

EMPOWERING GIRLS to Take Care of Themselves AND EACH OTHER

BY HEATHER BRITT, PhD., Vice President of Programming, Girls on the Run International

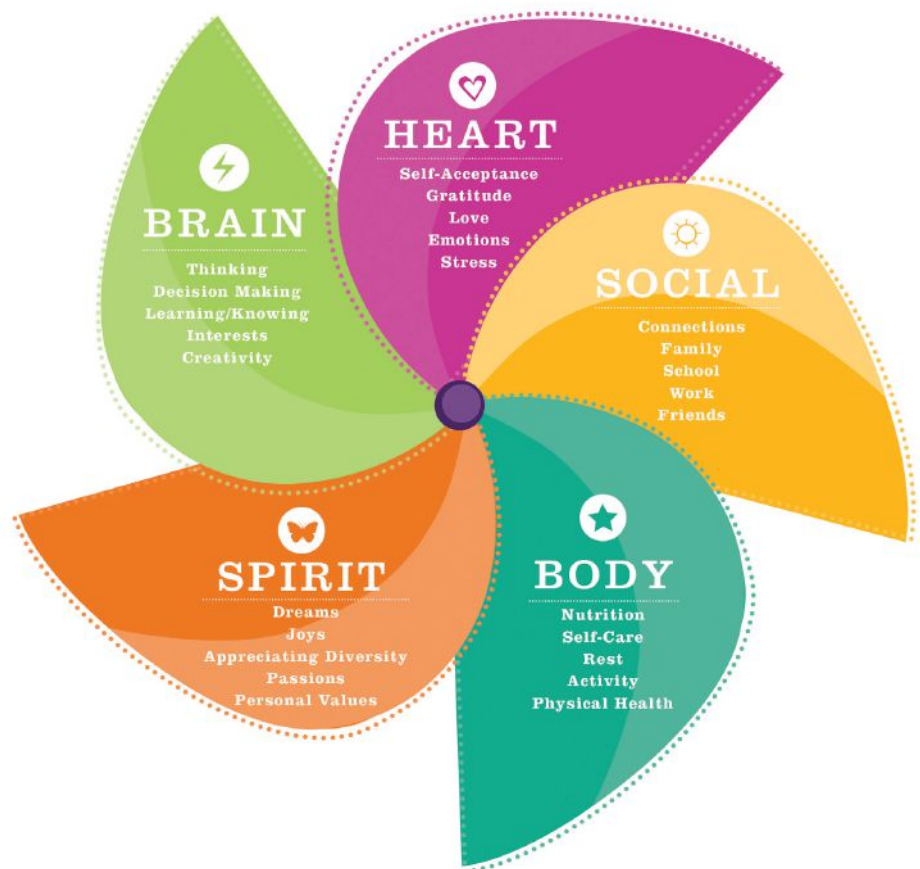
Let's face it: Very few people view adolescence positively. It's seen as something to just get through. Teens are depicted as turning away from adults and toward negative peer groups. They make rash decisions and act impulsively. Adolescence is negatively portrayed in the media, especially when it comes to girls. The overly emotional, self-centered, mean girl persona permeates images, movies and music. They aren't people anyone wants to be around.

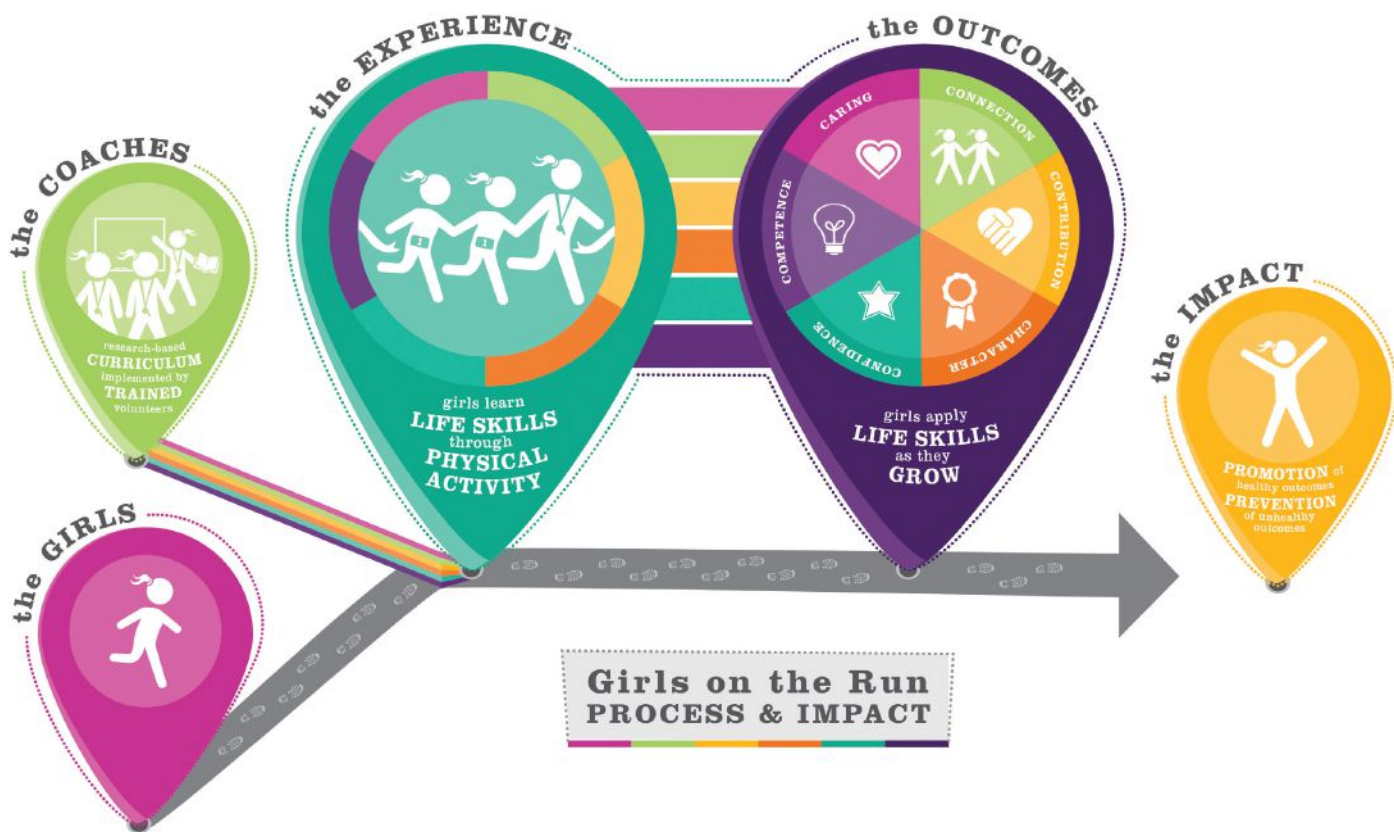
As youth workers, we can view adolescence differently—and at Girls on the Run, we do. We choose to see this time as an opportunity: to help girls explore their budding interests; to use increased emotionality as a way to explore empathy and caring; to create interdependence with caring adult role models in the community. It is a natural part of development for young people to turn toward their peers for acceptance, for guidance, for direction. We see this as opportunity as well. Because our program works with small teams led by trained volunteer coaches using a research based curriculum, girls create strong positive connections with peers, explore their strengths, explore who they are and who they want to be in the world, and how they can make an impact. We work to dispel the mean girl myth. And it works.

HEART & SOLE

Heart & Sole, our new middle school program for girls in grades six through eight, creates a safe and structured space for girls to develop life skills that they will use in adolescence and beyond. The 10-week program focuses on the social emotional Girl Wheel,

while at the same time helping girls develop their physical competence to complete a 5K by the end of the season. Each practice centers on a Big Idea—"We all face challenges," for example—followed by a group activity that exemplifies the Big Idea. Then girls engage in strength and conditioning, and a running activity





to both prepare them for the 5K and also further explore the Big Idea.

At the end of the practice, the girls reflect in their journal and connect what they've been exploring to their own personal Girl Wheel. The Girl Wheel—everyone has one—allows each girl to decide what she wants to explore that season, where her strengths lie, where she wants to set goals and also teaches her lessons in empathy. As girls develop strengths in their individual Wheels, the team bond strengthens. Additionally, girls share what obstacles they face in their own lives, how they address these obstacles and what additional resources they might need to further overcome them. They notice they are not alone in their obstacles and struggles. They begin to problem-solve together about how they can help

each other. They become each other's best resources. One coach and parent remarked that the program "gives them a chance to not feel isolated and alone, and as if they are the only one being misunderstood. Can you imagine the impact it would have on adolescent girls if each and every one of them could know that they are more than their facade, that there are people who care about what is going on beneath the surface? That there is empathy and support out there for them?"

Throughout the course of the season the girls develop skills that they can apply to a multitude of circumstances, which makes the program accessible to girls from rural areas to urban areas. Some of these skills are how to set and keep boundaries, ask for help, set and reach goals, make decisions and extend

the reach of their Girl Wheel. When middle school girls are given the time, space and structure to participate in activities that allow them to explore who they are individually, who they are as part of a team and who they are as part of a community, they rise to the challenge. As one eighth-grade participant said, "I learned to trust myself more, know who I am, stop and think, and help someone else out. Even if I don't know her."

There are no mean girls. There are confidantes, collaborators and limitless potential.

In its inaugural season this fall, the program will reach more than 7,000 middle school girls nationwide. Visit www.girlsontherun.org to find out more or to bring Heart & Sole to your school. [NAA](#)