when they are with friends who accept them, immersed in something they enjoy, or doing something to help others.**

Compliments have staying power when they are tied to who she is, not what she has done. Parents aren't a solid source of compliments that stick.

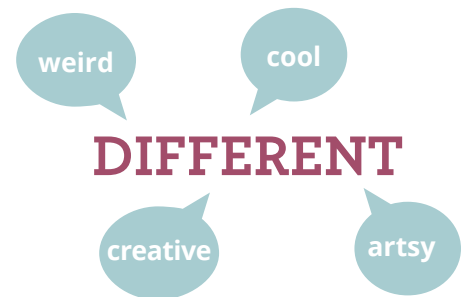
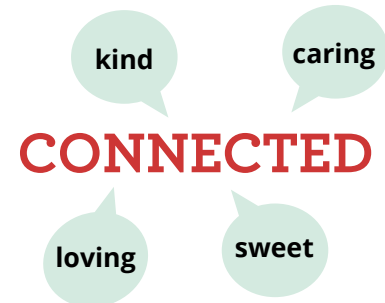
**What would she change?** Many girls would like to be more confident and outgoing; it's likely there is an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with physical appearance here.

**Many were clear and specific about the steps that would give them the future they wanted ... which may make it harder for them to be happy today.**

**When asked what would they change in their lives right now, the most common wishes were:** to not worry about school/grades, to be happier and less stressed; and to be liked as herself.

When asked about the future, younger girls talked about the process, while older girls were very specific about their objectives (where to live, with whom and what job to do). However, the older girls offered a glimpse into an arc of growth and increased self-awareness. They say school and future plans can be stressful, and they are happiest when they feel good about a few areas of their life (not just school). Those who had a "passion" or immersive interest tended to be more positive and self-assured, many older girls expressed pride for being recognized for their personal interests and strengths (music, photography, athletics).

Overall, for girls 14 and older, their world is bigger than the younger girls, and they mention a wider variety of role models and influences. Several talked about understanding the connection between attitude and outcomes (if I have a good attitude, if I slow down and take more time, things go better).



**“If I have a good attitude, if I slow down and take more time, things go better.”**



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## RELATIONSHIPS

Friendships were complicated – so important and yet often unpredictable, particularly for younger girls.

Younger girls were more likely to talk about friendship challenges – friends who were unpredictable, who made them feel self-conscious or insecure – than older girls (14+). Older girls are more likely to say they had challenging friends when they were younger but no longer do.

### **Participants truly valued the connection with their parents but wanted the freedom to explore life outside of the family.**

Relationships with others outside of their immediate family tended to be less complicated, offering acceptance, recognition and sometimes unconditional love.



*Pictured: Girls from Central Texas schools participating in 2016 We Are Girls Conference at Austin High School.*



### GEN TIPS

How girls want to be connected to their family: Easy conversation, be close to each other physically, parents saying something they're proud of, shared sense of humor, fun, "fast forgiveness."

## STRESS AND STRESS MANAGEMENT

Most feel they have some control over one major source of stress (school) and little control over another (appearance).

Most common source of stress: doing well in school, followed by appearance, and friendships.

- Wealthier households were more likely to mention fitting in at school, social media and the future as sources of stress
- Caucasian girls mentioned family, appearance more often than girls of color.

"Appearance" is more likely a source of stress among younger girls (11-13); older girls cited "getting everything done" as their source of stress.

- About half of the participants say they feel stress "often" or "all the time" and increases with older girls

How to deal: spending time alone, finding a distraction are most common tactics

- Many Hispanic/Latina girls in our panel mentioned physical activities and exercise as ways to manage stress. Caucasian girls talked about being online and talking to friends more often to manage stress.



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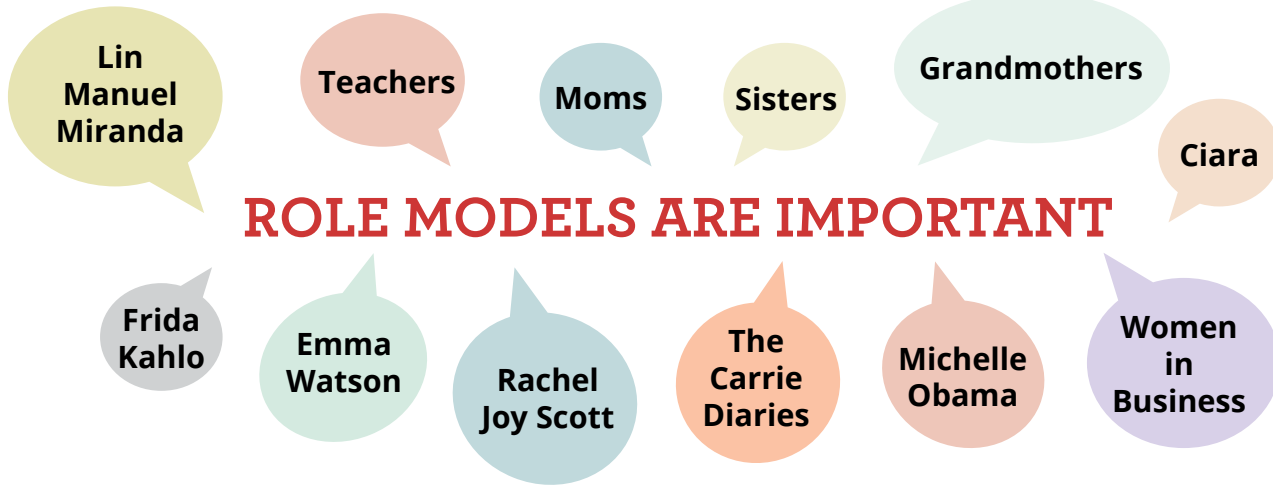
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## ROLE MODELS & REFERENCE POINTS

**Younger girls'** role models are found primarily in daily life, in their family or inspirational figures (Rachel Joy Scott, who died at Columbine) and Broadway director/writer Lin Manuel Miranda.

**Older girls'** role models also included daily life and expanded to include celebrities in arts, culture, business and leadership.



To learn more about our report #Stressed #Savvy, please contact Girls Empowerment Network.  
[www.GirlsEmpowermentNetwork.com](http://www.GirlsEmpowermentNetwork.com)

More about #Stressed Savvy: Texas Girls Talk

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