

MAKING SPACE FOR GIRLS

Report 1

May 2006

WILSON COUNTY GIRLS SYMPOSIUM

What are the factors in families, schools, and communities that contribute to girls engaging in risky and illegal behavior?

Imagine that you have been put in charge of developing programs or services in Wilson County that would help girls or be useful to them. What would you create?

These were among the questions addressed by girls and by juvenile justice and social service professionals at the Wilson County Girls Symposium. This symposium, the first of its kind in North Carolina, was designed to engage court-involved and other vulnerable girls, their parents and services providers in a dis-

cussion of issues critical to creating conditions within Wilson County that could contribute to improved lifestyles and outcomes for girls.

On the first Saturday in May, 2006, 20 girls and 13 service providers gathered together at the Farmington Heights Church of God to share their views. On hand to help for the day were representatives of the North Carolina Alliance for Girls, a state-wide association of organi-



zations concerned with the needs of girls, staff and “graduates” of Leadership CONNECTIONS, a state-wide leadership program for girls, and professionals with the North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention – 7th Judicial District. Faculty and graduate students from UNC Greensboro were present to “capture” the information. This report provides a preliminary analysis of the participants’ views about how Wilson County could better meet the needs of court-involved and at-risk girls, and, hopefully, prevent risky and delinquent behavior.

RISK FACTORS “R” US: INDIVIDUAL, FAMILY, PEER, AND COMMUNITY ARE ALL ARE IMPLICATED

Both the girl and adult participants at the symposium identified many factors that contribute to risky and delinquent behavior in girls. Both the girls and service providers recognized that the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors of the girls contribute to their “getting into trouble”. These include: having “attitude”, drinking and using drugs, being lonely, be-

ing jealous, stress, lack of power and feeling they don’t have a voice, becoming a mother, and “wanting to fit in”. In addition, our participants identified risk factors related to girls, boys, their families, and communities. For example, peer pressure, gossip, bullying, and girls both trying to protect friends and girls not “sticking together” can lead to trou-

ble. Similarly, fighting over boys, trying to impress boys, taunting by boys and sex can lead to trouble. Family factors included parents being absent, being bad role models, being hypocritical, and family violence. Community factors include lack of social and physical activities, gangs, and lack of good community role models.

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Risk Factors

- Wanting to fit in
- Peer pressure: hanging out with the wrong people
- Trying to impress boys and fighting over boys
- Parents fighting
- Not being with your real family
- Too much TV and not enough physical activities
- Prostitution

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES GIRLS USE: WHAT ARE THEY AND HOW COULD THEY BE IMPROVED?

Girls are seeking and/or receiving support from a variety of services at school and in the community. Some programs mentioned by the participants are those available to all girls; other programs mentioned are designed for at-risk or delinquent adolescents. Below is a summary of these services and the perceived weaknesses and strengths of programs in general. The information used for this report does not provide data on the extent to which girls made use of any of these services or how helpful the services were.

Programs available to all girls and boys: The girls and service providers mentioned programs and activities such as pep rallies, in-school activities, YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, recreation centers and roller rinks, churches, Sunday in the Park, Sup-

port our Students (SOS), Youth of Wilson, the PEACE Program, and sex education (not in schools).

Programs for at-risk and/or delinquent adolescents: Programs mentioned in this category were: in-school suspension, foster homes, Wesley Shelter for domestic violence, New Opportunities Program, Integrated Family Services, and Independent Living Program.



Strengths: As a group the programs available for girls in Wilson County offer many services of value. Programs exist which: help girls get needed medicines; provide a 'place to go', help them keep fit, help keep them from being suspended, show them how the 'real world is', provide one-on-one mentoring, promote field trips, help raise their self-esteem, and teach sportsmanship.

Areas for improvement: The participants identified ways that existing programs could be improved, including: offering more variety; adding dancing; offering more opportunities for 'talking'; obtaining more community and parental support; and offering more field trips. Of course, the need for additional resources was mentioned by service providers!

IDEAS FOR NEEDED SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

Below we describe the new programs and services the participants identified as being needed in Wilson County.

The court-involved girls identified the need for school-based groups for girls run by women. This group of girls was also interested in educational programs for new mothers as well as reliable day care. In addition, they were interested in new programs that helped them to feel, and be, safer. They identified the need for a Community Center for Girls.

The at-risk girls also identified the need for support groups for girls, teen talk sessions, job services, sex education programs as well as more education on relationships and drugs, access to sports, counseling, and activities to make school more interesting. It is important to note that this group was also interested in

'just having fun' and wanting to spend time with their friends. They recommended having access to programs that provided fun activities, games, and parties. They also identified the need for specialized programs for children whose parents were in rehabilitation and for better access to

doctors. Some of them expressed an interest in going to church more and in having a "mother-daughter day". It is unfortunate that some mentioned watching Jerry Springer and Maury Povich as ways they learned 'good information' about sexuality.

The juvenile justice, mental health, and social services providers also identified many needed services and programs. These included programs that provided sex and relationship education, pregnancy prevention and parent education and arts-based activities (e.g. music, dance, art) to stimulate

creativity. The providers identified the need for "life skills" education programs that teach financial management, resiliency, self-care and nurturing, the importance of, and how to access, higher education, and boundary setting. They also identified the need for peer mentoring. Also needed are more programs for the girls' parents that help them with their parenting and life skills, and help with care for their other children (so the girls would not carry that responsibility). Finally, they saw the need for more mental health services, more opportunity for girls to connect with positive role-models, and more proactive school counseling and more training for community professionals on how to help young girls.

The need for gender-specific programs and sex-education were identified by both the girls and services providers.

It is unfortunate that some girls mentioned watching Jerry Springer and Maury Povich as ways they learned 'good information' about sexuality.

IMAGINE YOU ARE 'QUEEN OF THE WORLD.'

What would you do if you were in charge? What programs and services would you develop for girls, for boys, for families and for communities? This was the last question addressed by the participants at the symposium. Both the girls and the providers placed strong emphasis on wanting more programs and activities for girls that engaged them in physical activity. Examples included: dance programs; cheerleading; basketball teams and camp; all sports camp; horseback riding, nature and bike trails. The desire for more recreation and arts programs, that included singing, dancing and music were also mentioned.

On a different note, many expressed the need for more job and vocational training programs, as well as the need for more jobs for youth and their par-

ents that paid above minimum wage. The "queens" also noted the need for programs geared toward the girls' parents to help families get along better, to show them how 'normal' children and parents act, and to teach parents about drugs.

Not surprisingly, many of the girls identified programs for boys that would benefit girls! These included: WATCH classes for boys 'in the middle of the 'hood so they won't need a ride to get there,' and programs to help boys go into the military

We need a Wilson County Community Center by for and about girls. A space for girls.

and onto higher education.

The participants envisioned a Community Center for Girls that could offer the following important gender-specific services: a safe space, parenting classes, self-care education, mentoring programs by those 'who have been there,' education to counter violence in video games and in the media, self-discovery, and gang prevention programs. This center could also organize and host art performances and other shows of interest (e.g., fashion). This community center could also have a hotline and could help connect girls to independent living programs and health care. Some of the providers indicated that such a center could be planned collectively by all the services agencies. And, of course, the girls!

COLLECTING AND ANALYZING THE INFORMATION

The participants at the symposium were divided into groups for small group discussion. The girls were divided into 4 groups: one group consisted only of girls already involved with DJJDP. The mental health and social service providers were divided into 2 groups. Each group had a facilitator. Staff and "graduates" of Leadership CONNECTIONS facilitated the groups of girls. Also present in each room were UNCG graduate students who took notes on laptop computers. In addition, each group recorded key ideas

on paper. UNCG faculty collected all of this information in order to create summary reports. The data in this report comes from the key ideas recorded on paper. A second, more detailed and thorough report will summarize the information collected on the computers. Funding for UNCG faculty and students was provided by the Ulrich Fund for the Center for Women's Health and Wellness and by research development funds at the Center for Youth, Family, and Community Partnerships.



The information was captured on computer by UNCG graduate students and on paper by participants. Data in this report comes from that collected on paper by participants.

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The 2006 Wilson County Girls Symposium was sponsored by

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