

A Gender-Responsive Approach to Working with Girls and Gender Expansive Youth

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Girls and gender expansive youth often enter the juvenile justice system for reasons distinct from those that cisgender boys experience—reasons rooted in trauma, gender-based violence, unstable housing, and systemic inequities. Their responses to these challenges, such as running away from unsafe environments or disengaging from harmful school settings, are often self-protective. Yet systems frequently criminalize these survival strategies, leading to deeper involvement for low-level offenses or noncriminal behaviors like status offenses and technical violations.

Despite their unique pathways into the system, girls and gender expansive youth remain overlooked in both program design and evaluation. Many publicly endorsed interventions have never been assessed for their effectiveness with girls, and those that have often show limited impact—or even harm.

To improve outcomes, responses must be fundamentally different. Programs must recognize and address the specific gendered and racialized experiences shaping girls' lives, including exposure to violence; caregiving burdens; adultification; and systemic barriers to education, health, and economic opportunity. Effective programming does not simply acknowledge these realities—it works actively to undo their harms.

Research from the past decade highlights a set of core principles and strategies that work for girls because they are designed to meet their needs directly. Gender-responsive programming is defined not solely by the services offered, but by *how* those services are delivered. The difference lies in approaches that build trust and adapt to girls' lives—rather than just monitor compliance. A gender-responsive framework responds to the realities of young people living at the intersections of patriarchy, racism, and classism, offering a pathway to meaningful, lasting support.

Gender-responsive programs create meaningful, systemwide change for girls and gender expansive youth—helping to prevent incarceration, divert youth from the legal system, provide alternatives to detention, and support successful reintegration into the community.

Here are the four principles of the gender-responsive framework, along with specific strategies and programmatic processes needed to implement them.

Evidence that gender-responsive programs work

While few evidence-based interventions have been explicitly designed using a gender-responsive framework, those that do exist demonstrate significantly greater effectiveness compared to traditional, gender-neutral approaches. The ROSES (Resilience, Opportunity, Safety, Education, Strength) program is a notable example. When evaluated against a typical system response, ROSES produced markedly stronger outcomes across several key indicators for girls involved in the juvenile justice system.¹ Compared to gender-neutral programming, ROSES yielded

- more than **twice** the reduction in girls' mental health challenges,
- more than **three times** the reduction in legal system contact (rearrest or reincarceration),
- more than **four times** the increase in girls' resilience, and
- more than **six times** the increase in girls' safety.

Gender-Responsive Principle 1: Take a Structural Approach

An effective strategy for girls requires a structural lens—one that aims to transform the social and systemic contexts influencing girls' lives rather than focusing solely on individual-level change. Structural factors such as poverty, housing instability, inadequate access to mental health services, and systemic discrimination significantly affect girls' trajectories and how institutions engage with girls.

A structural approach is not the same as—and is rarer than—a holistic approach. Indeed, many interventions for system-involved girls emphasize holistic and individualized care, acknowledging girls' unique experiences and needs. While this approach can be helpful, it may be insufficient if it does not also address the broader structural forces that shape girls' experiences. Girls' risks and needs are not only personal but also deeply influenced by the environments in which they live—that is, the social structures that shape their social conditions, including the choices and access to resources they have in the first place.

A structural approach to gender-responsive programming begins with the belief that girls have a right to safety, education, and opportunity—and that systems must work to remove the barriers that deny those rights. This means focusing not only on how girls respond to harm, but also on changing the environments that produce it. Practitioners often recognize the contexts that harm girls—such as sexual abuse, family violence, and poverty—but programs too often focus on helping girls adapt or survive, rather than on shifting those harmful conditions. For example, if a girl stops attending school because she shares a campus with an abusive partner, a typical response might include healthy relationship workshops or counseling. While well-intentioned, this approach can place the burden on the girl to manage her situation. A structural approach, instead, prioritizes her right to safety and learning. It would support a school transfer for the girl if desired, address barriers like transportation or credit transfer, and offer emotional support and safety planning on her terms.

Taking a structural approach to gender-responsive programming targets the systems and contexts that shape girls' lives—rather than blaming girls or their families—by recognizing structural barriers, centering girls' rights, and working to change the conditions around them.

Gender-Responsive Principle 2: Prioritize Self-Determination

Gender-responsive programming uses a self-determination approach that recognizes girls as experts in their own lives. Like a strengths-based approach, it values and builds on girls' inherent strengths

and abilities. Instead of asking girls to simply agree to a plan made for them, gender-responsive programming co-creates programs that align with their needs and prioritize their choices. The program is not in charge of making decisions about what is best for girls—girls are.

A self-determination approach can be contrasted with what some disability scholars have called the “medical model.”² This framework neglects social factors of disability, placing the full burden of accountability on the individual while giving medical authorities the power to diagnose and determine treatment.³

Some experts see the medical model’s reliance on clinician-led decision-making and limited patient input as necessary for medical reasoning. Yet these same features overlook girls’ lived experiences and broader life contexts, making the model ill-suited for gender-responsive care.

In juvenile justice contexts, this kind of top-down, pathologizing approach fails to account for the complex realities of girls’ lives and their resource needs. Without understanding these broader factors and engaging girls’ understanding of their own lives, programs risk misdiagnosing the root of the problem and offering ineffective solutions.⁴

Gender-Responsive Principle 3: Humanize Girls

Gender-responsive programming must make space for girls’ full human potential—including their dreams and sources of joy. While addressing the structural challenges girls face and supporting their self-determined goals, programs must also recognize their fundamental developmental needs for joy, fun, imagination, play, connection, and love. This work requires a foundation of nonjudgmental, unconditional positive regard—holding the belief that girls want what’s best for themselves and have the right to experience childhood and for their cultural traditions to be recognized and celebrated.

Juvenile justice-involved girls navigate multiple systems that strip away their humanity and childhood. They face racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia—forces that limit their choices, reduce them to stereotypes, and isolate them from others. Their involvement in the court system further reduces their experiences to a series of compliance-based checkboxes, disconnecting them from their full selves and often retraumatizing them.

To truly humanize girls, gender-responsive programs must see them as whole—messy, complex, joyful, and fully human. Programs must be designed to recognize this complexity, adapt as girls’ lives shift, and keep the ultimate goal at the center: helping them build a life worth living.

Gender-Responsive Principle 4: Shift Accountability to Programs

When asked, “Accountable to whom?” and “Accountable to what?” gender-responsive programs answer: to girls and their dreams, wants, and needs. This means that gender-responsive programs look first at how the program can change to meet the needs and dreams of girls rather than require that girls change to meet the needs of the program. This shift in accountability prevents gender-responsive programs from unwittingly reproducing cycles of systemic harm in which girls continue to fail out of the programs that are supposed to help them and are driven deeper into the system.

Traditional approaches inherently position girls as accountable to the system, the program, or others, often framing them as responsible for their past harm, “lack of morals,” or low motivation. The term *accountability* is often used to blame girls for not complying with court mandates, completing program requirements, or taking sole responsibility for their actions. Gender-responsive programs shift this perspective by holding the program itself—not the girls—accountable.

Strategies for Gender-Responsive Programming

1. Put relationships at the center of care and access to resources

Strong, trusting relationships between girls and caring adults are essential for understanding what girls need and helping them access opportunities to grow, heal, and stay engaged. Programs should

- promote open, honest, and nonjudgmental communication;
- prioritize active listening over teaching or mentoring so that girls feel heard and valued; and
- take time to understand the deeper challenges behind girls' behavior and needs—especially the barriers they face in their daily lives across many contexts.

2. Ensure access to essential resources

Gender-responsive programs must prioritize resource access to meet girls' basic needs and create stability. This must happen before girls are asked to take part in other program requirements. Programs should provide

- **economic support**, including stipends for participation;
- **resource support**, such as childcare, rental assistance, housing, and longer-term food resources;
- **tangible necessities**, such as meals, snacks, hygiene products, and transportation assistance;
- **flexible financial assistance** to address urgent needs for participants and their families; and
- **other resources** that girls identify as essential to their safety, well-being, and sense of self.

3. Prioritize autonomy and self-determination

Gender-responsive programming requires ongoing commitment and flexibility. Strategies include

- offering multiple program choices;
- structuring program choices so that girls get to decide what they want to engage in, when, and how;
- providing multiple reengagement opportunities without punitive consequences;
- adapting services based on participant feedback and allowing for choice in activities and services;
- using culturally affirming practices that validate girls' diverse identities and lived experiences;
- supporting girls if they change their minds about participation by building in multiple ways to engage, succeed, and receive credit;
- obtaining girls' consent before engaging with caregivers and other people in their lives to honor the complexity of girls' relationships and uphold their right to autonomy and privacy; and
- showing up again and again (even—and especially—when girls don't), and in different ways, to recognize their humanity and complexity.

4. Emphasize flexibility, fun, and engagement

Girls engage more deeply with advocacy-based programs that allow for joy. To maximize engagement

- build in time for breaks, laughter, and unstructured activities;
- avoid rigid, compliance-based models that mirror punitive systems; and
- offer experiences that affirm girls' identities and celebrate their strengths.

5. Deliver services in the community

Programs should be accessible where girls live, study, and spend their time. Girls should not have to navigate unfamiliar or restrictive institutional spaces to receive support. Programs should

- meet girls where they are—whether in schools, community centers, or other safe spaces;
- recognize and value the spaces where girls already engage;
- leverage all safe digital platforms to support engagement;
- reduce logistical barriers by providing accessible locations, virtual options, or mobile services;
- ensure that program environments are welcoming, youth friendly, and free from system surveillance; and
- provide program staff with MetroCards/gas to allow flexibility in meeting locations.

6. Push back against systemic demands

Programs should be aware of legal system demands and navigate them intentionally, prioritizing girls' well-being over system compliance. This includes

- questioning the assumptions the system makes about girls' lives—such as the idea that any program is better than no program at all;
- challenging harmful mandates that do not serve girls' best interests;
- finding alternatives that will meet mandates without creating economic, emotional, and time and effort burdens for girls; and
- using system knowledge to provide necessary documentation, advocacy, and support for legal decision-making in ways that align with girls' goals.

7. Build coping strategies and patience within your program to handle inevitable challenges

Programs should resist punitive responses to challenges and allow time for trust and engagement to develop. This means

- prioritizing trust and relationship building with girls and resisting the pressure to embrace quick fixes or rapid compliance with program or court mandates, recognizing that meaningful engagement and lasting change require time, emotional resilience, and the ability to make—and learn from—mistakes;
- recognizing that meaningful progress takes time and requires sustained, compassionate support from program staff, and incentivizing staff to develop coping strategies to tolerate feelings of distress, practice patience, and continue to show up for girls;
- placing responsibility on the program for setting girls up to succeed, rather than labeling girls as noncompliant or program failures;
- valuing long-term, self-determined solutions over quick fixes and incentivizing this work for staff;
- expecting girls to make mistakes and normalizing and planning for this in programming; and
- creating an internal culture of respect, communication, and self-determination that models the values staff use in working with girls.

By integrating these strategies, gender-responsive programs can create environments that truly support girls and gender expansive youth, address their needs, prioritize their voices, and advocate for systemic change.

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This brief is part of a multi-part publication that addresses various aspects of ending girls' incarceration. The complete set is available at vera.org/ending-girls-incarceration-how-to.

Endnotes

1. Shabnam Javdani, *Reducing Crime for Girls in the Juvenile Justice System through Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships* (Washington, DC: Office of Justice Programs, 2020), <https://perma.cc/8G6L-AA5L>.
2. Andrew J. Hogan, "Social and medical models of disability and mental health: evolution and renewal," *Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ)* 191, no. 1 (2019), E16-E18, <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/191/1/E16>.
3. Julie F. Smart and David W. Smart, "Models of Disability: Implications for the Counseling Profession," *Journal of Counseling & Development* 84, no. 1 (2006), 29-40, 31, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2006.tb00377.x>.
4. Ahmed Samei Huda, *The Medical Model in Mental Health: An Explanation and Evaluation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 3-4, 180, 225.