

Growing Girls for Greatness

**Proceedings of the
CWLA National Girls
Initiative Symposium**

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Foreword

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) envisions a national climate in which the well-being and optimal development of all children, youth, and families is a top priority. CWLA's National Framework affirms its commitment to support families, communities, agencies, and policymakers in improving the lives of America's children. To ensure children's survival and promote their healthy development, CWLA has identified five universal needs: the basics (food, clothing, shelter, and education), nurturing relationships, opportunities to succeed, safety from harm, and healing when harm has already occurred.

CWLA recognizes that girls and young women develop in unique ways. They have distinct strengths and needs that require a specialized focus when working in their behalf. Therefore, CWLA created the National Girls Initiative (NGI), a comprehensive action strategy for promoting the positive development of girls and young women in the United States. NGI will address the complex developmental process girls and young women experience in a broad range of cultural and societal contexts. It will engage the multiple systems and disciplines affecting girls and young women to facilitate the validation and replication of promising gender-competent policies and programs and the development of new programs to fill identified needs.

To address the unmet needs of girls and young women, NGI will promote professional and public discourse about the optimal development of girls. Research indicates that the developmental process for girls and young women is unique. As a result, they may participate in risky behavior for different reasons than males. For example, *The Formative Years: Pathways to Substance Abuse Among Girls and Young Women Ages 8–22*, recently published by The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, highlights the varying reasons girls abuse substances. Although the pathways and the reasons are distinct, females receive services developed for males or those that are considered unisex. In this area, as in many others, there is a lack of coherent, gender-

competent policies and programs that reflect the unique needs and strengths of girls and young women.

All children and young people need networks of opportunity and encouragement that widen as they grow. Although the opportunities available to girls and young women have expanded in recent years, barriers to equal access still exist. CWLA is committed to developing solutions through a comprehensive, collaborative effort that involves the multiple systems, disciplines, and collateral stakeholders, such as girls and their families, with a vested interest in the well-being of girls and young women. Prevention, opportunities for positive youth development, and early intervention can address risk before it escalates. Strategies will be most effective if they fill gaps identified through reliable research and build on programs and policies that are evidence based, gender competent, and responsive.

Introduction

In October 2003, CWLA convened the National Girls Initiative Symposium: Growing Girls for Greatness in Washington, DC. CWLA extended invitations to 125 professionals, stakeholders, and consumers from various fields, disciplines, and specialties. Significant focus was directed at convening a group of participants that was representative of the diverse issues and demographic make-up of America's girls and young women. The 65 attendees represented federal, state, and local government agencies; private organizations; and youth from 20 states and the District of Columbia. The symposium's goal was to gather information and address the need for gender-competent and responsive policies and programs supported by research, focusing on the optimal development of America's girls and young women. The exchange of information, ideas, and recommendations will provide the foundation to advance NGI's mission and goals.

The symposium format was developed to galvanize broad and collaborative discourse, shared knowledge, and solution-focused strategies across various youth-serving systems, fields, and disciplines. The symposium, held over two 5-hour sessions, consisted of two breakout sessions. Child welfare, juvenile justice, behavioral health, education, and general health comprised the field-specific breakout session groups, and the specialty-specific breakout session groups included research, policy, advocacy, program, and practice. Participants selected and then were assigned to one group for each breakout session. The field-specific breakout session focused on assessing and identifying opportunities and needs for gender-competent and responsive policies and practices within each respective field. In the second breakout session, participants developed recommendations to facilitate comprehensive, collaborative, and multisystemic methods that promote the optimal development and well-being of girls and young women.

This document compiles and summarizes the symposium's proceedings and recommendations. It contains the ideas, opinions, knowledge, and professional experience articulated by the participants, and therefore does not

include specific citations or references. It represents the collective voice of the participants and captures perspectives from their unique areas of expertise.

The authors thank the many individuals who contributed their time, thoughts, and information to this issue brief. Additional thanks to all of the symposium participants, our CWLA colleagues, and members of the community at large who have assisted with this publication.