

Creating a Safe Space for Girls

A safe space is one in which girls feel as though they can be themselves, without explanation, judgment, or ridicule. Girl Scout research shows that girls are looking for an emotionally safe environment, where confidentiality is respected and they can express themselves without fear.

The environment you create is as important—maybe more—than the activities girls do; it's the key to developing the sort of group that girls want to be part of. The following sections share some tips on creating a warm, safe environment for girls.

Girl-Adult Partnership

Girl Scouting is for the enjoyment and benefit of the girls, so meetings are built around girls' ideas. When you put the girls first, you're helping develop a team relationship, making space for the development of leadership skills, and allowing girls to benefit from the guidance, mentoring, and coaching of caring adults.

The three Girl Scout processes (girl-led, learning by doing, and cooperative learning) are integral to the girl-adult partnership. Take time to read about processes and think about how to incorporate them into your group's experiences. [GIRL SCOUT PROGRAM: THE GIRL SCOUT LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE \(GSLE\)](#)

Progression

Girl Scout activities should be age-appropriate and should build on existing skills, while being just a little bit (attainably) challenging. Activities should build the girls' skills as they go.

Recognizing and Supporting Each Girl

Girls look up to their volunteers. They need to know that you consider each of them an important person. They can survive a poor meeting place or an activity that flops, but they cannot endure being ignored or rejected. Recognize acts of trying as well as instances of clear success. Emphasize the positive qualities that make each girl worthy and unique. Be generous with praise and stingy with rebuke. Help girls find ways to show acceptance of and support for one another.

Promoting Fairness

Girls are sensitive to injustice. They forgive mistakes if they are sure you are trying to be fair. They look for fairness in the ways responsibilities are shared, in handling of disagreements, and in responses to performance and accomplishment. When possible, consult girls as to what they think is fair before decisions are made. Explain your reasoning and show why you did something. Be willing to apologize if needed. Try to see that the responsibilities, as well as the chances for feeling important, are equally divided. Help girls explore and decide for themselves the fair ways of solving problems, carrying out activities, and responding to behavior and accomplishments.

Building Trust

Girls need your belief in them and your support when they try new things. They must be sure you will not betray a confidence. Show girls you trust them to think for themselves and use their own judgment. Help them make the important decisions in the group. Help them correct their own

mistakes. Help girls give and show trust towards one another. Help them see how trust can be built, lost, regained, and strengthened.

Managing Conflict

Girls expect and want conflicts to be dealt with consistently and fairly. For more information, go to [[Girls and Adults: Preventing & Managing Conflicts](#)]

Inspiring Open Communication

Girls want someone who will listen to what they think, feel, and want to do. They like having someone they can talk to about important things, including things that might not seem important to adults. Listen to the girls. Respond with words and actions. Speak your mind openly when you are happy or concerned about something, and encourage girls to do this, too. Leave the door open for girls to seek advice, share ideas and feelings, and propose plans or improvements. Help girls see how open communication can result in action, discovery, better understanding of self and others, and a more comfortable climate for fun and accomplishment.

Communicating Effectively with Girls of Any Age

When communicating with girls, consider the following tips:

- **Listen:** Listening to girls, as opposed to telling them what to think, feel, or do (no "you should") is the first step in helping them take ownership of their program.
- **Be honest:** If you're not comfortable with a topic or activity, say so. No one expects you to be an expert on every topic. Ask for alternatives or seek out volunteers with the required expertise. (Owning up to mistakes—and apologizing for them—goes a long way with girls.)
- **Be open to real issues:** For girls, important topics are things like relationships, peer pressure, school, money, drugs, and other serious issues. (You'll also have plenty of time to discuss less weighty subjects.) When you don't know, listen. Also seek help from GSNorCal if you need assistance or more information than you currently have.
- **Show respect:** Girls often say that their best experiences were the ones where adults treated them as equal partners. Being spoken to as a young adult helps them grow.
- **Offer options:** Providing flexibility in changing needs and interests shows that you respect the girls and their busy lives. But whatever option is chosen, girls at every grade level also want guidance and parameters.
- **Stay current:** Be aware of the TV shows girls watch, movies they like, books and magazines they read, social media they engage with, and music they listen to—not to pretend you have the same interests, but to show you're interested in their world.

One way to communicate with girls is through the LUTE method—listen, understand, tolerate, and empathize. Here is a breakdown of the acronym LUTE to remind you of how to respond when a girl is upset, angry, or confused.

- **L = Listen:** Hear her out, ask for details, and reflect back what you hear, such as, "What happened next?" or "What did she say?"
- **U = Understand:** Try to be understanding of her feelings, with comments such as, "So what I hear you saying is . . ." "I'm sure that upset you," "I understand why you're unhappy," and "Your feelings are hurt; mine would be, too".
- **T = Tolerate:** You can tolerate the feelings that she just can't handle right now on her own. It signifies that you can listen and accept how she is feeling about the situation. Say something like: "Try talking to me about it. I'll listen," "I know you're mad—talking it out helps," and "I can handle it—say whatever you want to."
- **E = Empathize:** Let her know you can imagine feeling what she's feeling, with comments such as, "I'm sure that really hurts" or "I can imagine how painful this is for you."

Addressing the Needs of Older Girls

Consider the following tips when working with teenage girls:

- Think of yourself as a partner, and as a coach or mentor, as needed (not a "leader").
- Ask girls what rules they need for safety and what group agreements they need to be a good team.
- Understand that girls need time to talk, unwind, and have fun together.
- Ask what they think and what they want to do.
- Encourage girls to speak their minds.
- Provide structure, but don't micromanage.
- Give everyone a voice in the group.
- Treat girls like partners.
- Don't repeat what's said in the group to anyone outside of it (unless necessary for a girl's safety).

Girl Scout Research Institute

It's amazing what you can learn when you listen to girls. Since its founding in 2000, the Girl Scout Research Institute (GSRI) has become an internationally recognized center for research and public policy information on the development and well-being of girls. Not just Girl Scouts, but all girls.

In addition to research staff, the GSRI draws on experts in child development, education, business, government, and the not-for-profit sector. They provide the youth development field with definitive research reviews that consolidate existing studies. And, by most measures, they are now the leading source of original research on the issues that girls face and the social trends that affect their lives. www.GirlScouts.org/research