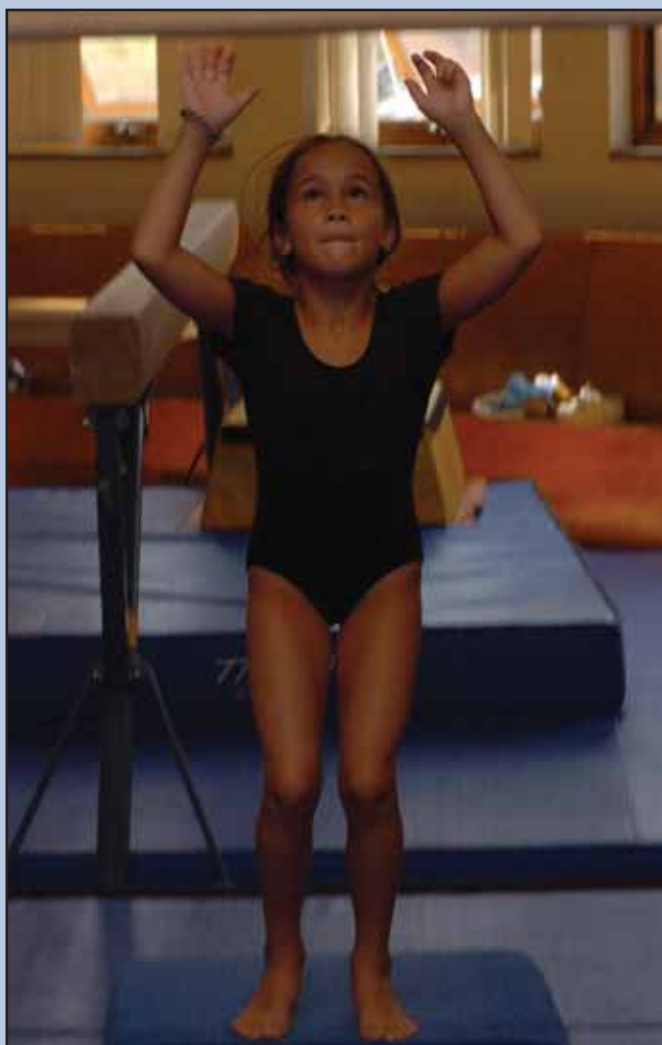


The Supergirl Dilemma

Girls Grapple with the Mounting Pressure of Expectations

SUMMARY FINDINGS



*A Nationwide Survey of School-Age Children
Conducted for Girls Incorporated[®]
by Harris Interactive[®]*

**girls
inc.[®]**

Girls Incorporated® is a nonprofit organization that inspires all girls to be strong, smart, and boldSM. With local roots dating to 1864 and national status since 1945, Girls Inc. has responded to the changing needs of girls and their communities through research-based programs and advocacy that empower girls to reach their full potential and to understand, value, and assert their rights. Girls Inc. public education extends our empowering messages to a broad audience, offering tools for both girls and adults to engage actively with our mission.

Programs focus on science, math, and technology, health and sexuality, economic and financial literacy, sports skills, leadership and advocacy, and media literacy for girls ages 6 to 18 throughout the United States and in Canada. While our goal is to reach all girls, we recognize that girls in at-risk communities have an even greater need for our programs. Of those we serve, 71 percent are girls of color and 71 percent come from families earning \$25,000 or less. Forty-seven percent are from single-parent households, most of which are headed by women.

In 2005, Girls Inc. reached nearly 800,000 girls through Girls Inc. affiliates, our website, and educational products. Guided by our vision of empowered girls and an equitable society, Girls Inc. is committed to reaching millions more girls through its programs and public education efforts.

**This study was made possible with support from IBM Corporation
and additional generous support from Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.**

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Girls Incorporated
120 Wall Street
New York, NY 10005
(212) 509-2000
communications@girls-inc.org
www.girlsinc.org

Introduction

Girls Incorporated is committed to a vision of empowered girls and an equitable society. We work toward realizing this vision by pursuing our mission of inspiring all girls to be strong, smart, and bold. It is our conviction that girls themselves must lead the work of building a more equitable society. Their voices must inform the public dialogue about the role gender plays in our world. Only girls can tell us about the realities of their lives, goals, and experiences. Building on the Girls Inc. *Taking the Lead* study published in 2000, and on information from the *Choosing Community* study of 2002, we seek to provide information and insights into girls' lives today and to clarify how their experiences have changed over time.

The period between 2000 and 2006 has been marked by vividly reported global violence and terrorism, major natural disasters, a struggling U. S. economy, an increased emphasis on high-stakes testing determining school advancement, rapid advances in technology, and media-driven blurring of the line between reality and fiction. While our culture has continued to become increasingly sexualized—with the attendant overemphasis on women's and

I feel that we are expected to be grown up now. We are to dress like older girls. Most clothes don't even make us look like little girls. I feel girls are even more pressured than boys because we have to "make" something of ourselves where as for boys it's natural to become.

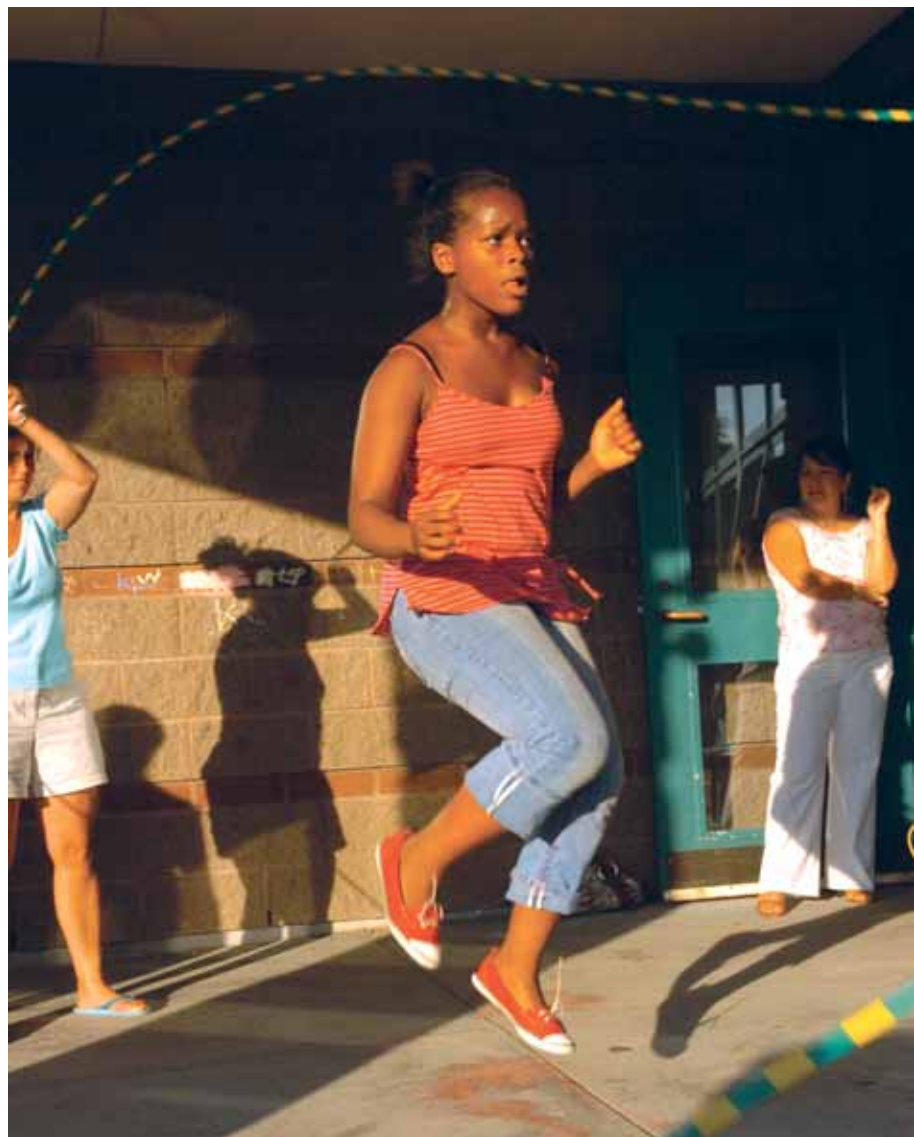
—6th Grade Girl

girls' bodies—the debate on gender equity has devolved into a war between the sexes, with high-profile debate about the biological abilities of women and girls in the sciences and more and more frequent alarms about the educational neglect of boys. We believe it is essential to understand how these, and other, forces shape both the experiences of girls and societal gender expectations.

This study was designed to give voice to girls—their opinions, aspirations, and fears. We also wanted to know how gender stereotypes affect boys and how girls, boys, and adults view the stereotypes that confront girls and boys.¹

It is our hope that these findings will spark and sustain a public dialogue about the issues girls face and ultimately influence parents, educators, and opinion and policy makers.

¹ Please see pages 38 and 39 for a description of survey methodology and profile of respondents.



The Supergirl Phenomenon

Girls today experience intense pressure, at ever younger ages, to be everything to everyone all of the time. While stereotypes about girls' leadership capabilities and math and science abilities appear to have diminished in the past six years, expectations about physical perfection—dressing “right” and being thin—seem to have increased simultaneously. Stereotypes about girls' needing to speak softly, not brag, and to play caretaker roles seem to persist. Society appears to be making some room for girls to transcend traditional expectations about abilities and aspirations, just as long as they also conform to conventional notions of femininity.

Girls are very pressured today to get good grades, look good, have a lot of friends, do a majority of the chores, and still have time for family.

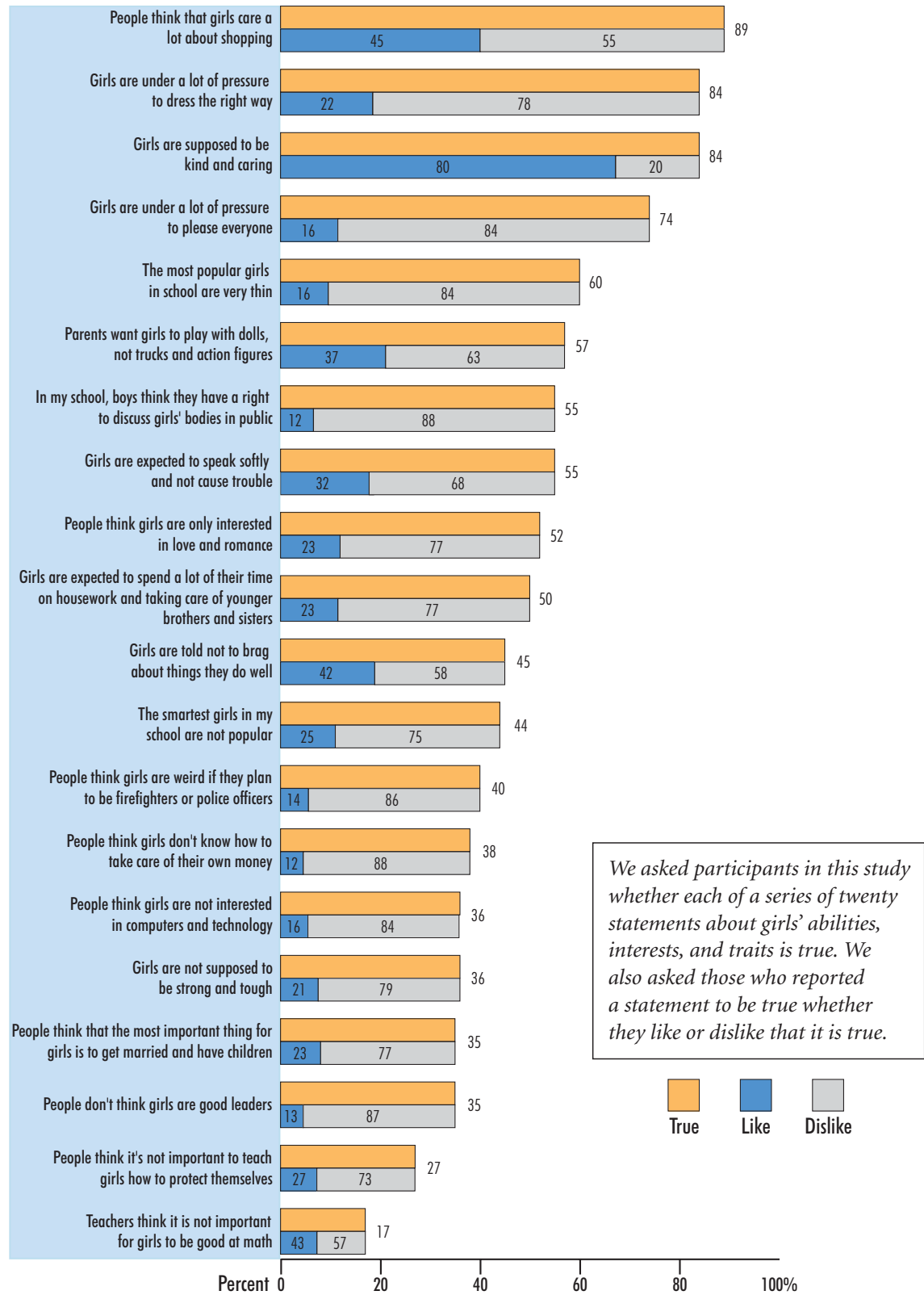
—9th Grade Girl

We asked participants in this study whether each of a series of twenty statements about girls' abilities, interests, and traits is true. We also asked those who reported a statement to be true whether they like or dislike that it is true. (See Chart 1 on the next page.)

These findings reveal that traditional notions of femininity persist into the twenty-first century. Girls still feel societal pressure to be pretty and passive and not smart and aggressive. They also feel that it is their job to please all the people around them. Furthermore, the first two findings seem to point to the expectation that a girl's appearance is still her most important asset.

A lot of pressure to be athletic, pretty, and skinny plus smart.
—4th Grade Girl

Chart 1 Girls' Views of Stereotypes Affecting Girls



We asked participants in this study whether each of a series of twenty statements about girls' abilities, interests, and traits is true. We also asked those who reported a statement to be true whether they like or dislike that it is true.

True Like Dislike



Even today, society values beauty in girls over intelligence and talent.

—9th Grade Girl

For analyses across ages and ethnic/racial groups, please refer to the full report, available at www.girlsinc.org.

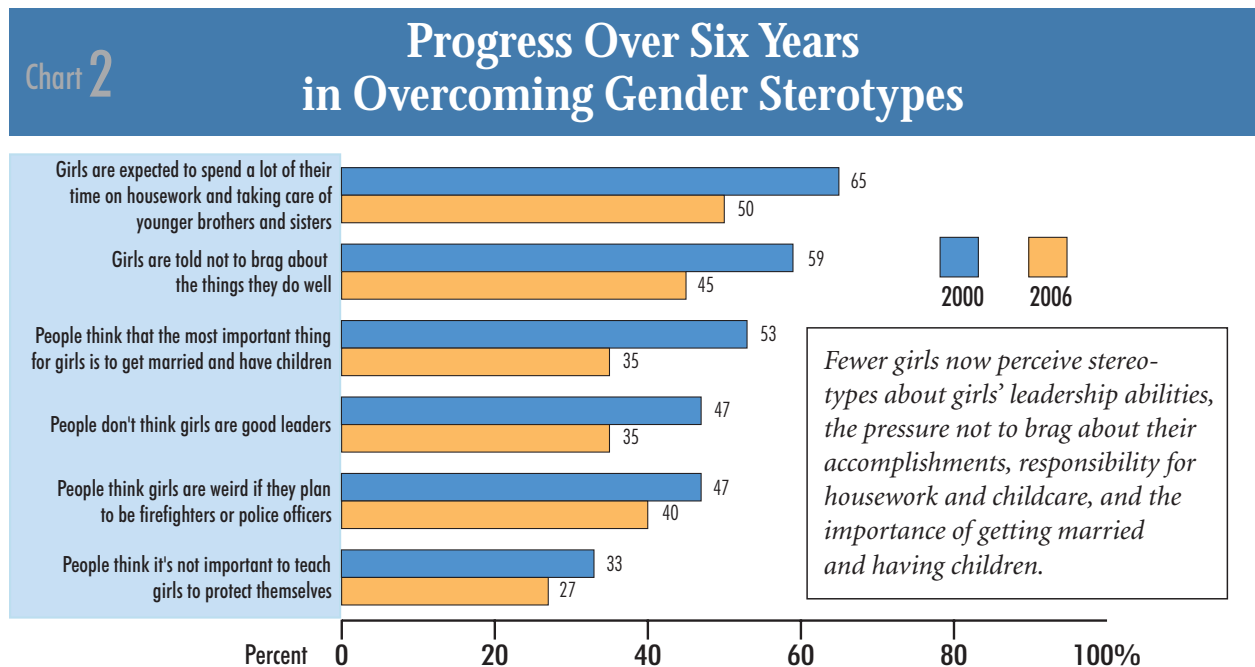
Change Since 2000

It is hard. You have to be pretty and have a body to be popular and if you are too smart, you are called a nerd. But, you have to be extra smart to even get a job after college.

—5th Grade Girl

Girls Inc. conducted a similar study in 2000. There are limits to any comparisons due to differences in methodology—for instance, the 2000 study was a paper survey, while the 2006 study was an online survey. However, we can make general statements about the differences in the data from the two studies.

There are signs of progress over the past six years. Most notably, fewer girls now perceive stereotypes about girls' leadership abilities, the pressure not to brag about their accomplishments, responsibility for housework and childcare, and the importance of getting married and having children. (See Chart 2.)





You feel very pressured to fit into the mold that makes up tradition and most of us girls don't want to. I AM going to be a police officer whether people tell me to or not. Sometimes parents need to understand that no matter what, we are going to do what we feel is right and they just need to support us.

—12th Grade Girl

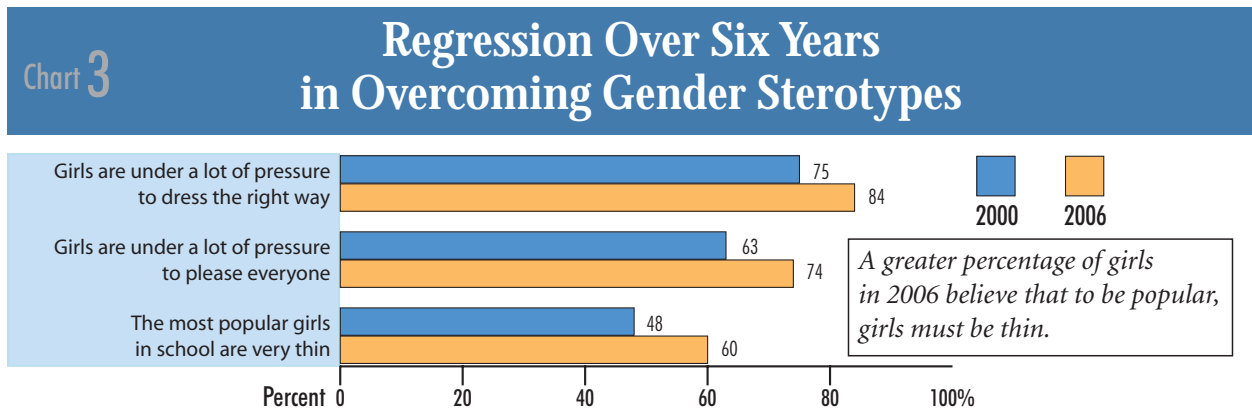
In other areas, the stereotypes girls face have not changed. Girls in approximately the same percentages continue to report that the following statements are true:

- Girls are not supposed to be strong and tough (38% 2000, 36% 2006);
- Parents want girls to play with dolls, not trucks and action figures (62% 2000, 57% 2006);
- Girls are supposed to be kind and caring (81% 2000, 84% 2006);
- Girls are expected to speak softly and not cause trouble (56% 2000, 55% 2006);
- The smartest girls in my school are not popular (44% 2000, 44% 2006);
- People think girls don't know how to take care of their own money (39% 2000, 38% 2006);
- Teachers think it is not important for girls to be good at math (17% 2000, 17% 2006).

We want to be able to play rough with the boys and not be told that girls don't do that.

—3rd Grade Girl

There has been a change for the worse in certain stereotypes. Even more girls feel pressured to please everyone and dress right, and a greater percentage of girls in 2006 believe that to be popular, girls must be thin. (See Chart 3.)



Finding 2

Girls Have Big Aspirations, but Worries Loom Large

The majority of the girls surveyed aspire to go to college full time and many dream of traveling to exciting places. However, when they predict what will actually happen, more see their college and travel ambitions curtailed by the need to work full time or part time and by other concerns. In addition to the pressures of grades and the other challenges of growing up that generations of children have faced, girls and boys are experiencing stresses and fears brought on by terrorist attacks, ongoing war, and natural disasters. Gender has a significant impact on how they react to and internalize these ordinary and extraordinary trials. (See Chart 4 on the next page.)

One of the reasons girls appear increasingly to feel the need to work after high school as they get older is concern about the costs of college. Over half (56%) of high school girls report that they are concerned that “college will be too expensive for me.” More than a third (35%) of middle school girls have that worry, and so do one fifth (20%) of elementary school girls. The last number is noteworthy. Financial worries, too, are afflicting girls at younger ages.

Young girls are eloquent about the weight of the pressures they feel.

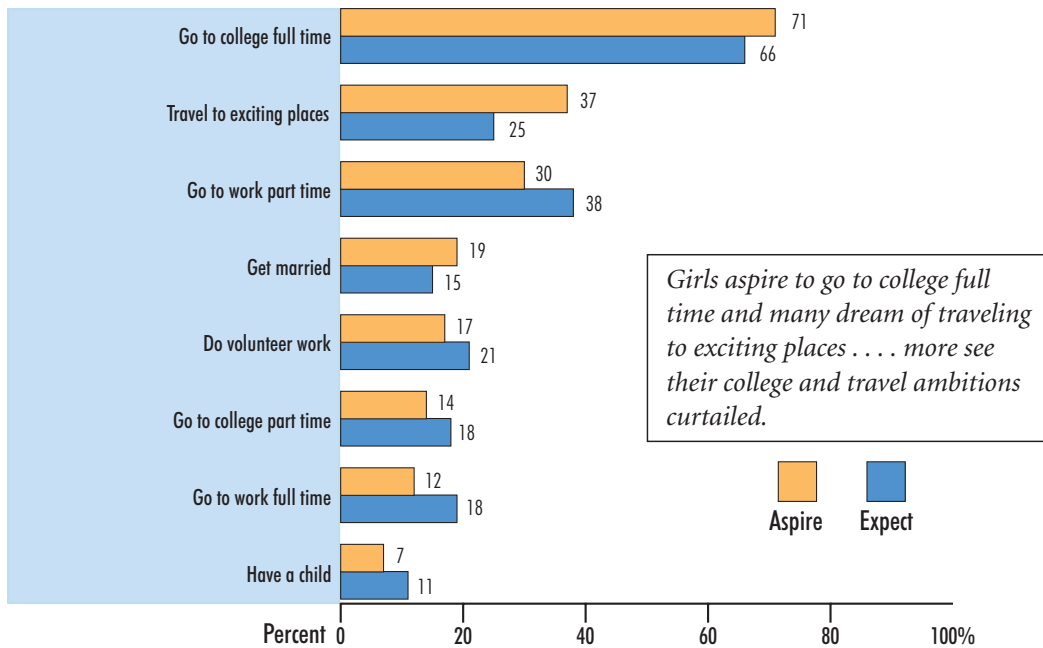
One girl in the fourth grade summed up the general picture of the quality of girls’ lives in her take on what it is like growing up as a girl today: “. . . it’s lots of fun and I’m not in a hurry to be a

I am only 9, let me decide what I want to do when I am older.
—3rd Grade Girl

Chart 4

Girls' Aspirations and Expectations

Want to Do Most After High School / Expect to Do After High School



[I want adults to know] that when you are 8 you feel like you are a teenager already.

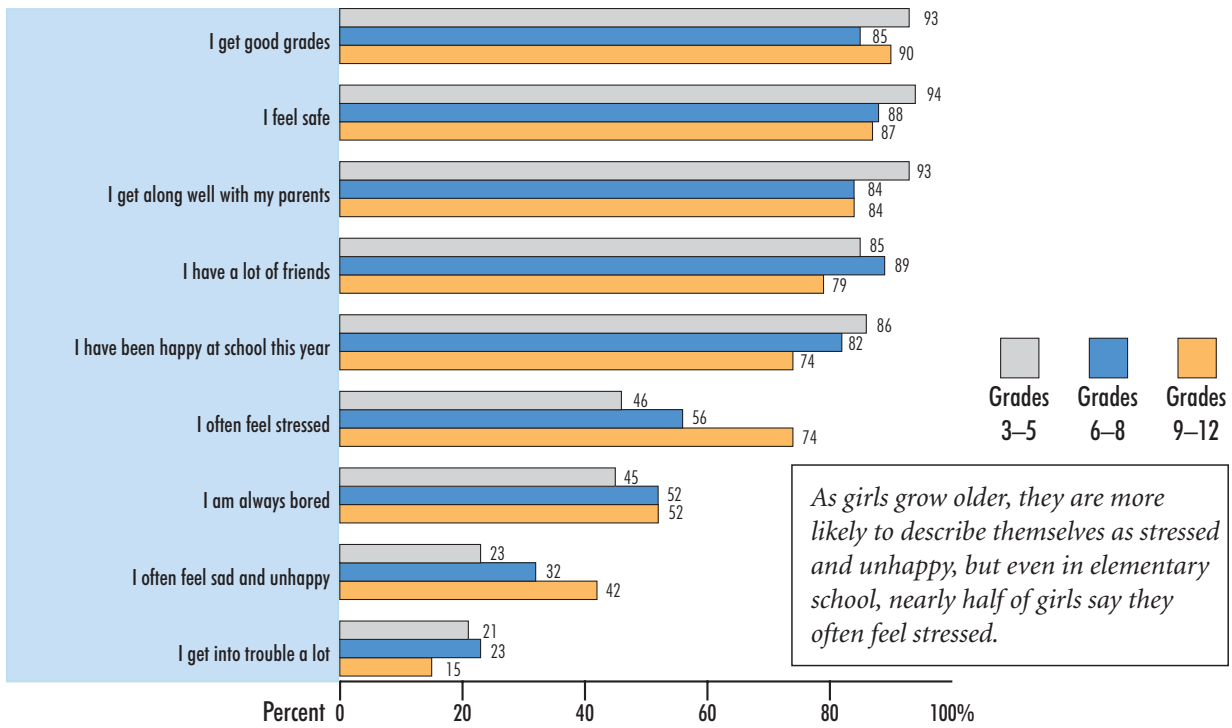
—3rd Grade Girl

grownup like lots of kids.” In general, girls indicate that they enjoy school and have good relationships with their friends and parents. There are areas of concern, however. Six in ten girls (60%) report that they often feel stressed and one half (50%) report that they are always bored. Even more disconcerting is that one-third of girls (33%) say they often feel sad and unhappy. (See Chart 5 on the next page.)

It is sometimes hard. I don't know what I am supposed to be doing. I don't want to grow up because I think it is scary to be an adult.

—5th Grade Girl

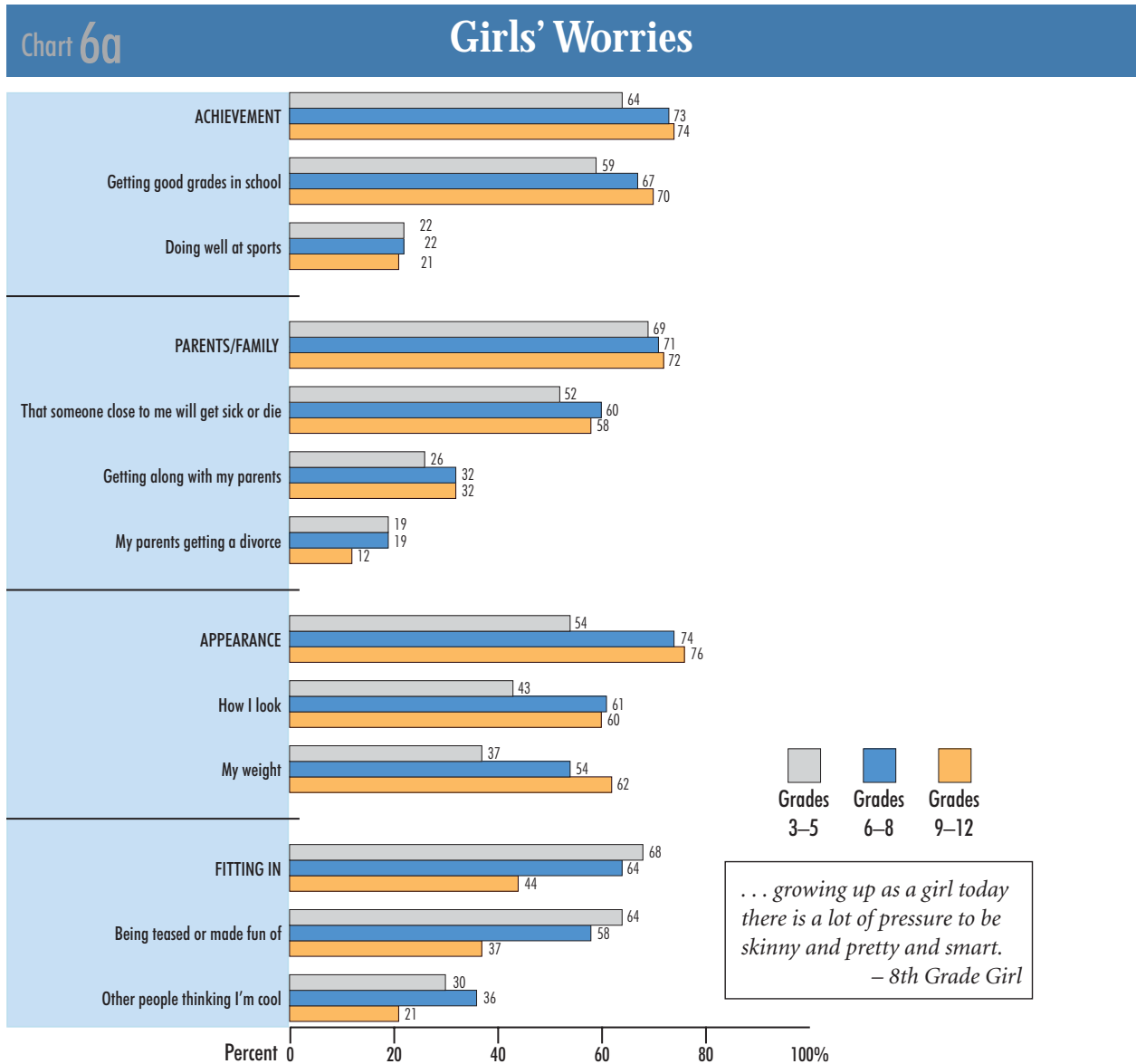
Chart 5 Girls' Descriptions of Themselves A Lot Like Me / Somewhat Like Me



I want them to know that it is extremely tough growing up in this world today. There are so many pressures of being a teenage girl. You never feel like you're thin enough, pretty enough, or just good enough.
—9th Grade Girl

As girls grow older, they are more likely to describe themselves as stressed and unhappy. Here, too, we cannot overlook the fact that nearly half of girls in elementary school say that they often feel stressed.

- In the United States in 2005 a much higher proportion of young women (36.7%) than of young men (20.4%) reported that they felt sad or hopeless almost every day for two or more weeks in a row so that they stopped doing some usual activities. Nearly half of Latinas in grades 9–12 (46.7%) said they felt sad or hopeless, compared to 36.9% of Black young women and 33.4% of White young women.
 - In the United States in 2005 young women in grades 9–12 (21.8%) were considerably more likely than young men (12.0%) to report they had seriously considered attempting suicide, or made a suicide plan (16.2% of young women, 9.9% of young men). Nearly 1 in 4 Latinas in the United States (24.2%) reported considering suicide and nearly 1 in 5 (18.5%) had made a suicide plan.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2006, June). Youth risk behavior surveillance—United States, 2005. *MMWR*, 55 (No. SS-5).



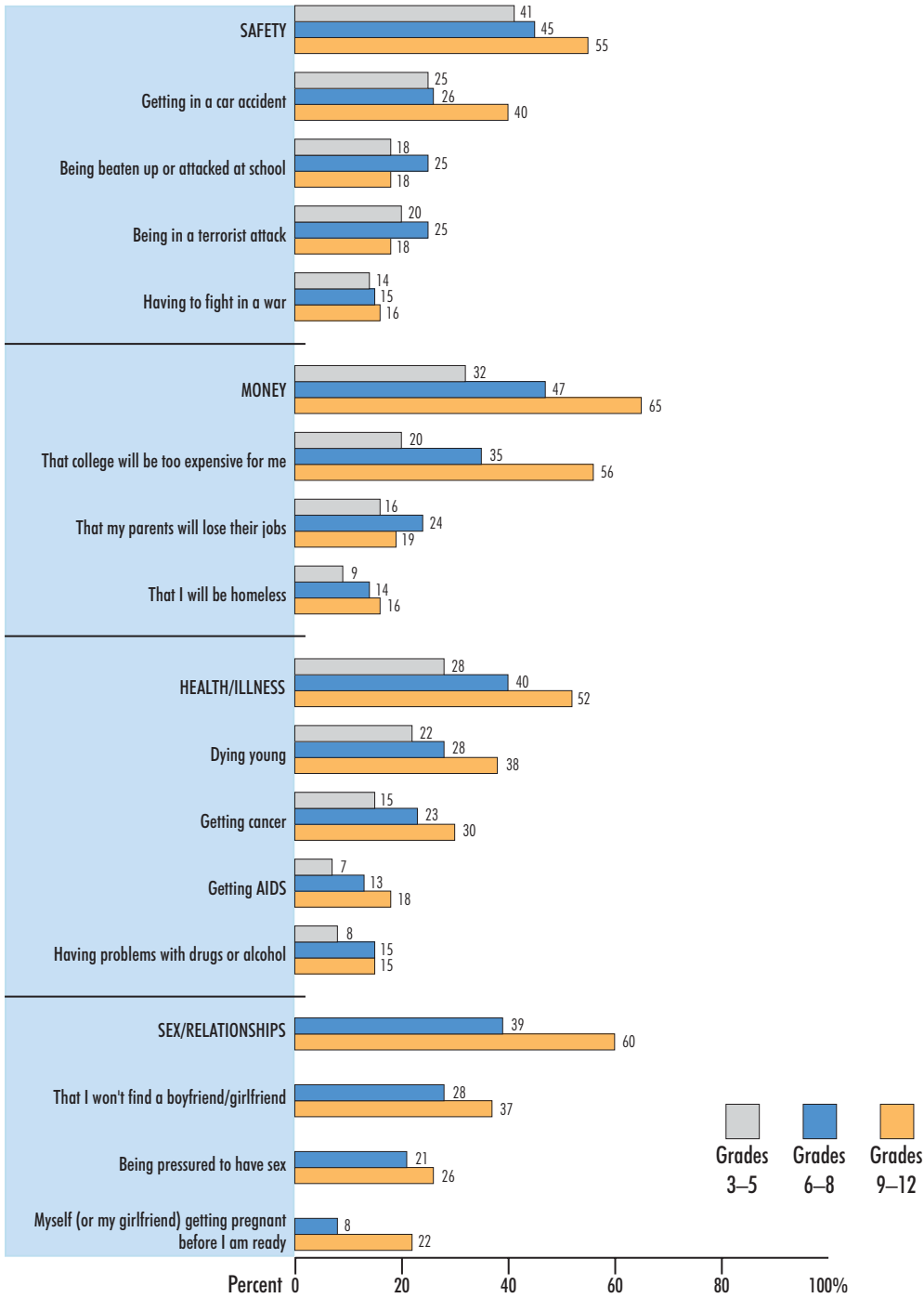
GIRLS CAN DO A LOT OF WHAT BOYS CAN AND WE ARE NOT HERE JUST TO BE A TOY FOR THE BOYS.
—10th Grade Girl

Body Image and Appearance. Seven in ten girls (69%) report being concerned about their appearance. Specifically, girls worry about how they look (55%) and their weight (52%).

Sex and Relationships.² Sexuality is a major area of concern for girls in middle and high school. Six in ten high-school girls (60%) and nearly four in ten middle-school girls (39%) report that they worry about sex and relationships. As girls get older, they are more likely to worry about finding a romantic partner, about being pressured to have sex, and about getting pregnant. It is critical to note, however, that more than one in five middle-school girls (21%)

² We did not ask girls in grades 3-5 the questions about sex and relationships.

Chart 6b **Girls' Worries [continued]**



worry about being pressured to have sex and nearly one in ten (8%) worry about getting pregnant. In concert with the fact that more than one in five girls in high school (22%) worry about getting pregnant, these findings indicate that serious attention must be brought to bear on the role sexuality plays in girls' lives.

Finding 3

Support Systems Bolster Girls' Ability to Endure Stresses and to Believe They Can Achieve Their Aspirations

In this study, as in the previous two, we evaluated students' quality of life, using an index that included such measures as being happy at school, feeling safe, and getting good grades.³ The higher a girl's quality of life, the less likely she is to worry about daily issues and the more capable she is to handle the stress of other life concerns, such as body image, sex, and relationships. Quality of life also affects aspirations and expectations for the future. Girls with a higher quality of life are more likely to intend to go to college and to believe that they actually will do so than those with a lower quality of life.

Based on the quality of life index score, the girls in this study fall into equivalent size groups of one-third each: Thirty-four percent of girls are considered to have a high quality of life, 34 percent a medium quality of life, and 32 percent a low quality of life. There are somewhat more girls with a low quality of life than in the 2000 study, where 26 percent were considered to have a low quality of life.

MTV, movies, and movie stars and singers are making bad behavior look good. . . . A girl has to act like the girls that you see on the TV or movie to be popular and fun and for the boys to like them.

—5th Grade Girl

³ An index for the purpose of measuring students' quality of life was created based on students' responses to nine descriptors: I have a lot of friends; I get along well with my parents; I am always bored; I often feel sad and unhappy; I have been happy at school this year; I get into trouble a lot; I feel safe; I get good grades; I often feel stressed. Response categories for each statement were assigned point values and then totaled for a combined score. This combined score determines whether a student is considered to have a high, medium, or low quality of life.

Growing up as a girl is difficult because everyone, regardless of age, expects girls to be well-rounded, and has high standards for girls. This is what makes girls 'break-down' and/or 'change.'

—11th Grade Girl

However, there is little change in the percentage considered to have a high quality of life—34 percent in 2006 vs. 35 percent in 2000.

Stereotypes

I want adults to know that growing up as a girl today there is a lot of pressure to be skinny and pretty and smart.

—8th Grade Girl

Girls who have the lowest quality of life are more likely than girls with a high quality of life to think that society endorses traditional stereotypes about girls. The one notable exception is that they are less likely to believe that girls are supposed to be kind and caring. Although, in general, girls with a low quality of life are more likely to believe that these stereotypes exist, it is those girls with a high quality of life who express the most dissatisfaction with many of these stereotypes. (See Charts 7 and 8 on the next two pages.)

Aspirations and Predictions

Quality of life affects ambitions and visions of the future. Girls considered to have a higher quality of life are more likely to report wanting to go to college full time compared to those with a lower quality of life. Those with a lower quality of life report greater intentions than those with higher quality of life for working part time, working full time, getting married, and having a child. (See Chart 9 on page 16.)



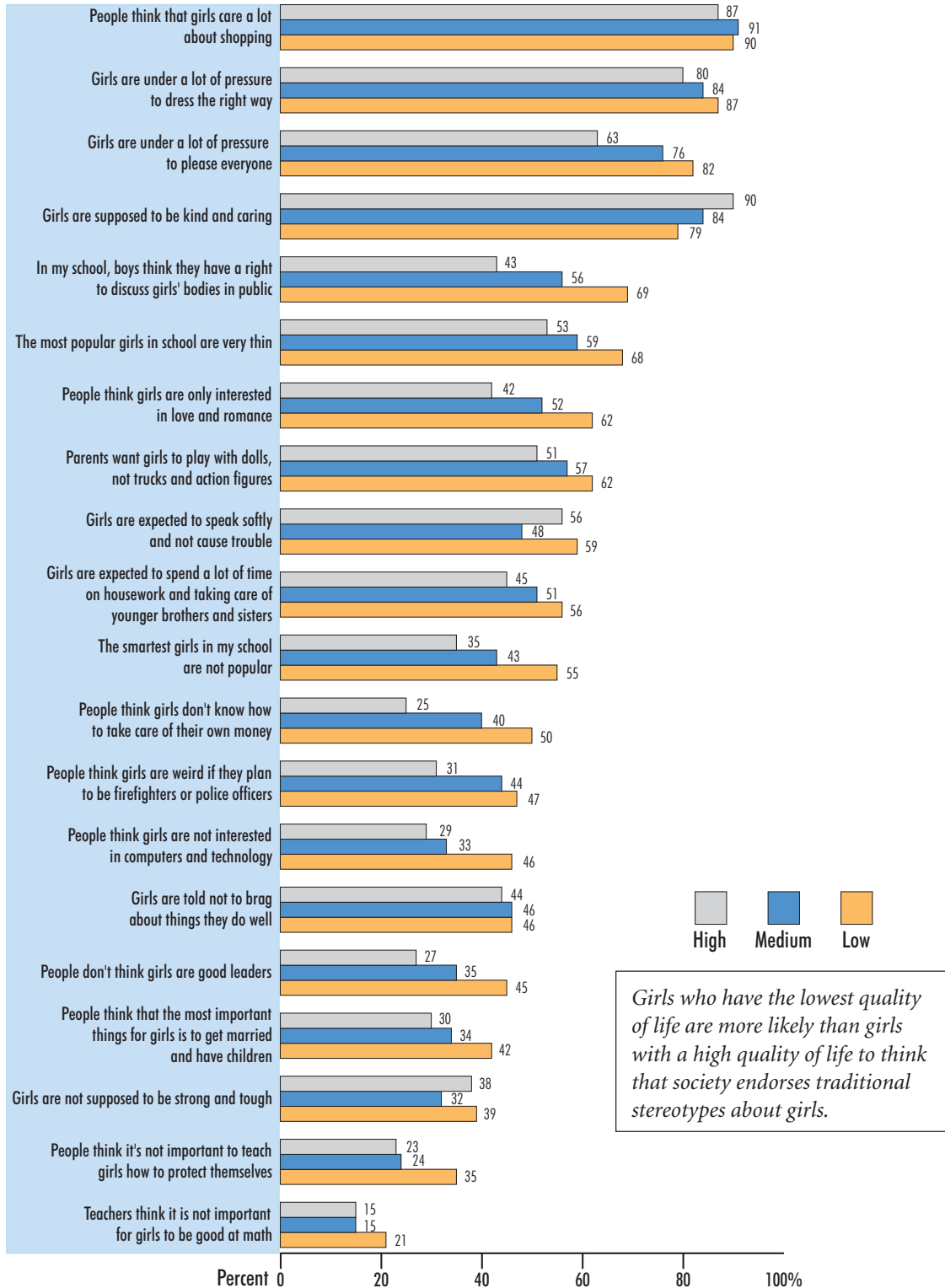
We are special even if we are not boys. We are smart and strong and don't have to starve to death to be pretty. . . .

—4th Grade Girl

Chart 7

Girls' Views of Stereotypes Affecting Girls (by Quality of Life)

“Here are a few statements about girls. For each statement, please tell us if it is true or if it is false.”

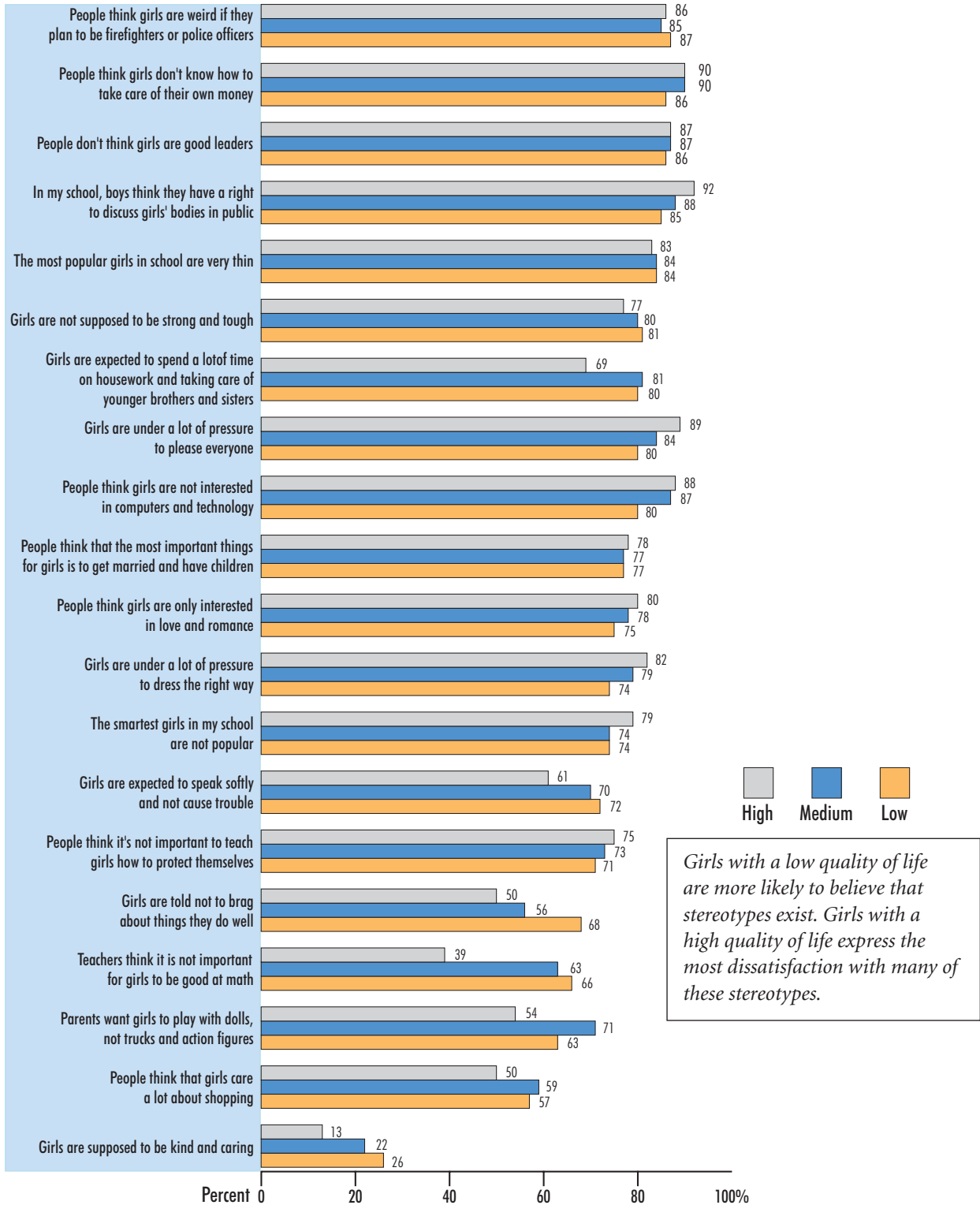


Girls who have the lowest quality of life are more likely than girls with a high quality of life to think that society endorses traditional stereotypes about girls.

Chart 8

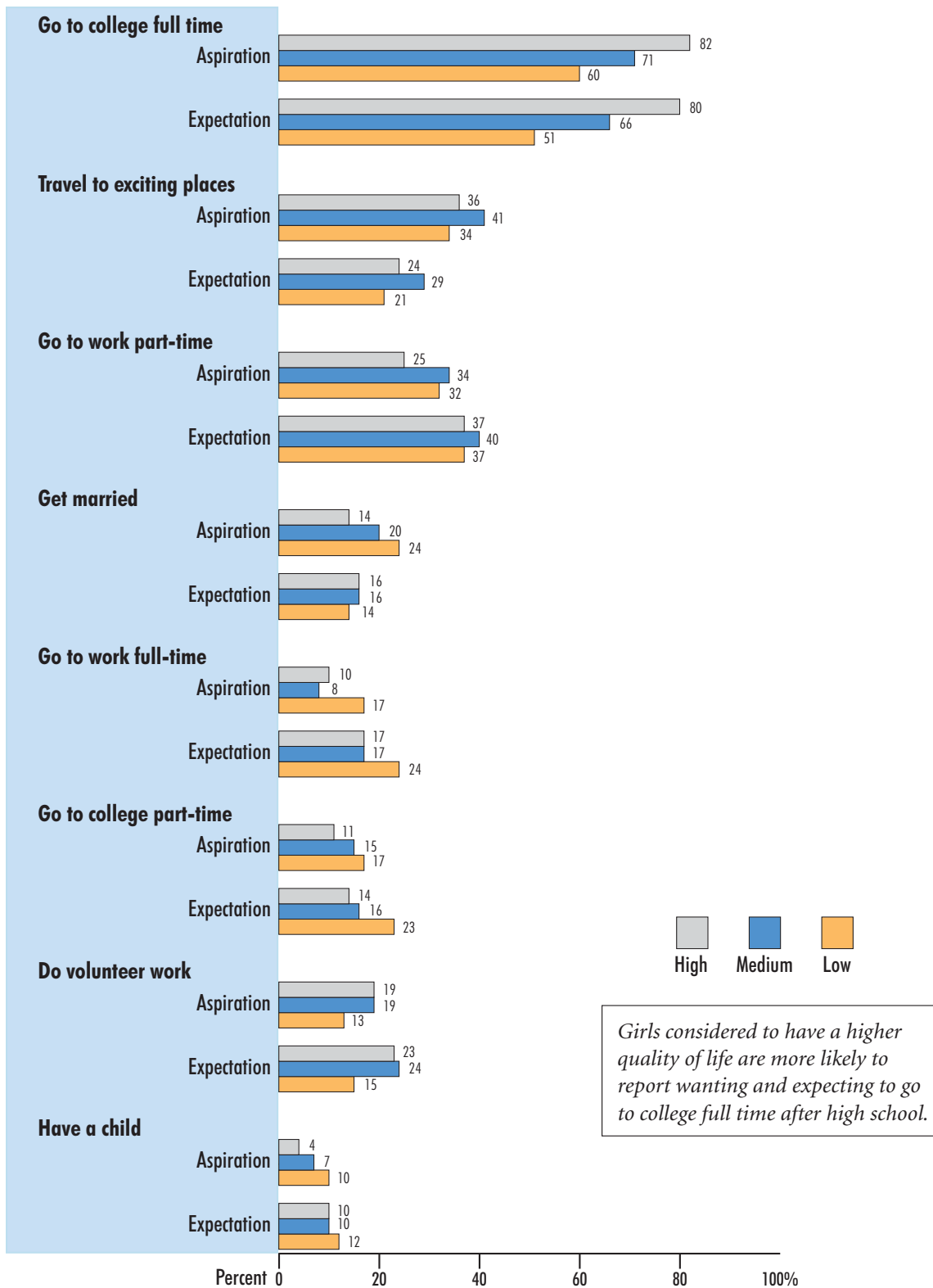
Girls' Dissatisfaction with Stereotypes Affecting Girls (by Quality of Life)

"You told us that each of these statements is true. Please tell us if you like that it's true, or if you don't like that it's true."



Girls with a low quality of life are more likely to believe that stereotypes exist. Girls with a high quality of life express the most dissatisfaction with many of these stereotypes.

Chart 9 Girls' Aspirations and Expectations (by Quality of Life)



[I want adults to know] that we need input from them about what kind of person we are growing up to be.
—4th Grade Girl

Stresses and Concerns

A girl's quality of life also affects what she worries about. The disparity between the worries of those with a low quality of life compared to those with a high quality of life is particularly dramatic in the areas of health, body image, and sex and relationships. (See Charts 10a and 10b.)

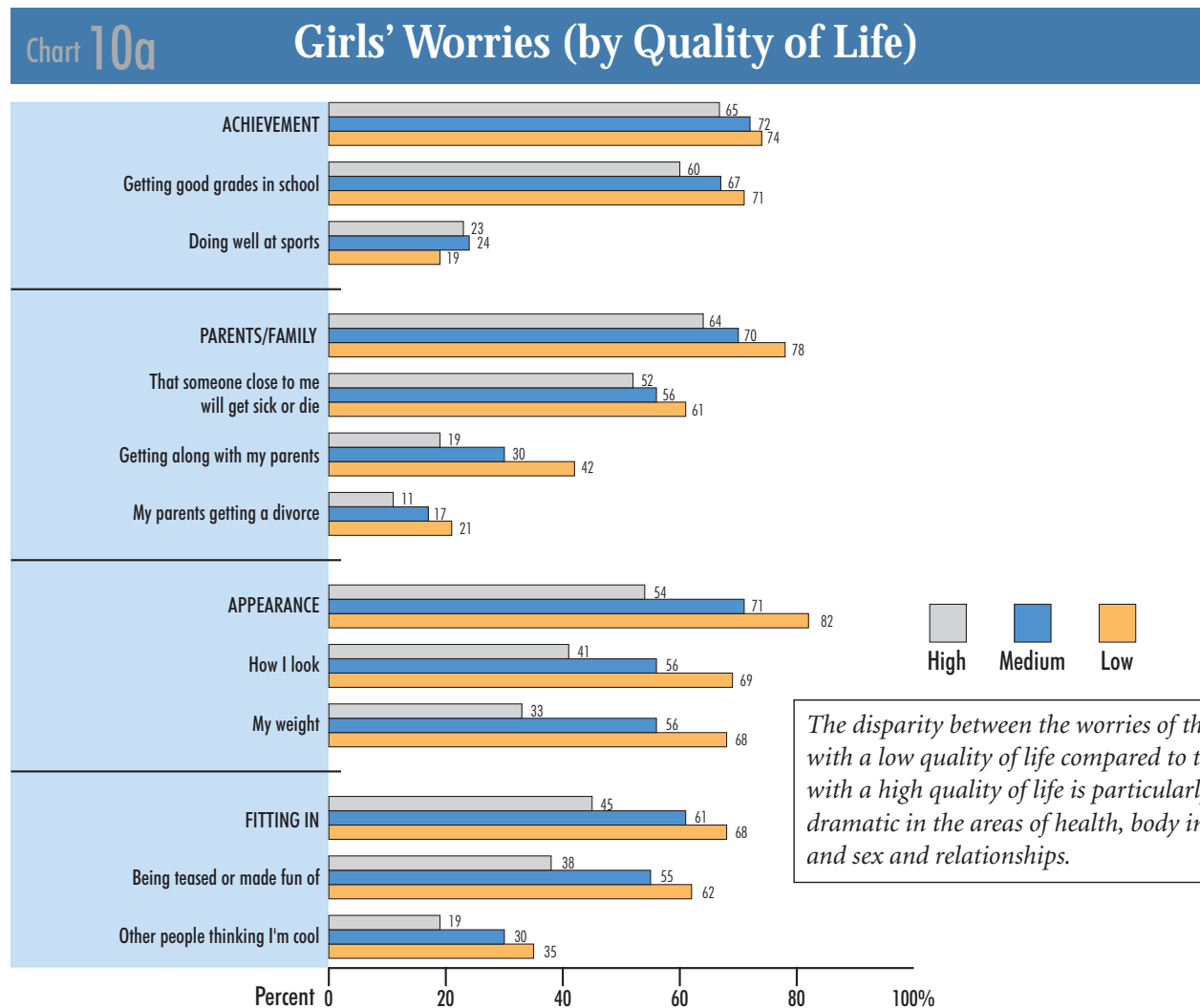
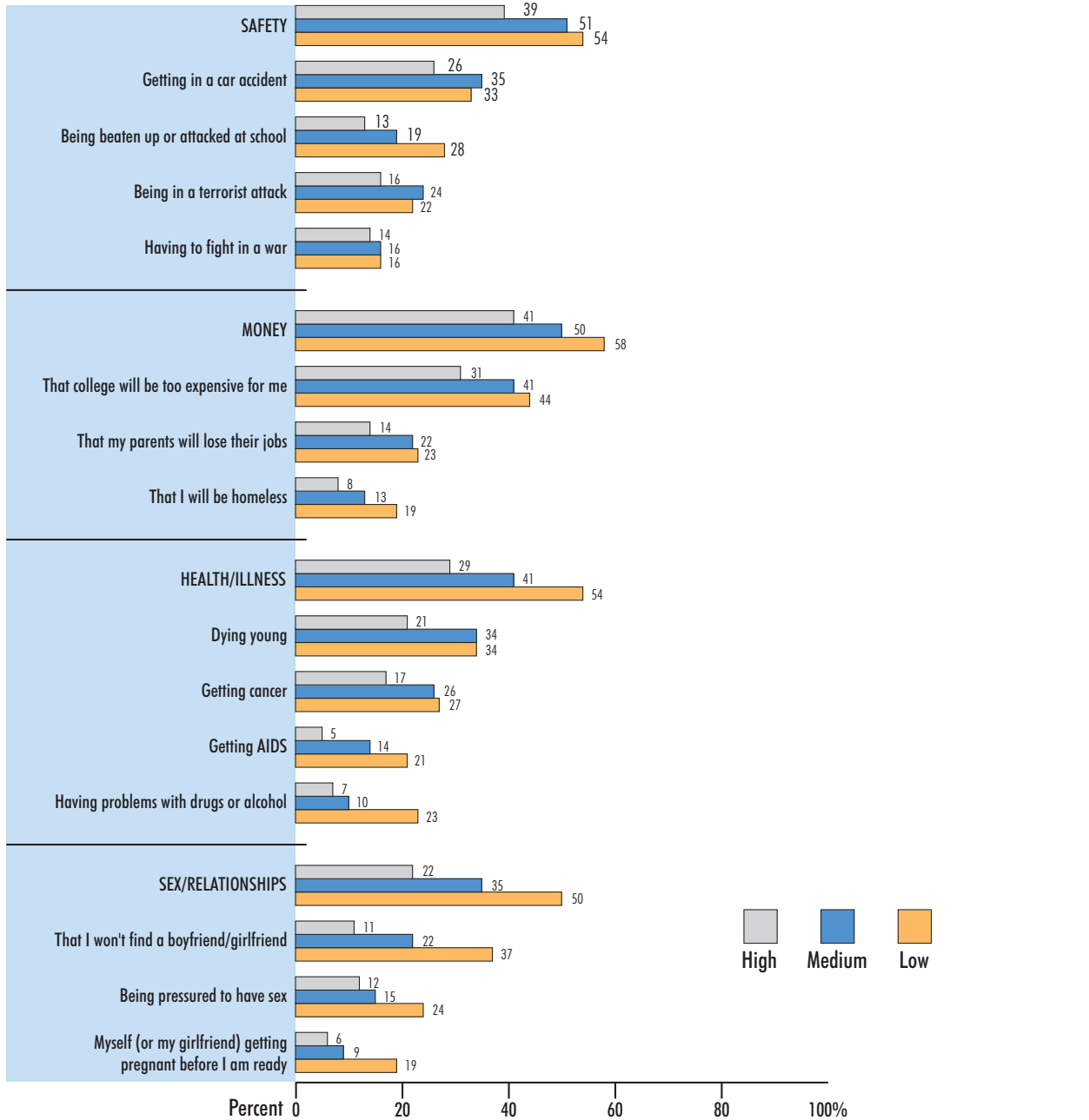


Chart 10b Girls' Worries (by Quality of Life) [continued]

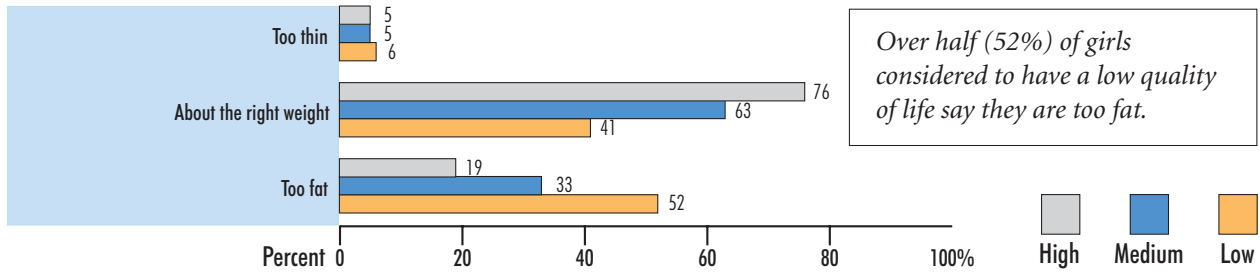


We keep hearing that it's different from the old days and girls can be smart and do whatever they want and don't have to be pretty and sweet and wait for boys to notice them, but it doesn't seem like things have really changed because it's like boys treat us the same way boys always have in old stories and TV and the pressure to be pretty and pleasant is just the same except now it's not acceptable to be a dumb blonde.

—6th Grade Girl

Chart 11

Girls' Body Image (by Quality of Life)



Over half (52%) of girls considered to have a low quality of life say they are too fat.



The way girls relate to their bodies is also connected to their quality of life. Three-quarters (76%) of girls considered to have a high quality of life say they are about the right weight compared to four in ten (41%) of those considered to have a low quality of life. Likewise, girls with a high quality of life (19%) are dramatically less likely than those with a low quality of life (52%) to think they are too fat. (See Chart 11 above.)

- Nationwide in 2005, 10% of young women in grades 9–12 were overweight and an additional 16% were at risk for becoming overweight, a smaller percentage than of young men (16% overweight and 16% at risk for becoming overweight) in the same grades. Yet young women (38%) were significantly more likely than young men (25%) to identify themselves as overweight.
 - A nationally representative survey found that 6 in 10 young women in grades 9–12 (62%) were trying to lose weight using a range of methods during the 30 days preceding the survey.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2006, June). Youth risk behavior surveillance-United States, 2005. *MMWR*, 55 (No. SS-5).

[Growing up as a girl today is] hard. You are expected to be very sexy and attractive but at the same time are condemned for the sexuality that you portray.

—10th Grade Girl

My mom says she went through everything I go through, but she says to her friends I know too much, more than she did when she was my age. I don't know a lot, it would be nice if I did. Sometimes I don't want to ask her questions because she's so busy, she works all the time. And sometimes I feel like she doesn't have any interest in me. I just want my mother and my teachers and my friend's mothers to understand I'm not perfect and I can't be perfect all the time. And I'd like to be able to ask questions, and I don't feel like I can. I don't think any of my friends feel like they can.

—11th Grade Girl

Support Systems

Adult support and guidance are important parts of growing up and can influence girls' quality of life and resilience. And yet, more than one in ten (12%) girls report that they do not know three adults to whom they could turn if they have a problem. There has been little change in comparison to 2000, when eleven percent of girls reported not having three adults to go to for support.

Girls with a low quality of life (27%) are four times more likely as those with medium quality of life (7%) and seven times more likely than those with high quality of life (4%) to report this lack of adult support.

It is critical to note that the lack of support intensifies as girls get older. High school girls (20%) are almost twice as likely as middle school girls (12%) and five times more likely than elementary school girls (4%) to say they do not know three adults to go to if they have a problem.

Life is scary.
—9th Grade Girl

We are our own person and if given the right information will make the right choices.

—9th Grade Girl

There is way too much pressure, especially from the media, to be skinny, popular, athletic, and have a boyfriend. Girls should be respected more as people than so-and-so's girlfriend.

—8th Grade Girl

Finding 4

Girls and Boys Face Different Stereotypes and Concerns

There are remarkable commonalities between the attitudes, experiences, and aspirations of girls and boys. However, there are some critical gender-based differences: Girls and boys believe that girls are supposed to be kind and caring, while boys are supposed to protect themselves and others. Girls are more worried than boys about their appearance, social pressures, being pressured to have sex, and about getting pregnant. Boys, on the other hand, are more concerned about having to fight in a war and about doing well in sports.

In general, among those saying that a stereotype about girls is true, a greater percentage of girls than boys dislike the fact that this is so. (See Charts 12 and 13 on pages 22 and 23.)

What Girls and Boys Say About Stereotypes Facing Boys

It is clear from the findings that both girls and boys recognize that boys also face gender stereotypes. While girls and boys generally agree on the stereotypes facing boys, there are some gender

Even though we are told we can be whatever we want to be, there is still pressure to do and become the same old gender roles.

—8th Grade Girl

Chart 12

Girls' and Boys' Views of Stereotypes Affecting Girls

*“Here are a few statements about girls.
For each statement, please tell us if it is true or if it is false.”*

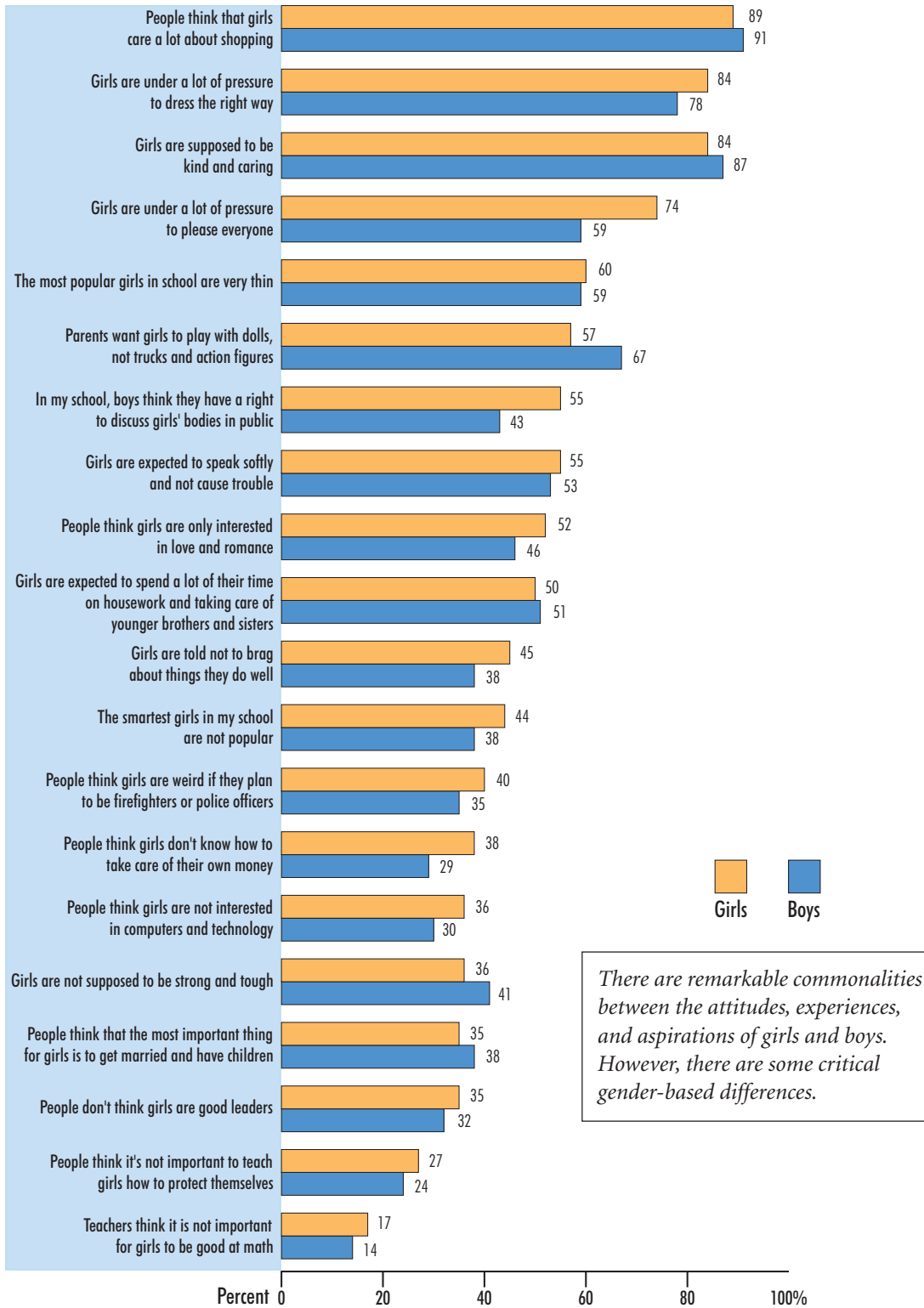
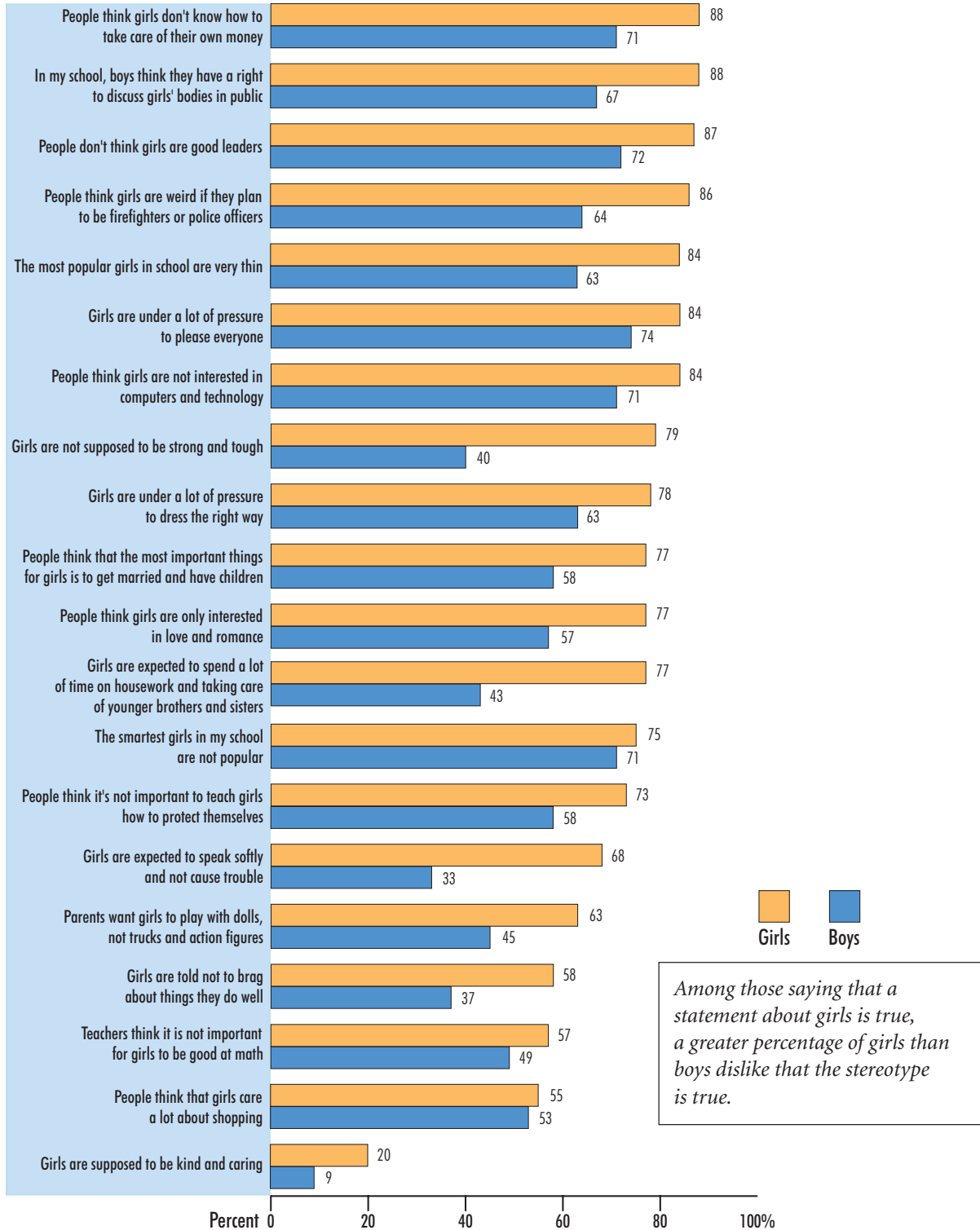


Chart 13

Girls' and Boys' Dissatisfaction with Stereotypes Affecting Girls

"You told us that each of these statements is true. Please tell us if you like that it's true, or if you don't like that it's true."



differences to note. Girls are more likely than boys to believe some of the more negative typecasts for boys, such as that boys are not expected to participate in housework and caring for siblings. In addition, more girls than boys believe that “boys are under a lot of pressure to make jokes about girls’ bodies and put them down.” Boys, on the other hand, are more likely than girls to say that statements about boys’ leadership and strength are true.

There are also some significant differences in girls’ and boys’ views of stereotypes about boys. Overall, girls are less accepting of traditional stereotypes such as the notion that boys are expected to take charge of things and are not expected to spend time on household chores and caring for siblings.



What Boys and Girls Say About Gender Differences

Girls and boys have varying opinions about gender similarities and differences, depending on how the questions are asked. Half of all girls (51%) and boys (53%) believe that girls and boys are very different in all areas of their lives. The vast majority of girls (92%) and boys (95%) agree that boys are better than girls at some things and that girls are better than boys at some things. However, girls (58%) are more likely than boys (48%) to believe that girls and boys have the same abilities and strengths.

While a gender gap in views about gender similarities and differences persists, it has narrowed in comparison with 2000, with a greater percentage of both girls (47% 2000, 58% 2006) and boys (29% 2000, 48% 2006) believing that they have the same abilities and strengths.

Girls and boys express strikingly similar views of their lives and how gender expectations affect them:

It's hard to be everything to everybody: good grades, good athlete, good friend, good son.

—8th Grade Boy

It's hard. We have to live up to what the adults in our lives expect from us, while dealing with peer pressure, while trying to decide who we are ourselves. So we are torn in three directions. No wonder there is so much teen depression and suicide. We are trying to live up to three different areas in our lives.

—9th Grade Girl

It's a whole lot of pressure.

—11th Grade Boy

... most of us are all under pressure from society, parents and teachers to stay thin, popular, get high grades and have lots of friends—otherwise we aren't "normal."

—11th Grade Girl

Being a male is hard and easy at the same time. Males are expected to take charge of everything they do, that's the hard part, but because we are expected to do that, many males already know how to take charge.

—12th Grade Boy

There is a lot of pressure to look good and to be the right shape. We have to be smart and still be like a girl, we also should be good at a sport. It is much easier for us to be seen as equal to boys though and sometimes better!

—7th Grade Girl

Although we are boys we need love and attention too.

—10th Grade Boy

We can do and be anything we want to be, and that being a smart and capable person does not make someone less feminine. I can wear a dress and still do scientific research.

—9th Grade Girl

Boys can be strong and sensitive.

—3rd Grade Boy

[Girls] don't always want to wear dresses, play with dolls and be nice and quiet—we sometimes like to be the opposite.

—5th Grade Girl

Additional analysis of the similarities and differences between girls and boys is available in the full *The Supergirl Dilemma* report. Please visit www.girlsinc.org to download a PDF copy.



Finding 5

Superwomen Worry for Supergirls

The crush of conflicting expectations and the mounting pressure to excel at everything that girls describe echo closely the professional and social struggles of women of previous generations. Adult women appear frustrated with the fact that gender stereotypes and limitations persist for today's girls and boys and express serious concern about the consequences of these stereotypes.

Stereotypes Facing Girls

Adult women and men share many of the same beliefs about statements regarding girls. A greater percentage of women than men agree that stereotypes regarding girls' appearance and demeanor exist. (See Chart 14 on the next page.)

Women are more likely than men to report that they dislike that these stereotypes about girls are true, while a greater percentage of men enjoy the status quo. (See Charts 14 and 15 on pages 28 and 29.)



Chart 14

Adults' Views of Stereotypes Affecting Girls

*“Here are a few statements about girls.
For each statement, please tell us if it is true or if it is false.”*

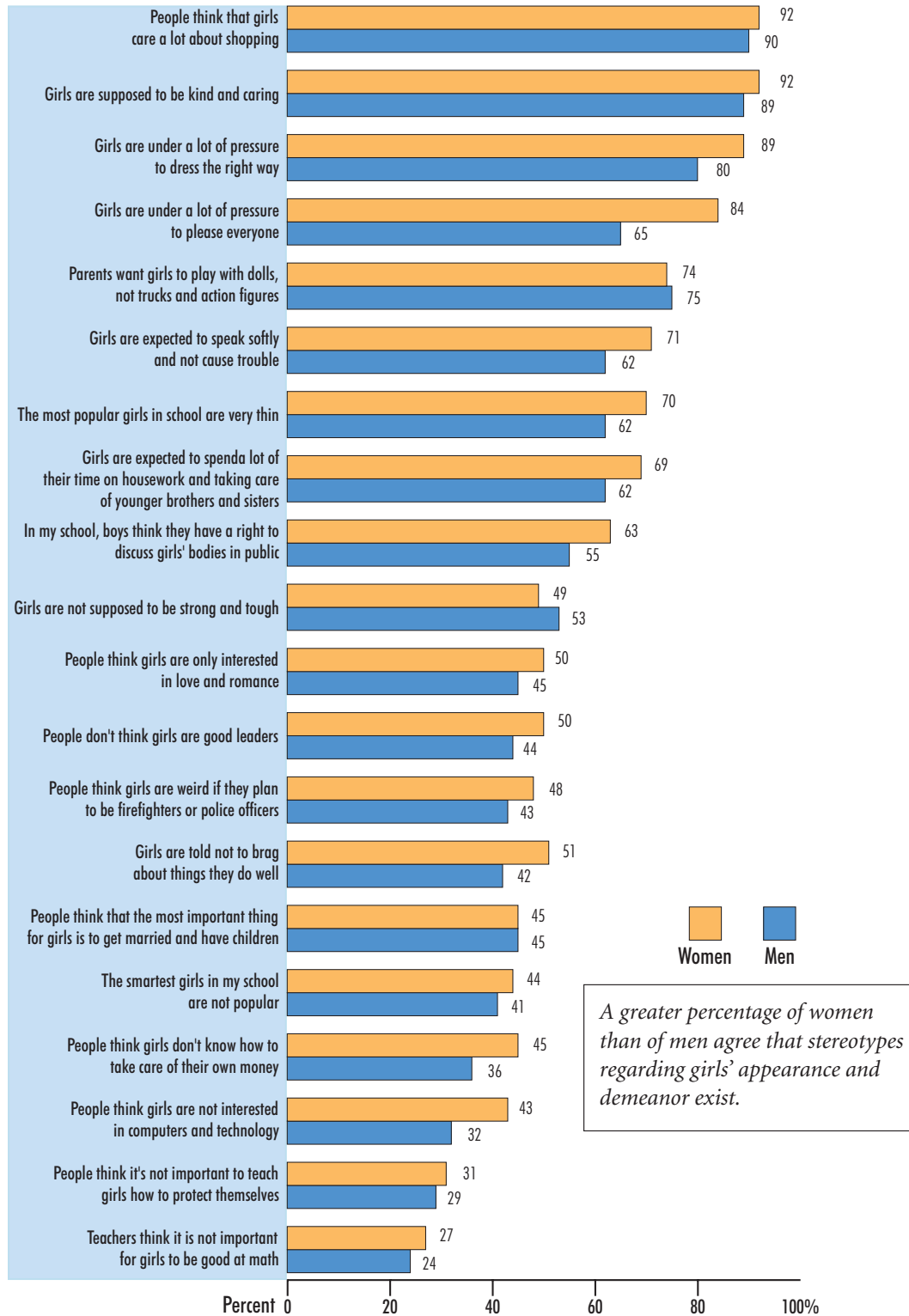
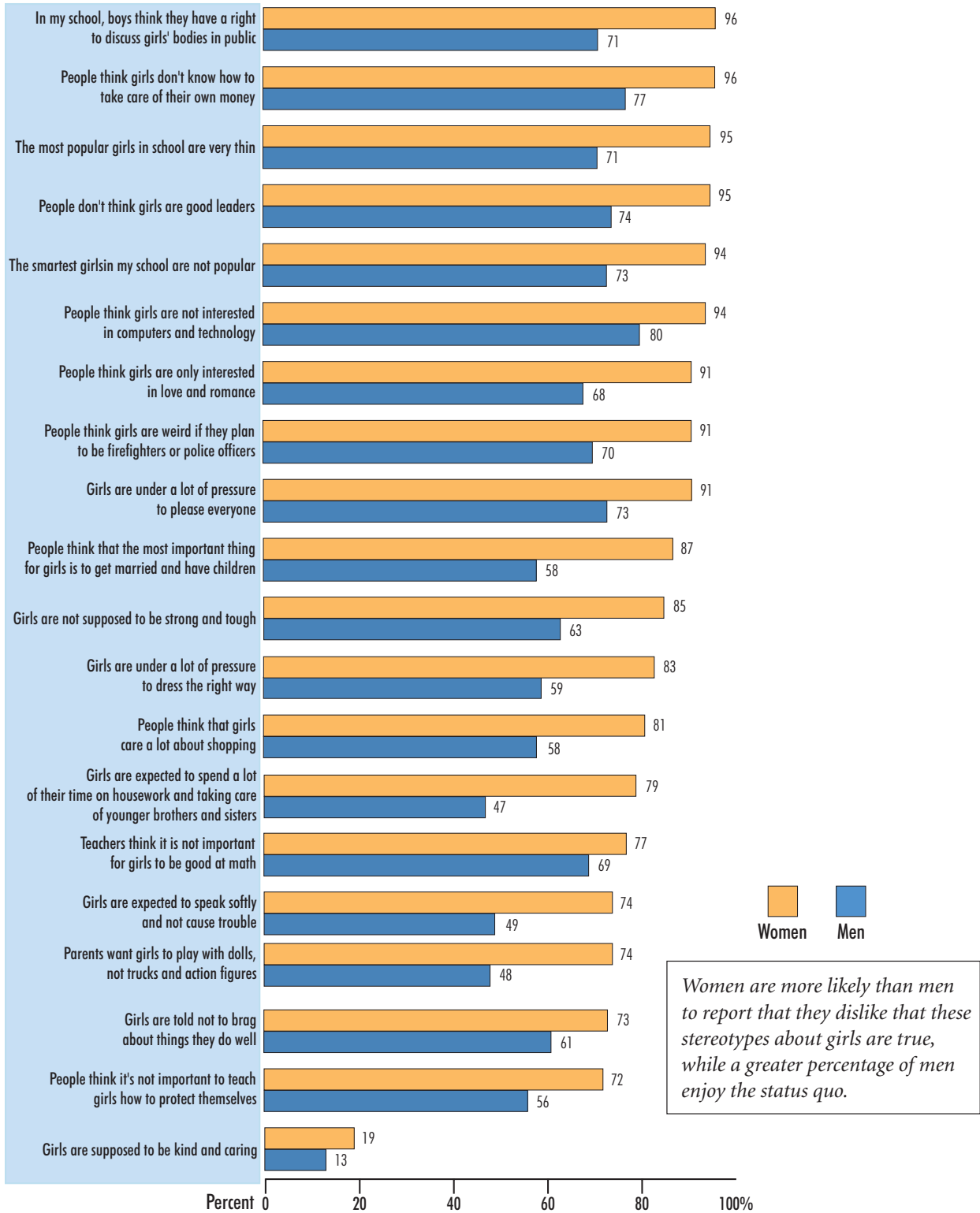


Chart 15

Adults' Dissatisfaction with Stereotypes Affecting Girls

"You told us that each of these statements is true. Please tell us if you like that it's true, or if you don't like that it's true."





[I want adults] JUST TO BE THERE FOR ME

—4th Grade Girl

We're pressured everyday to be someone someone else wants us to be.

—12th Grade Girl



Implications and Recommendations

Implications

Girls Inc. believes girls can do anything. However, it seems that as a society we have moved to the point where girls are getting the message that they have to do everything all at the same time. Girls feel the need to be everything for everyone in their lives—parents, siblings, friends, boys, and teachers. These unrealistic expectations of girls create intense pressure in girls' lives.

In particular, the pressure for physical beauty—dressing “right” and having the perfect body—seems to have intensified since 2000.

These findings underscore the urgency of the Girls Inc. mission—to inspire all girls to be strong, smart, and bold—and vision—empowered girls and an equitable society. Parents and extended family, teachers and school administrators, policy makers, and employers need to pay close attention to the concerns and contributions of girls of all ages. These girls grow up to be women—citizens, employees, mothers, among many roles—and their success is our collective success. We need to address the challenges and limitations girls encounter earlier, since it is clear that girls are

It is hard to live up to what everyone wants for us. We need to do things at our pace and in our time. And just believe in us; support us as we grow up.

—3rd Grade Girl

It's hard growing up as a girl today. You now have the added pressure of everyone wanting you to be great and make some wonderful advancement which will advance women even further. Pressure comes from other sources, like having to work harder so people don't think that the boys are better than you. Or working harder to prove that it doesn't matter what your sex is, you are still a smart, motivated, and intelligent young person striving to learn.

—12th Grade Girl

experiencing them earlier. We must help girls to be super in the ways that feel right to them rather than perpetuating the idea that they must be supergirls in order to meet societal expectations.

Recommendation: Listen to What Girls Have to Say

First and foremost, these findings underscore the need to pay close attention to what girls think, feel, and experience. Whether you are a parent or another caring adult, ask a girl—or even better many girls—about what is on her mind and really listen, careful not to get upset or judgmental.

- Ask girls you know what they think of these findings.
- What are their hopes and aspirations? What are the pressures and stresses they experience?
- Ask a girl how her social life is going. Is she getting support from friends and adults?
- Is she getting pressured about the choices she makes?

Recommendation: Empower Girls to Set Priorities and Make Smart Choices

It is clear from the data that the pressure to meet so many conflicting expectations is the most difficult aspect of girls' lives.

Let us be ourselves to a certain level. We are not all careless. Tell us how proud you are of us. Talk to us more often. Communication is the key.

—12th Grade Girl

Too much pressure to look good, act good, do as you are told and not cause trouble. Be quiet and do house chores all the time.

—5th Grade Girl

Girls want their ideas respected. Girls want their future open to any dreams they might have for themselves.

—3rd Grade Girl

Parents, teachers, and caring adults need to help girls think about how to make smart choices and how to set priorities. Support girls in learning to say “no” and in establishing boundaries.

Provide Role Models

- Invite successful women to talk to girls about how they resist internalizing societal messages about what women can and should be.
- Share profiles of women, particularly ones that reveal how they overcame obstacles to achieve the success.
- Introduce girls to career options at your organization. Introduce girls to women leaders in your organization.

Recommendation: Redefine Notions of Femininity and Masculinity

Look deep down and see if you really are sexist or not...

—12th Grade Girl

...I can think for myself. I like math and computers, hate shopping most of the time. There are things that I can do just as well if not better than guys can.

—12th Grade Girl

Redefine What It Means to Be Kind and Caring

Help girls overcome the pressure to please everyone. Teach them how to say “no” in a kind and caring way.

[I want adults to know] that some girls are smart and some are not. That it's okay to do things that boys do and it's okay to have a big voice. My mom says it's okay to say what I am thinking and try not to be afraid. A big voice is good.

—3rd Grade Girl

Nurture the Individual (Girl or Boy)

It is very hard to figure out what one really wants to do in life. I want to take my time in finding out who I am.

—11th Grade Girl

- Tell a girl it's okay to brag about something she is good at.
- Tell a girl it is “cool” rather than “yucky” to play in the mud, hold a snake, or get sweaty.
- Tell a girl it is okay to get angry and express it in a healthy way.
- Teach girls skills that help them think on their feet, make their points, and defend their positions without apology.
- Avoid rescuing girls. Encourage girls to take healthy risks, make mistakes, and get dirty or disheveled in pursuit of a goal.
- Offer training in self-defense and sports to promote feelings of strength.
- Confront notions of female fragility. Challenge views in the media and elsewhere of assertive women as unfeminine.
- Celebrate the accomplishments of women who excel in non-traditional areas.

Recommendation: Provide Strategies to Assess Media and Societal Messages Critically

Help girls challenge insidious media messages

There are a lot of pressures and stereotypes we have to deal with to be who we want to be and at the same time live up to who you want us to be.

—6th Grade Girl

- Ask a girl what she finds interesting and troubling in the magazines she sees.
- Ask a girl about her favorite television shows. What roles does she see girls and boys and women and men playing? What roles would she like to see them play?
- Ask a girl about her point of view on current events.
- Encourage girls to become media critics. Help them examine portrayals of girls and women on television, in movies, music, books, magazines, and computer games. Are the portrayals realistic? Are female characters judged more for their looks or actions?

I want them to realize that there's an insane amount of media and peer pressure on girls: to be thin, to be beautiful, to be air-headed and only care about shopping, to always be wearing the latest trends, to not care about grades or school, etcetera. They need to encourage girls to be themselves and find what they're passionate about because otherwise, without adult support, most girls won't have the courage to go against the media and do what they love, be it considered appropriately 'feminine' or not.

—12th Grade Girl

Address Issues of Body Image

- Help girls develop a healthy body image. Teach them that beauty comes in different sizes, shapes, colors, and abilities. Encourage girls to focus on health, flexibility, and strength.
- Praise girls for their skills, efforts, and successes, not only their appearance.
- Tell a girl she is great because of what she does, not because of how she looks.
- Tell a girl to think in terms of her nutrition, health, and strength. Banish the word “diet” from her—and your—vocabulary.
- Model all of the above for girls.

Recommendation: Educate Yourself and Raise Awareness of Stereotypes and their Consequences

Be aware of the signals and messages you are sending young children.

Girls absorb the subtle messages and expectations that are all around them. When elementary school girls worry about their

I like science and computers. Girls like to get dirty just like boys. We like to play with trucks and hot wheels too.

—4th Grade Girl

It's very difficult because there is so much pressure to be perfect. The media puts pressure on us to be thin, parents put pressure on us to get good grades. We are supposed to be nice. . . . Sometimes it seems unbearable. We just want acceptance.

—8th Grade Girl

I want them to know it is not easy, and we don't want to just get married and have a baby and be stuck. We want to live our lives like anyone else, without people wanting us to be good cooks or cleaners or moms or babysitters. We can fight and travel and make lots of money and be a big part of the world if we weren't mostly stuck in the house raising kids and being told what to do.

—4th Grade Girl

weight and the costs of college, we must look to their environment, to make sure that they receive positive messages and reinforcement.

- Provide access to an array of toys (trucks and dolls, chemistry set and dress up clothes). Guard against sending verbal or non-verbal signals that you approve or disapprove of certain toys because of their gender associations.
- Advocate for gender-awareness and equity training for teachers in the school system.
- Advocate for equity in academics and sports. Help the school system in your community provide equal access to math and science courses, non-traditional career preparation, as well as team sports.
- Encourage girls to enjoy math and science, by helping them see the math and science everywhere in their lives.
- Debunk the myth that girls and boys are “hardwired” for completely different styles of education and fields of study.

How Girls Inc. Can Help

Girls are inherently strong, smart, and bold. It is societal pressures and expectations that undermine girls' ability to realize their fullest potential.

Girls are expected to be athletic, get top grades, be well-dressed, be thin and beautiful. Girls are told they can be leaders as long as they remain traditionally feminine. To be strong, smart, and bold, girls need to be able to hold on to their dreams and believe they can achieve their aspirations.

It is hard to be a girl. I have a game and it is called a game boy. Why is it not called a game kid? I play it and I am not a boy. That is how things are.

—4th Grade Girl

With so many pressures heaped upon us and so many expectations, it is hard to just be yourself. Everyone should love you for who you are, not what they want you to be.

—10th Grade Girl

The Girls Inc. Girls' Bill of RightsSM is a platform that offers girls a framework for remaining strong, smart, and bold in the face of societal pressure not to be so:

- Girls have the right to be themselves and to resist gender stereotypes.
- Girls have the right to express themselves with originality and enthusiasm.
- Girls have the right to take risks, to strive freely, and to take pride in success.
- Girls have the right to accept and appreciate their bodies.
- Girls have the right to have confidence in themselves and to be safe in the world.
- Girls have the right to prepare for interesting work and economic independence.

We offer girls across the United States and in Canada welcoming girls' communities, supported by caring adults who are trained youth development professionals. Our programs provide opportunities to learn, explore, and grow. Girls Inc. even offers girls who participate in our programs the opportunity to apply for scholarships for higher education.

For those girls who cannot take part in a Girls Inc. center, we offer a lively online community at www.girlsinc.org, which provides girls fun activities, surveys, resources, and opportunities to interact with other girls.

We also have a wide range of resources, such as fact and resource sheets and publications, for adults who want to support girls. Please visit our web site, www.girlsinc.org.

The full report of *The Supergirl Dilemma* is available for download in PDF format at www.girlsinc.org.

Girls are under a lot of pressure to dress the right way, stay the right size, say the right thing, impress people without being too outgoing, keep a reputation, and keep grades up.

—8th Grade Girl

Project Responsibility

This study was designed by Harris Interactive and Girls Incorporated. Dana Markow, Ph.D., *Vice President Youth & Education Research*, directed the project for Harris Interactive. Kelly Bagnaschi, *Research Associate, Youth & Education Research*, conducted the research and analysis, with assistance from Amie Kim, *Research Manager, Youth & Education Research*.

Alexander Kopelman, Director of Marketing and Communications for Girls Inc., Marcia Brumit Kropf, Ph.D., Girls Inc. Chief Operating Officer, and Heather Johnston Nicholson, Ph.D., Director of Research for Girls Inc., conceived this project and guided it to completion.

Meredith Moore wrote the report. Alexander Kopelman edited the report and the summary findings.

Survey Method

This survey was conducted online by Harris Interactive on behalf of Girls Inc. among 2,065 U. S. students (including 1,059 girls and 1,006 boys) in grades 3–12 and 1,005 U. S. adults (ages 18 and over) within the United States, between March 14 and 30, 2006 (for students) and March 14 and 28, 2006 (for adults). Figures for grade, sex, race/ethnicity, urbanicity, parents' education and region (for students) and age, sex, education, race/ethnicity, household income and region (for adults) were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

With a pure probability sample of 2,065 one could say with a ninety-five percent probability that the overall results have a sampling error of \pm two percentage points; for a pure probability sample of 1,005, the sampling error would be \pm three percentage points. (Sampling error for subgroups is higher and varies.) However, that does not take other sources of error into account. This online survey is not based on a probability sample and therefore no theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

A Note on Reading the Charts

Percentages may not always add up to 100% because of computer rounding or the acceptance of multiple answers from respondents. The base for each question is the total number of respondents answering that question. Percentages depicted may not add up to 100% because some answer categories may be excluded from the figure. **Data reported in the text are identified as significantly different at a 95% confidence level.**

Profile of Respondents

1,059 girls responded to the survey.

By Grade

39% grades 9–12 (high school)

31% grades 6–8 (middle school)

31% grades 3–5 (elementary school)

By Race/Ethnicity

58% Caucasian

16% African-American

19% Hispanic

6% Other

1,006 boys responded to the survey.

604 adult women and 401 adult men responded.



The full report is available for download as a PDF file
from the Girls Inc. website, www.girlsinc.org.

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Girls Incorporated[®]

120 Wall Street
New York, NY 10005
212 509 2000
www.girlsinc.org