



Top Girls

Young women in
independent schools



Introduction

The *Top girls: Young Women and Independent Schools* study has involved almost 100 young women over the last three years – gathering views and experiences about education, what is going well in life and what is going less well, and what girls hope for in the future.

We have been especially interested in finding out how you and your families choose the senior schools you go to, what you feel the school does to help you develop, and the skills and education needed for the next stage in life.



Four schools in one area of England took part in the study.

- Co-educational (predominantly) boarding school
- Co-educational day school
- Girls-only, day school, academically very selective
- Girls-only (predominantly) boarding school

Time was spent experiencing different aspects of the school day – before around 25 young women from Years 10-13 in each school participated in an in-depth interview. Over half of the same young women were re-interviewed 12-18 months later.

A small number of interviews were also conducted with senior staff members in each school.

Choosing a school

For families choosing to send their daughters to an independent school – there are different kinds of schools to choose from:

- A traditional 'public school' or a school which used to receive local authority funding but is now fully independent.



- A strongly academic school or one which is less so. Some girls talked about not passing the entrance exam for one school and having to go to a 'second choice' school. Others said they had chosen a school which they believed would be less pressured academically.
- Family tradition. Some young women told us that where their own parents had been educated influenced the schools they looked at.
- Some girls living in London said their parents were looking for schools that were more 'in the countryside'.



Fitting in and enjoying school

Your experiences at school were deeply affected by the other kinds of students there and the environment created by the staff. In some schools, many girls seemed to come from **relatively similar backgrounds**. This meant that some of the girls and their families knew each other quite well and spent time together outside school. It also meant that many of you said you **felt comfortable** and understood each other well because you were likely to have similar views about what you wanted from your education and future.

In other schools – the backgrounds of students were more varied. For some, this meant you found it a little **harder to feel like you 'fitted in'**, or to find a group of friends you felt you connected to. This seemed more of an issue for girls who might come from families with less money, or from homes where there might be family relationship difficulties.

All the schools in the study worked hard to support students to do well academically. Some of you found it easier than others to cope with the expectations from parents and/or schools.

In the schools in our study, many girls were **involved in extra-curricular activities** such as drama, music, the Duke of Edinburgh award, Model United Nations (MUN), the Young Enterprise scheme, sport and so on. Girls had to work hard to find a way to balance academic work with extra-curricular activities – and some felt they managed this better than others. What was amazing was how well so many of you did in all areas – becoming what we have called 'very accomplished' in the process!

What is especially interesting is that while some young women do these 'extras' alongside their schoolwork to build a strong application for a place at their first choice university; most participated in non-academic activities because you enjoyed them so much! Girls felt a real sense of satisfaction and pride in being involved in team sports, drama productions, raising

money for charity, being prefects, debating, creating pieces of artwork and so on.

Many of you described how being involved was a way of expressing yourself or finding other things you were good at. Most extra-curricular activities were only possible because schools worked hard to provide many different opportunities.

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Confidence and surety

One of the main questions we have been thinking about has been how girls in independent schools gain confidence and surety in themselves – to increase their chance of doing well and realise their ambitions for the future. Confidence seems to be expressed through an ability to identify and describe yourself as having a ‘special’ combination of qualities and abilities.

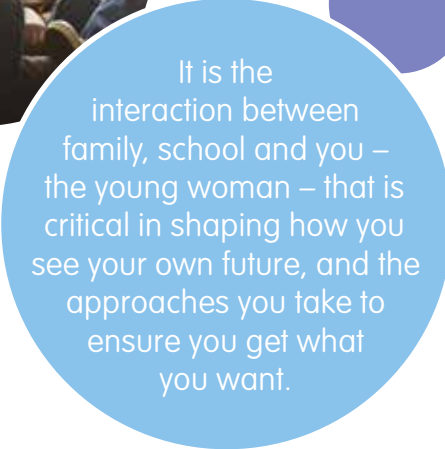
What really seems to help many is having a strong **sense of connectedness** to the school and to others in your school. This promotes a sense of belonging, and of fitting in.

Developing confidence, a sense of oneself and strong hopes for the future is helped by your **family**. However, **schools** play a significant role in developing this further – which impacts on the success many young women experience.

Importantly, it is the interaction between family, school and you – the young woman – that is critical in shaping how you see your own future, and the approaches you take to ensure you get what you want. We explain this in a little more detail on the next page.



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How families, schools and you – affect how you see things and what you do



Families influence their daughters' ways of seeing and behaving. Additionally, **friendships and social networks** matter, as do the social circles your parents move in. We found that mothers', fathers' and older brothers' and sisters' successes and failures in school, work and so on shaped how young women in our study saw themselves in terms of their abilities, the career pathways they were considering, and 'success in life'.

Young women are busily making their own plans through projects of the self – deciding and setting about developing an understanding of who they are, what values they have, what they want from life, and how they are going to go about achieving their goals.

The **school** you go to also influences your choices and ways of thinking about things through – the emphasis it gives to academic work, extra-curricular activities, and what being a 'clever', 'academic' or 'good' person looks like.

Projects of the self

In amongst all this – young women are busily making their own plans through projects of the self (as we have called them) – deciding and setting about developing an understanding of who you are, what values you have, what you want from life, how you feel about yourselves, and whether and how you are going to go about achieving your goals.

Projects of the self are also influenced by the expectations of families and the school attended. How young women negotiate such projects in between these two sets of influences is both a conscious and unconscious process – something that happens within the young woman herself.

Importantly, developing a project of the self has a **strong emotional side** to it. For example, if you feel excited about your future, or are worried about a choice you have made, or are frustrated or angry with your family about the pressures you are being

put under, this affects your subsequent approach to life. This is a really important finding.

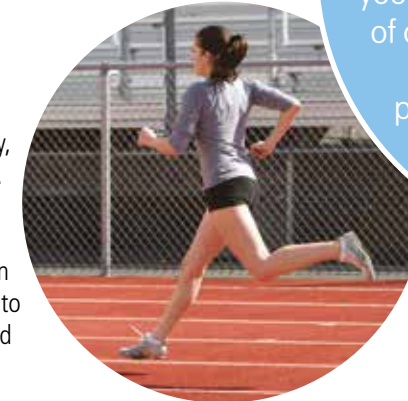
Engaging in reflection

How young women understand their emotional responses to everyday experiences is shaped by what society sees as the right way or the wrong way to act. Similarly, how family, friends and others react to the choices we make also influences how we feel about something – both positively or negatively. Many girls who took part in the study suggested that emotional responses often prompted a process of reflection. Thinking about the outcome of a decision made seemed to lead young women to develop an idea of what they wanted to do next, and have a sense of what to do to resolve a situation and/or achieve their goals.

Understanding how you respond emotionally to experiences or how different relationships – with family, friends, other students – leave you feeling is important. The emotions you experience in different situations shape how you reflect on these events, and the range of responses you can draw on. Having more time to learn about yourself, and understand what kind of approaches to take in different situations helps us to think positively and creatively about success, 'failure', and what to do next.


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Optimism and feeling sure

Producing confident, resilient and focused young women



Many young women seemed confident and optimistic about what their futures might hold. This **sense of surety** is in part influenced by the kind of family you come from, what values they hold and what they want for your future. Feeling optimistic about things may be strengthened or weakened by your subsequent experiences in school.

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We found that where expectations, reactions and aspirations are shared between your family and the school you go to – the surer you are likely to feel about the choices you make and your sense of yourself. That said, some young women we talked to made choices and decisions which were not always those anticipated by their families or their schools. This can be a good thing.

For young women experiencing difficulties at home or at school, or where there were different expectations between families and schools around aspirations, **a more unsettled, less sure understanding of oneself sometimes emerged**. And yet, feeling too pressured, having a difficult relationship with parents or friends, having experienced a time when you felt like you did not fit into the school or with a group of friends – could lead to a stronger resolve to make positive things happen.

Overall, both schools and families want education to support the development of confidence and the skills to be able to talk about things and identify what you want from life. Ultimately, the key seems to lie in finding a way to feel sure about yourself – your abilities and qualities – and to be resilient when you experience set-backs. If families and schools can help young women think about their feelings (even the difficult ones) in a positive, optimistic, confident way – this is key to supporting you to achieve what you want.



Difficult, upsetting and challenging experiences can lead to a stronger resolve to change things and make things happen that will be positive for you.

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Conclusions

Our research has examined how independent schools can offer a setting in which young women can develop confident and aspirational plans for the future. We have listened to what girls have said and have been very impressed by what we have heard. We hope that some of our ideas will help schools create spaces that **strengthen confidence, resilience and the ability to plan for the future.**

A focus on developing different **sureties** in young women (surety about yourself, surety in the future, surety about being educationally successful even without three A*s, and surety about interacting with others – friends, teachers, new people) may offer a useful way of supporting girls in their future education.

A stronger focus on the **emotional aspects of school life** – the kinds of environments that schools create and how young women talk about their education and their interactions with others – will help develop stronger, more supportive environments in which young women can plan for the future.

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