

Putting Gender-Responsive Principles into Practice

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Girls and gender expansive youth make up approximately one in four cases in the juvenile legal system and nearly one in two cases in the child welfare system.¹ Yet, their distinct experiences, needs, and responses are often overlooked. Cisgender boys remain the primary focus of gender-neutral programming—but research and practice experiences show that being *neutral* to gender actually *neglects* the needs of girls.

As highlighted in *A Gender-Responsive Approach to Working with Girls and Gender Expansive Youth*, one of the other briefs in this series, a gender-responsive framework offers a necessary shift. It is defined not solely by *what* services are offered, but also by *how* they are delivered. A gender-responsive framework responds to the lived realities of young people navigating the intersections of patriarchy, racism, classism, and systemic violence. It builds trust and positions girls as experts in their own lives, rather than as problems to be fixed. Importantly, it adapts to girls' evolving needs and goals, rather than monitoring their compliance to a rigid program model.

Across the country, a growing number of programs are putting these gender-responsive principles into practice. This brief highlights three exemplary programs that have stepped up to meet the needs of girls and gender expansive youth: JustUs; Young Women's Freedom Center (YWFC); and Resilience, Opportunity, Safety, Education, Strength (ROSES). Although their approaches vary, each program demonstrates a commitment to gender-responsive values and employs shared elements that other programs can learn from: taking a structural approach that prioritizes changing girls' contextual realities; humanizing girls through relationship-enhancing and trust engagement strategies; prioritizing self-determination; and shifting accountability from youth to programs.

JustUs: A Focus on Building Relationships

JustUs is New York City's first gender-responsive diversion program, created to address a gap in programming for girls and gender expansive youth involved in or at risk of entering the juvenile justice system: Most programs fail to address the trauma and the structural drivers of inequity that bring girls into the system in the first place. JustUs's strength lies in its healing-centered approach to care, which recognizes that young people's survival behaviors, such as running away and using substances, are often a coping response to neglect, abuse, and other structural harms.

JustUs builds therapeutic relationships to help girls and gender expansive youth who are involved in the juvenile justice system navigate the complex realities they face. Rather than operating from a compliance-based model, JustUs centers youth autonomy and voice by providing meaningful opportunities to develop girls' and gender expansive youth's confidence, autonomy, and skills to reduce the number of these youth involved in the system. JustUs offers the type of therapeutic support that girls are likely to find meaningful and engaging. These therapeutic resources are supplemented with community engagement, career analysis, and paid internship opportunities.

This combined approach allows girls to complete a valuable form of diversion programming, instead of “failing up” from diversion to more intensive levels of the juvenile legal system, such as probation or detention. As such, JustUs’s position in the service array as a gender-responsive diversion program is critical.

Through its nine guiding principles—healing-centered approach, self-determination, flexibility, system resistance, safe spaces, economic empowerment, challenging binary thinking, centering lived experience in hiring, and centering youth voices in program design—JustUs offers youth a sense of belonging, role models, and guidance at every step, including by

- conducting multiple interviews to help youth become familiar with the program space and staff;
- providing individual and group programming that builds adult–youth and peer relationships;
- offering flexible schedules that reduce barriers such as transportation, school, work, or life obligations;
- supporting youth in creating and modifying individual goals to promote self-determination and flexibility;
- providing financial compensation to reduce economic stressors and increase program stability;
- educating program participants on structural oppression and its impact on emotional, behavioral, physical, relational, and communal well-being; and
- ensuring access to program space and staff after program completion.

To learn more, visit <https://www.risingground.org/justus/>.

Young Women’s Freedom Center: A Community-Based Model

For more than 30 years, YWFC has delivered programming throughout California to girls and gender expansive youth impacted by the juvenile legal and child welfare systems. YWFC’s services go beyond typical programming; they represent a comprehensive and radical vision toward self-determination, collective healing, and personal and social transformation. YWFC serves multiple generations of young people entrenched in legal and welfare systems, but its approach extends far beyond direct service delivery to also target community and coalition building with system-impacted peers as leaders at the helm.

YWFC is likely the most exemplary and comprehensive gender-responsive approach in the country. A set of centers located in the most impacted California counties, YWFC is nested under the umbrella of Reimagine Freedom, a multi-unit organization that tackles policy, housing, and programming for these communities. YWFC develops and implements a broad array of gender-responsive programming that recognizes the structural conditions—poverty, racial and gender-based violence, housing instability, and lack of access to care—that bring young people into the system. It was among the first organizations to offer paid positions to support participants in becoming peer coaches, staff, and organization leaders; created one of the first unconditional cash transfer programs for girls and gender expansive youth; and developed housing partnerships to improve access and affordability through their Beloved Village youth housing program.

YWFC offers diverse mentorship, training, and supports that align with the unique experiences, histories, and needs of system-impacted girls and gender expansive youth, including histories of abuse, domestic violence, and family instability, in addition to the poverty and academic disconnection system-impacted youth experience across the board.² YWFC’s program includes peer

advocates who provide crisis intervention and stabilization; freedom circles that connect girls' experiences of violence to larger systems to promote healing; paid internships to promote leadership development; advocacy/system navigation; and educational, employment, and job training. Multiple program offerings and deliberate flexibility enable girls and gender expansive youth to select the methods and activities that best align with their individual wants and needs, *when* and *how* they are ready for them. YWFC also offers a youth-friendly space where young people can go to build community, access resources, and take respite from violence in their homes and communities.

YWFC recognizes the gender-based challenges girls and gender expansive youth face in and out of the juvenile justice system and uses a community focus to

- **connect girls and gender expansive youth with people who have juvenile justice experience through the credible messenger method;**
- **serve girls within their communities, not at a specific location;**
- **integrate people with lived experience at all levels—from direct services to organizational leadership; and**
- **promote genuine, authentic conversations grounded in shared experiences to strengthen relationships, promote healing, and allow girls and gender expansive youth to envision a different future for themselves and their larger community.³**

YWFC also pushes beyond individual change, advocating for systems transformation to ensure youth no longer need to be resilient to survive. Whether through day-to-day support or policy-level advocacy, YWFC helps youth move from surviving to leading—a practice aligned with research showing that youth are best served in and by their communities.⁴

To learn more, visit <https://youngwomenfree.org/>.

Resilience, Opportunity, Safety, Education, Strength: A Strengths-Based Perspective

Based in New York, ROSES is a gender-responsive intervention designed to support girls and gender expansive youth involved or at risk of involvement with the juvenile justice or child welfare system. Recognizing that most girls and gender expansive youth in the juvenile justice system are there because of a concern for “their own safety” in a structurally precarious world (not because they are “bad” or “broken” kids), ROSES uses a radically humanizing and youth-centered model of engagement to make community-based alternatives to incarceration and placement a real possibility.⁵ In line with research, ROSES uses a one-to-one advocacy model, pairing girls and gender expansive youth with university students to leverage the benefits of relationships and education.⁶

ROSES is particularly strong in two ways. First, the one-to-one caseload model allows for a high-intensity but short-duration approach to support that does not reproduce a dependency model of service delivery while still allowing a highly trained advocate to fully focus on one young person for 12 consecutive weeks, 10 hours per week. Second, ROSES meets young people where they are, not where the system expects them to be—both physically and emotionally. This means that all services are offered *where* youth want them to be offered—in their homes, schools, neighborhoods, libraries, and broader communities—and *how* youth want them to be offered, in a deeply self-directed way with advocates providing consistent support for every unmet need identified by youth. ROSES does this by centering youth's rights and strengths:

- **Girls and gender expansive youth are prioritized as experts in their own lives.**
- **Advocates get to know the youth and provide support based on their lives, goals, and environments.**

- Advocates and youth work together on the young person's own self-determined goals with the focus on changing youth's contextual realities (not youth themselves).
- Youth determine the time and location of meetings, reducing barriers to participation.
- Youth gradually take over navigating systems and advocating for themselves based on individual needs.

ROSES views advocacy as a partnership rather than as a program. In each phase of ROSES, advocates first get to know the youth, including their lives, goals, and environmental factors. Advocates also act as role models and educators, helping girls and gender expansive youth identify their own self-determined goals and navigate systems and resources based on their needs. As youth grow in their ability to navigate systems, advocates remain steady, supportive presences, modeling persistence, respect, and care. In this way, ROSES helps shift power back to young people and fosters the relationships that research shows are essential for long-term success.⁷

To learn more, visit <https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/metrocenter/roses>.

Figure 1

Summary of three effective gender-responsive programs working to meet the needs of girls and gender expansive youth

Gender-Responsive Principle	JustUs	YWFC	ROSES
Take a structural approach	<p>Flexible scheduling, with hours and days that meet youth's needs</p> <p>Educates youth on structural oppression and activism and their effects on well-being</p> <p>Centers economic empowerment</p> <p>Builds in flexibility to accommodate systemic barriers like school and work schedules</p>	<p>Community members with lived experience incorporated at every level of organization</p> <p>Peer-based outreach, advocacy, and crisis intervention that occur wherever youth are</p> <p>Services offered at mini-campuses located in the communities YWFC serves</p> <p>Youth are paid for their time spent in YWFC activities</p> <p>Explicitly challenges systemic violence through harm reduction, unconditional cash transfer, and critical consciousness-raising programming</p>	<p>Focuses on changing youth's environments, not the youth themselves</p> <p>Sets up engagement success via advocates going to meet girls in their own communities</p> <p>Reduces barriers to accessing needed resources across a variety of need areas</p> <p>Prioritizes non-institutional settings but offers services while youth are confined to avoid disruptions in care</p>

Prioritize self-determination	<p>Choice in the type and duration of programming</p> <p>Youth define and revise their own self-determined goals</p> <p>Program adapts to participants' evolving needs</p> <p>Emphasizes autonomy and flexibility</p>	<p>Choice in type of programming and in when and how to engage</p> <p>Youth empowered to engage and reengage with programming as determined by their own needs and goals</p> <p>Self-determined goals and advocacy around system navigation</p> <p>Offers multiple program pathways</p>	<p>Youth-identified and prioritized goals that can shift over programming</p> <p>Youth learn to navigate systems with advocate assistance</p> <p>Advocates eventually transfer advocacy responsibility to youth</p> <p>Youth choose meeting times/locations</p>
Humanize girls	<p>Creates a safe, welcoming, and nonjudgmental environment</p> <p>Multimodal (groups and individual) programming; space open after completion</p> <p>Builds trust through relationship-centered programming and builds individualized knowledge through comprehensive intake</p> <p>Prioritizes healing over compliance</p>	<p>Credible messenger approach is “baked in” to many aspects of programming and leadership</p> <p>Youth-driven agreements to establish community trust</p> <p>Adolescent-friendly and healing spaces for young people to “hang out and find refuge” via centers and programs (for example, freedom circles)</p> <p>Values joy, cultural affirmation, and community connection</p>	<p>Builds consistent, trusting relationships</p> <p>Enables advocates to show up for youth over and over again via strong advocate supervision and support structure</p> <p>Affirms youth wisdom and strengths by inviting youth to change their minds about goals and direction of the program</p> <p>Encourages agency and voice throughout engagement through close collaboration with youth</p>
Shift accountability to programs	<p>Staff conduct multiple intake interviews to build familiarity</p> <p>Programming remains accessible post-completion</p>	<p>Staff with lived experience are central to delivery</p> <p>Advocates for structural change through legal policy and housing access</p>	<p>Programming occurs in the community; there are no set meeting times or physical sites</p> <p>Support is provided where and when youth determine</p>

	<p>Program adapts around youth needs</p>	<p>Many program staff and leaders are former program participants</p> <p>Prioritizes system accountability over youth compliance</p> <p>Creates paid leadership opportunities for participants</p>	<p>Programming is rights based and flexible to place the focus on girls' needs rather than on program compliance</p> <p>Program provides progress reports and testimony for court, probation, and other system needs</p>
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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 Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, "Easy Access to Juvenile Court Statistics, 1985–2021," database, Table for National Estimates of Juvenile Court Processing for Delinquency Cases, accessed October 21, 2024, search: Detained, Female, <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/statistical-briefing-book/data-analysis-tools/ezajcs/case-processing>. For crossover from child welfare systems, see Casey Family Programs, *Strategy Brief: Supportive Communities* (Seattle: Casey Family Programs, 2022), <https://perma.cc/78FE-WFHM>.

² Kayla Patrick and Neena Chaudhry, *Let Her Learn: Stopping School Pushout for Girls Involved in the Juvenile Justice System* (Washington, DC: National Women's Law Center, 2017), 4–6, https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/final_nwlc_Gates_JuvenileJustice-1.pdf.

³ Shabnam Javdani and Nicole E. Allen, "An Ecological Model for Intervention for Juvenile Justice-Involved Girls: Development and Preliminary Prospective Evaluation," *Feminist Criminology* 11, no. 2 (2014), 135–162, 138.

⁴ See Stephanie R. Hawkins, Phillip W. Graham, Jason Williams, and Margaret A. Zahn, *Girls Study Group: Understanding and Responding to Girls' Delinquency—Resilient Girls: Factors that Protect against Delinquency* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Protection, 2009) 2–5, <https://www.rti.org/publication/resilient-girls-factors-protect-against-delinquency/fulltext.pdf>.

⁵ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, "Easy Access to Juvenile Court Statistics, 1985–2021," database, Table for National Estimates of Juvenile Court Processing for Delinquency Cases, accessed October 21, 2024, search: Detained, Female, Offenses: simple assault, other person offenses, larceny–theft, vandalism, stolen property, trespassing, other property offenses, drug law violations, obstruction of justice, disorderly conduct, liquor law violations, nonviolent sex offenses, and other public order offenses, <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/statistical-briefing-book/data-analysis-tools/ezajcs/case-processing>. The following charge categories made up 90 percent of girls' delinquency cases in 2019: simple assault, other person offenses, larceny–theft, vandalism, stolen property, trespassing, other property offenses, drug law violations, obstruction of justice, disorderly conduct, liquor law violations, nonviolent sex offenses, and other public order offenses. Felony person offenses, robbery, burglary, or other offense categories that could pose imminent threat of bodily harm to community members made up 10 percent or less.

⁶ Javdani and Allen, "An Ecological Model for Intervention for Juvenile Justice-Involved Girls," 2014, 137.

⁷ Hawkins, Graham, Williams, and Zahn, *Resilient Girls*, 2009, 2–5.