

### When Sensitive Topics Come Up

In Girl Scouts, "sensitive issues" are subjects that may be deeply rooted in beliefs and values, or are controversial topics. Examples are topics such as these: relationships, dating, violence, human sexuality, eating disorders, pregnancy, suicide, death, drug/alcohol use, or current events of a controversial nature.

It's not uncommon for girls of any age to spontaneously talk about these topics. They are faced with them in school, in the news, and in magazines, and will want to talk about them together. This is especially true with pre-teen and teenage girls. Also, the girls in your troop may choose a sensitive issue as a program focus. Girl Scouting plays an important role in helping girls explore their values and beliefs and gaining self-confidence in their ability to make good decisions.

According to *Feeling Safe: What Girls Say*, a 2003 Girl Scout Research Institute study, girls are looking for groups that allow connection and a sense of close friendship. They want volunteers who are teen savvy and can help them with issues they face, such as bullying, peer pressure, dating, athletic and academic performance, and more. Some of these issues may be considered "sensitive" by parents, and they may have opinions or input about how, and whether, Girl Scouts should cover these topics should be covered with their daughters.

Girl Scouts welcomes and serves girls and families from a wide spectrum of faiths and cultures. When girls wish to participate in discussions or activities that could be considered sensitive—even for some—put the topic on hold until you have spoken with parents and received guidance from GSNorCal.

You should know, GSUSA does not take a position or develop materials on issues relating to human sexuality, birth control, or abortion. We feel our role is to help girls develop self-confidence and good decision-making skills that will help them make wise choices in all areas of their lives. We believe parents and guardians, along with schools and faith communities, are the primary sources of information on these topics.

Parents/guardians make all decisions regarding their girl's participation in Girl Scout program that may be of a sensitive nature. As a volunteer leader, you must get written parental permission for any locally-planned program offering that could be considered sensitive. Included on the permission form should be the topic of the activity, any specific content that might create controversy, and any action steps the girls will take when the activity is complete. *Sensitive and Controversial Issues Permission forms* are available from [www.gsnorcal.org/forms](http://www.gsnorcal.org/forms). Be sure to have a form for each girl, and keep the forms on hand in case a problem arises. For activities not sponsored by Girl Scouts, find out in advance (from organizers or other volunteers who may be familiar with the content) what will be presented, and follow GSNorCal's guidelines for obtaining written permission.

**Listen and Ask:** As the preceding sections suggest, you can help most just by being an empathetic listener. Sometimes, you may also find that by asking questions, you can help girls figure out how to get more information and guidance at school or at home. You don't have to solve their issues, but you can put them on the trail toward solving them.

**Arrange for Education:** If you observe that girls need or want more information on a topic that concerns them, check with your Volunteer Development Manager (VDM), Membership Manager (MM) or other GSNorCal staff member about opportunities for arranging topical discussions with experts on areas such as healthy eating, or coping with bullies and cliques. You can reach your VDM/MM at [info@gsnorcal.org](mailto:info@gsnorcal.org). They will get back to you within a few days.

Don't feel that you have to solve everything! Your role is to help girls get information from those trained people who can provide it. Council staff has built up relationships with community experts who can help.

What may seem benign to one person could be a sensitive issue for another. When you or the girls wish to participate in anything that could be considered controversial, including health or education in human sexuality, advocacy projects, work with religious groups, or anything that could consider a political/social debate, put the topic on hold until you've obtained written parental permission. See the [Sensitive and Controversial Issues Parent Permission Form](#) available from [www.gsnorcal.org/forms](http://www.gsnorcal.org/forms). For non-Girl Scout activities, find out in advance from organizers or other volunteers who may be familiar with the content what will be presented, and follow GSNorCal's guidelines for obtaining written permission.

**Report concerns:** There may be times when you worry about the health and well-being of girls in your group. Alcohol, drugs, sex, bullying, abuse, depression, and eating disorders are some of the issues girls may encounter. You are on the front-line of girls' lives, and you are in a unique position to identify a situation in which a girl may need help. If you believe a girl is at risk of hurting herself or others, your role is to promptly bring that information to her parent/guardian or the council so she can get the expert assistance she needs. Your concern about a girl's well-being and safety is taken seriously, and GSNorCal staff will guide you in addressing these concerns.

**If you suspect that a girl needs special help:**

Contact your VDM or MM at GSNorCal ([info@gsnorcal.org](mailto:info@gsnorcal.org)) and find out how to refer the girl and her parents/guardians to experts at school or in the community. Share your concern with the girl's family, if this is feasible. Here are a few signs that could indicate a girl needs expert help:

- Marked changes in behavior or personality (for example, unusual moodiness, aggressiveness, or sensitivity)
- Declining academic performance and/or inability to concentrate
- Withdrawal from school, family activities, or friendships
- Fatigue, apathy, or loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities
- Sleep disturbances
- Increased secretiveness
- Deterioration in appearance and personal hygiene.
- Eating extremes, unexplained weight loss, distorted body image
- Tendency toward perfectionism
- Giving away prized possessions; preoccupation with the subject of death

- Unexplained injuries such as bruises, burns, or fractures
- Avoidance of eye contact or physical contact
- Excessive fearfulness or distrust of adults
- Abusive behavior toward other children, especially younger ones

### **Your Role with Sensitive Issues**

When Girl Scout activities involve sensitive issues, your role is that of caring adult who can help girls acquire their own skills and knowledge in a supportive atmosphere, not someone who advocates any particular position. Here are some guidelines for you:

- Remain neutral
- Provide factual information
- Respect the girls' family values
- Admit when you don't know an answer, or if the topic makes you uncomfortable
- Express confidence in the girls' decision-making abilities.
- Protect the girls' privacy
- Gently interrupt if the discussion becomes too personal and suggest that you talk it over after the meeting
- If possible, bring in experts
- [Sensitive and Controversial Issues Permission Forms](#) should be used whenever you feel the families may wish to be notified. Every region of our council and the country differs in terms of what families feel is okay for girls to discuss at various grade levels.
- Consult with GSNorCal staff for additional support (and whenever there are legal issues involved).