

What is Girlz Unplugged?

Girlz Unplugged is a youth program developed and delivered by the YWCA Muskoka that supports elementary-aged girls (grades 5–8) in local public and Catholic schools. The program helps participants build confidence and positive self-image, develop critical thinking skills, expand their understanding of healthy relationships, and explore emotional regulation, all while considering the needs and interests of youth. or every month, and it contains a variety of content.



The program is also informed by the YWCA Muskoka's pillars: building relationships, cultivating economic resilience, preventing gender-based violence, and promoting mental health and well-being. Run by knowledgeable facilitators, many of whom have lived experience in rural communities, the program is delivered weekly during nutrition and recess breaks. Programs include approximately 8–12 youth, organized into a grade 5/6 or 7/8 group for up to 14 weeks. Registration involves completing a permission form with a \$25 fee – subsidies are available upon request – which is returned to the school office. Program participation varies; youth can join by request or can be referred by school staff or community agencies.

What Topics are Covered?

In a supportive and interactive setting, girls explore a range of topics relevant to their lives. **Topics frequently include, but are not limited to:**

- Emotions
- Body Image
- Healthy Friendships & Relationships
- Setting Boundaries, Consent, & Conflict Resolution
- Goal Setting
- Online Safety/Digital Citizenship
- Gossip and Rumours
- Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity
- Mindfulness
- Self-Confidence



Within these groups, opportunities are provided for sharing, listening, creative expression, interactive and socio-metric activities, and role-playing. Importantly, all topics are covered in age- and developmentally-appropriate ways, with many reviewed by Ontario-registered teachers. For example:

- **Digital Safety:** Girls read different online interaction examples and move to different areas of the room to indicate whether behaviours are healthy or unhealthy.
- **Emotions:** Facilitators lead conversations about stress and practical strategies for managing it.
- **Body Image:** Each participant creates a piece of canvas art using colours, shapes, or designs that represent them and their uniqueness.
- **Consent:** Participants explore what consent means and engage in skills practice across various scenarios, including asking before borrowing personal belongings, taking a photo, or giving a hug.

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Impact and Feedback

Internal evaluation data have shown that *Girlz Unplugged* strengthens youth capacities, with participants saying things like:

- *I can talk to other people freely, and I should be kind and proud of how I look.*
- *I can do anything if I put my mind to it.*
- *I'm not as stressed as I used to be.*

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Research Outcomes



Recently, the YWCA Muskoka conducted an in-depth research project analyzing best practices in gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and youth programming, with a focus on rural communities.

What is gender-based violence?

Gender-based violence refers to any harm inflicted against an individual due to their gender, which includes their gender identity, expression, and how it is perceived by others. This may include experiences that range from bullying and online harassment to teen dating abuse and human trafficking.

In the context of Girlz Unplugged, GBV prevention is approached through a strengths-based framework. Rather than addressing violence directly, the program focuses on topics and activities that help reduce vulnerability to harmful situations by supporting youth in building confidence, staying true to themselves, and developing positive peer relationships.

Research Outcomes Continued

The research findings highlighted unique challenges and vulnerabilities in rural areas that contribute to higher rates of GBV, such as geographic isolation, transportation barriers, strong community ties, and a lack of tailored services. In Muskoka specifically, concerns including homelessness and unaffordable housing, food insecurity, precarious employment, and substance use were also identified – all factors that increase risks for youth.

At the same time, the research underscored the positive impact of GBV prevention programming. Programs that teach fundamental skills and raise awareness of GBV can improve safety and well-being for youth, support healthier peer relationships, strengthen communication skills, improve mental health, and foster more positive school climates. This knowledge, along with current strategies in the field, has been used to enhance the Girlz Unplugged program, particularly around curriculum development and delivery. While Girlz Unplugged has been serving the Muskoka area since 1998 with research- and evidence-informed approaches, YWCA Muskoka continues to adapt the program to meet the changing needs of youth and the wider community.

What's Being Done Now?

The research findings are now being applied to enhance Girlz Unplugged. Updates to the program include:

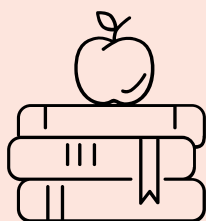


- Strengthening our trauma- and violence-informed approaches to prioritize safety, empowerment, and supportive relationships.
- Building on our relationship-centred, strengths-based, and skills-focused approaches that develop resilience and practical tools youth can use in their lives.
- Integrating youth-centred frameworks that consider young people's lived experiences and realities.
- Applying holistic programming models that consider various youth needs.
- Expanding on curricula in digital technology and online safety.

Girlz Unplugged remains a space where youth can grow, learn, and connect in safe, supportive and age-appropriate ways, guided by both evidence and research, all while having fun!

Schools We Serve

- Gravenhurst High School
- Beechgrove Public School
- Gravenhurst Public School
- KP Manson Public School
- Bracebridge Muskoka Lakes Secondary School
- St. Dominic Catholic High School
- Macaulay Public School
- Bracebridge Public School
- Muskoka Falls Public School
- Monck Public School
- Monsignor Michael O'Leary School
- Glen Orchard Public School
- Honey Harbour Public School
- Watt Public School
- VK Greer Memorial Public School
- Huntsville High School
- Riverside Public School
- Spruce Glen Public School
- Pine Glen Public School
- Huntsville Public School
- St. Mary's Catholic School
- Irwin Memorial Public School



Questions?

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UNPLUGGED**
A YWCA MUSKOKA PROGRAM

