



CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON GIRLS
AT LAUREL SCHOOL

STRESS AND WELL-BEING

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

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Girls, Stress, and Well-Being: What Parents Need to Know

RESULTS FROM THE STUDY 21ST CENTURY ATHENAS:
ALIGNING ACHIEVEMENT AND WELL-BEING

STUDY AIMS

Despite broad recognition that today's adolescent girls are achieving unprecedented levels of success while experiencing unprecedented levels of stress, almost no research exists on the relational factors that exacerbate and ameliorate stress in girls, particularly high achieving girls. The 21st Century Athenas Study aimed to help bridge this gap in the research and provide a deeper understanding of stress and well-being in adolescent girls. Specifically, the study examined the complex interactions between girls' relationships (with parents, teachers, peers, school community) and stress, emotional well-being, and academic achievement. While there are many other factors that may influence girls' stress and well-being directly and indirectly, this project aimed to answer questions such as: How do girls' relationships contribute to their performing well but feeling bad? What kinds of relationships contribute to helping girls thrive?

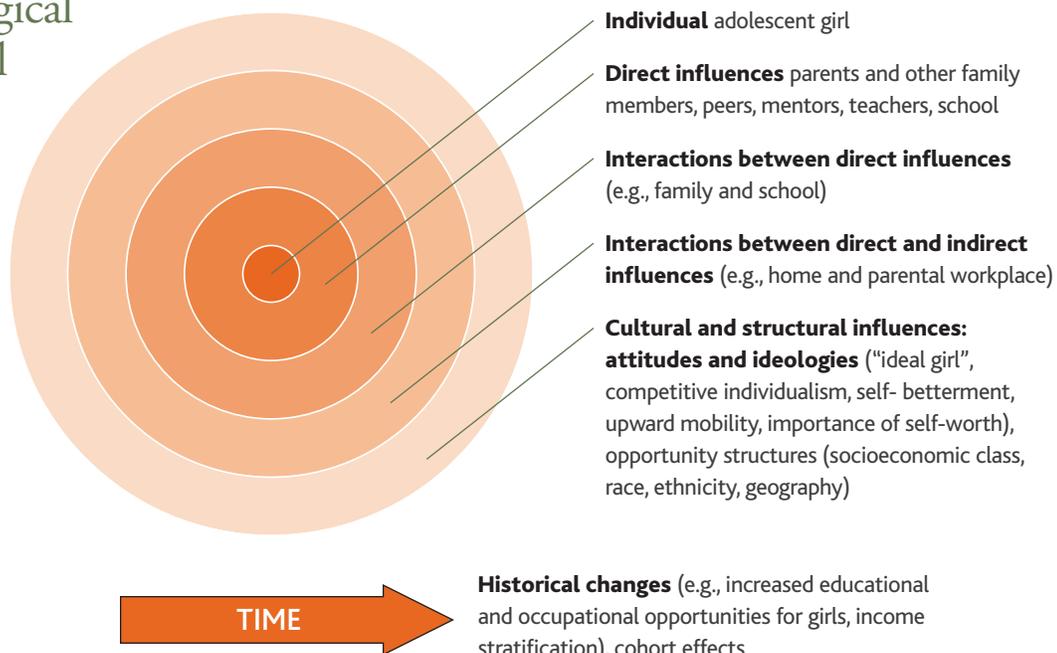
STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Participants included approximately 200 students enrolled in Laurel School (Shaker Heights, OH) or Dana Hall School (Wellesley, MA) who were in grades 6, 8, or 10 at the start of the study; one parent for each of the students; and teachers nominated by the students as ones with whom they felt a sense of connection. Of these 200+ participating students, ten girls from each grade at each school (for a total of 60 students) were randomly selected to be interviewed. The parents of these girls were also interviewed. Lastly, ten teachers from each school were randomly selected from among those nominated by the students to be interviewed. Surveys were administered to girls, parents, and teachers four times over the course of one-and-a-half years. Interviews were conducted twice during the same time period.

Major Findings: A Holistic And Ecological Approach

Through surveys and interviews with the adolescent girls, their parents, and teachers, it became clear that there is not a **singular** “cause” or source of stress (e.g., parents, peers, teachers, societal messages). Rather, applying Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) ecological model, stress results from the interplay between the various layers of the girls’ lives in conjunction with time and the historical context in which they live (see Figure). At each layer, influential figures send strong spoken and unspoken messages and share expectations regarding achievement and stress that work together to normalize stress for girls. Through these combined influences, girls come to believe that high levels of stress are both expectable and unavoidable. This normalization process appears to have powerful and potentially damaging effects. As can be seen in the Figure, there are environmental layers, such as socioeconomic class and cultural norms about achievement and success, that undoubtedly play a significant role in shaping girls’ attitudes, beliefs, and experiences. Those same environmental layers impact the girls’ parents and teachers. Therefore, it is essential to understand the findings from this study as being situated within a culture where particular forms of success and achievement are highly valued. *The 21st Century Athenas* study focuses on the two layers that most closely and immediately impact the girls (e.g., parents, peers, teachers, mentors, and school culture/climate). These layers - compared to those more distal to the girls - may provide direct opportunities for changing girls’ narratives and experiences around stress and success.

Ecological Model



KEY FINDINGS

PARENTS

- High levels of parental *criticism* were associated with increased problems for girls; high parental *expectations* had a smaller, also negative, impact on girls' development. Sustained high levels of parental *criticism* had a significant, negative impact on the girls' later well-being. Limited evidence, however, suggests that extraordinarily high levels of *expectations* sustained over time compromise girls' later well-being.
- Girls described higher levels of stress and lower levels of well-being when their parents held higher expectations than the girls held for themselves.
- Many parents reported experiencing high levels of stress. They were burdened by personal pressures to perform – or rather to produce performance in their children.

TEACHERS & MENTORS

- Girls with mentoring relationships characterized by high authenticity, engagement, and empowerment (i.e., “relational mentoring”) tended to have high levels of self-esteem and prosocial behavior. The positive benefits of relational mentoring on girls' adjustment were, in part, explained by higher engagement in purposeful activities.
- Relational mentoring was associated with improved social and emotional functioning, but not with academic achievement.

PEERS

- Girls described their peer relationships as both a source of stress and stress relief; they felt stressed especially in the context of feeling competitive with their peers.
- Girls who reported positive peer relationships had higher levels of mastery, self-esteem, and commitment to a sense of purpose and lower levels of social-emotional problems, depression, anxiety, perceived stress, and health problems.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Taken together, these findings indicate that multiple forces are contributing to the misalignment of achievement and well-being among adolescent girls; efforts to better align these require that we address the multiple layers in girls' lives.

- Girls benefit when their own performance expectations align with their parents' expectations. Girls also benefit when parental criticism is low. Parents should engage their daughters in conversations about the expectations they hold for themselves and work to promote, inspire, and support their daughters' efforts to meet these expectations.
- Girls benefit from mentoring relationships characterized by authenticity, engagement, and empowerment, especially when they are engaged in purposeful activities. Girls should be helped to connect with adults who can mentor them in areas that the girls find to be personally meaningful in order to help them connect with their own sense of purpose.
- Peer relationships play a significant role in girls' social and emotional health. Girls should be educated—at home and at school—about the powerful, positive effects of close and supportive friendships and the harmful role of certain aspects of peer competition. Girls may also benefit from learning to engage in competition in healthy, growth-fostering ways.

[**ENDNOTES**] *Girls, Stress, and Well-Being: What Parents Need to Know*

Bronfenbrenner, U. (2005). Ecological systems theory. In U. Bronfenbrenner (Ed.), *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development* (pp. 106–173). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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