



NCCD Center for Girls and Young Women

The Center supports single gender or “girl only” juvenile justice environments

Background/Context

Girls in the juvenile justice system present with higher mental health issues and have patterns of victimization including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and trauma that are experienced different from boys. In most cases, these abuses have been perpetrated by males in their lives. These issues should be addressed in a gender-responsive way, ensuring that her environment is safe from revictimization. In 1990, the Valentine Foundation and Women's Way noted that girls need a space that is physically and emotionally safe, and removed from the demands for attention of adolescent males. The unique needs and issues facing girls should be addressed in a safe, trusting and supportive women-focused environment (Bloom, 1998 ; Belknap, Dunn, and Holsinger, 1997). In addition to abuse and trauma, female substance abusers report different histories and life courses for their disorders. Their characteristics differ, usually requiring different treatment approaches and less structure than for males.

“The practice of serving girls in a setting without boys is a cornerstone of gender-specific services... to be sure, it is these programs that are moving in a promising direction toward providing services that are responsive to the unique needs and issues of girls” (Iowa Commission on Women, 2005).

Advantages of same sex juvenile justice environments for girls

Philosophy regarding her sense of “self”

- Females' sense of self is manifested and develops differently in female specific groups as opposed to coed groups (Bloom, 1998).
- Successful programs must address the social realities of gender and racial inequality in an environment that is sensitive to girls culturally and as females (Bloom, 1998; p. 19).
- Female participants may be more likely to speak freely about personal or sensitive issues when there are no males around. In addition, the presence of a male in the group may produce sexual tension—no matter how innocent—at a time when young women need to be concentrating on themselves” Myhand and Kivel, 1998; p. 11).

Treatment Outcomes: addressing treatment issues in single-gender environments for girls

There is a body of social psychological research that examines gender composition of groups. In general, women display more interpersonal variation when they are in single-gender groups as opposed to men who display more interpersonal variation in style in mixed groups (Hodgins, EL-Guebaly, & Addington, 1997). When considering dynamics of primary treatment (e.g., trauma, substance abuse), homogeneous groups should be used (Bloom and Covington, 2001).

Research has shown the following about single gender treatment groups for females:

- Discuss issues that they would not discuss in co-ed groups.
- Display a wider range of behaviors and skills that are not displayed in the presence of male clients.
- provide positive role modeling, help normalize feelings, and create an emotionally safe and supportive environment that allows women to address issues of abuse at a rate and intensity appropriate for each individual (Bloom and Covington, 1998; Nelson-Zlupko et al, 1995).
- In their group discussions, they focused on feelings, emotions, and personal experiences, rotating leadership roles among the females in the group. During the same eight week period, the discussions in the men-only groups focused on activities, accomplishments, competition, and skills, with no rotation of leadership (Covington and Beckett, 1988).
- In a study of 200 women who were randomly assigned to either a single gender group or a mixed gender group, the women in the specialized treatment unit showed more successful rehabilitation regarding alcohol consumption and social adjustment (Dahlgreen and Willander, 1989).
- Findings from a qualitative study with 30 girls in a gender-specific placement suggest that gender-specific services foster an increased sense of community, which has been linked to developing and integrating a healthy identity in adolescents (Smith and Smith, 2005).

Research has shown that for women in mixed or co-ed treatment groups, there is often a smaller ratio of females than male members, where women report a gender imbalance. The result is potential withdrawal from discussion or failure to address personal issues. When issues are left unaddressed in co-ed groups, this may magnify a woman's feelings of guilt, shame, and failure, and ultimately adversely affect treatment outcomes (Hodgins et al, 1997; Nelson-Zlupko et al, 1995).

References

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"Single-gender", "Same-sex" terms have been used to describe gender-specific environments for both boys only and girls only programming.

Iowa Commission on Women collects information about girls served in same sex programs and co-ed programs by judicial district. http://74.125.47.132/search?q=cache:ZHa_wacl8RUJ:www.state.ia.us/dhr/sw/ICSW_initiatives/juvenile_justice/docs/PromisingDirections05.pdf