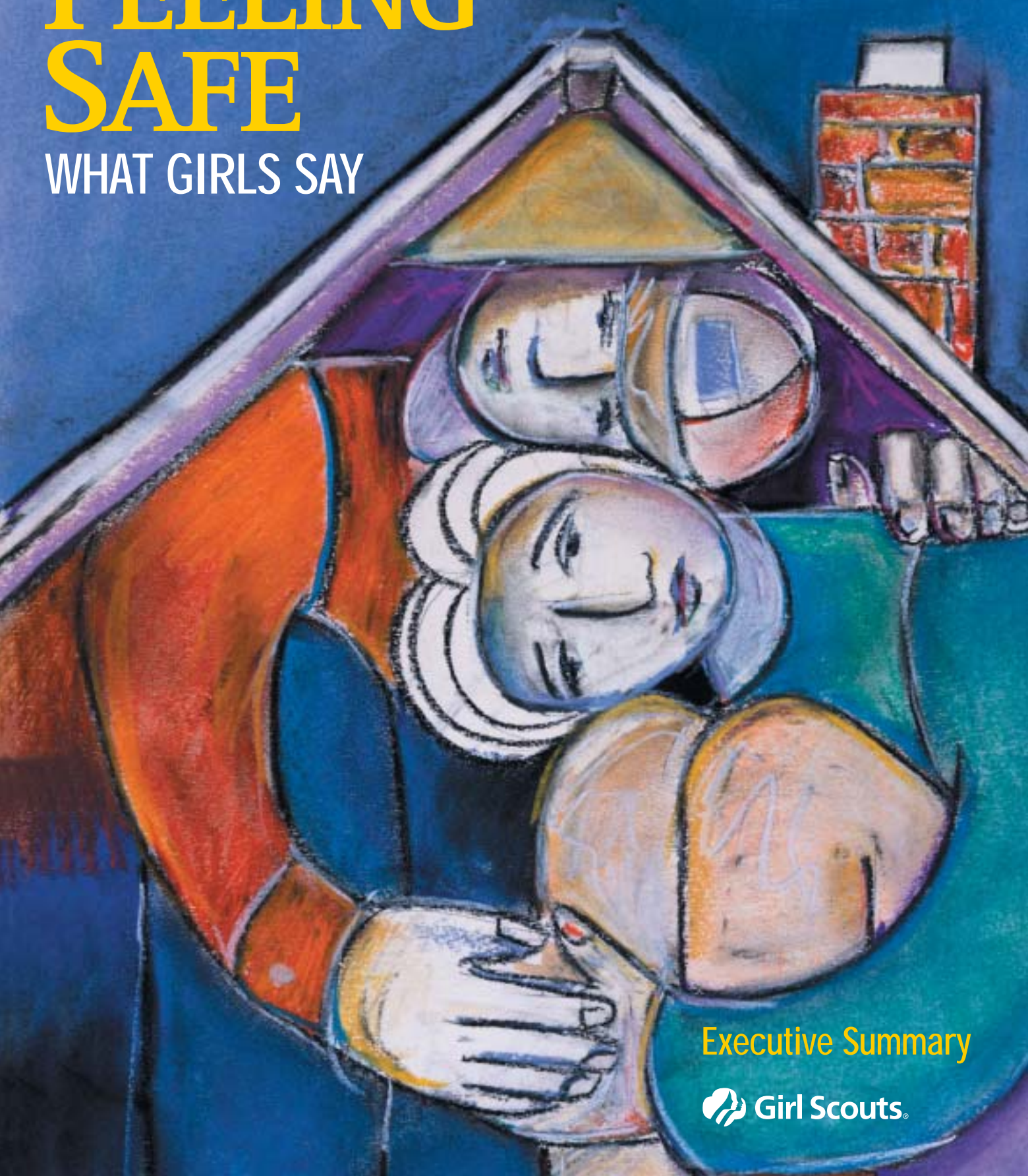


A Report from the **GIRL SCOUT RESEARCH INSTITUTE**

# FEELING SAFE

WHAT GIRLS SAY



Executive Summary



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# INTRODUCTION

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

**W**hat safety means to girls, what it takes to make them feel safe, and why feeling safe matters are the main questions explored in *Feeling Safe: What Girls Say*.

The desire to know how girls feel about these questions grew out of findings from two earlier studies conducted by GSUSA's Girl Scout Research Institute, *The Ten Emerging Truths: New Directions for Girls 11–17*, and *How America's Youth Are Faring Since September 11th, 2001*. In these studies, girls expressed a strong need for safety and the desire to discuss real-life issues with trusted peers and adults.

Consequently, the guiding research questions for this report were designed to address the following:

- How do girls define safety?
- What do they consider safe and unsafe situations?

- How does feeling unsafe impact quality of life issues?
- What strategies do girls use to cope with physically and emotionally unsafe situations?

Findings from both quantitative and qualitative research reveal what girls themselves say they need to feel safe—dispelling some commonly held perceptions. For example, to some adults safety may imply a physical place, but girls in this study consider it in more emotional terms. “It’s not where I am, but who I’m with,” said one 16-year-old, reflecting the view held by many of the participants that **trust** and **positive relationships** are what make them feel most safe and secure.

The summary of findings highlights how preteen and teen girls define and experience safety, the costs associated with feeling unsafe, and coping strategies.

## METHODOLOGY

**C**onducted in conjunction with Harris Interactive, Inc., the study contains data collected from a total of 2,341 girls 8–17 (online survey and focus group participants), over a four-week period in the spring of 2003. Two methodologies were used to achieve the research objectives: a national, online

survey and a series of focus groups. To account for developmental differences among the girls, the focus groups and online survey were conducted in four age segments (8–10; 11–12; 13–15; and 16–17 year-olds). The online survey data were also segmented by the four age groupings during the analysis phase.

All participants were screened extensively to ensure a broad, national sample (regarding race/ethnic diversity, geographic location, rural, urban and suburban representation and socioeconomic background). The overall racial and ethnic breakdown roughly mirrors the United States population of girls 8–17, based on the 2000 U.S. Census data.

## QUANTITATIVE

- **Survey:** A national sample, drawn from the Harris Poll Online (HPOL) multimillion member database, of 2,279 girls ages 8–17 was surveyed. Using a self-administered, online questionnaire, the survey averaged 15 minutes to complete and was administered between April 16–30, 2003.

## SAMPLE

Quantitative data were weighted to reflect the national population of girls 8–17 for key demographic variables (age, race/ethnicity, urban/rural/suburban, parents' education, and region). Demographic weights were based on data from the U.S. National Center of Education Statistics. The overall distribution of the online sample after weighting is as follows:

- **Ages:** 8–10 (27%); 11–12 (24%); 13–15 (31%); 16–17 (18%)
- **Region:** South (34%); West (25%) Midwest (21%); East (20%)

## QUALITATIVE

- **Focus Groups:** A total of 62 girls participated in ten focus groups conducted in four target cities—the Northeast, the Midwest, the South and the West. The two-hour moderated groups, conducted between May 7–14, 2003, were segmented by age. Prior to participating, the girls also were asked to create a collage (to represent their perceptions of safe and unsafe situations). The collages and information from the questionnaires provided moderators with a better understanding of how the girls perceived the issue of safety.

- **Race/Ethnicity:** Caucasian (56%); Hispanic/Latina (18%); African American (17%); Asian/Pacific Islander (4%)
- **Type of Area:** Suburban (49%); Urban (29%); Rural (22%)
- **Girl Scout Affiliation:** Never a Member (54%); Past Member (33%); Current Member (13%)

Please note that in the summary of findings, differences based on age were noted among girls 8–12 (preteens) and 13–17 (teens). Differences among the four age groupings (8–10; 11–12; 13–15; 16–17) were negligible and, therefore, were not noted.



# SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

**B**ecause girls often are portrayed as victims of violence in the media, adults are aware of their need to be protected from physical danger. But girls were very vocal in expressing the adverse effects of emotional harm they suffer from being teased, judged, abandoned and/or betrayed.

The emotional safety of girls is increasingly coming to the attention of researchers and other adults working with girls. Findings in this study confirm that emotional and physical safety are *both* key to their healthy development. **A significant finding is that girls who**

**describe themselves as emotionally unsafe also felt physically unsafe, and vice versa. This emphasizes the importance of emotional safety. Also, emotional safety was of key concern in the focus groups and the number one concern for one-third of girls who participated in the online survey.**

Although race and/or ethnicity were not major determinants relative to how girls perceived feelings of safety, any differences that were related to racial and ethnic backgrounds have been noted in the summary of findings.

## WHAT SAFETY MEANS

### INSIDE AND OUT—EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL SAFETY

*“A broken arm can heal, but what about a broken heart? Words can hurt a lot.”*

—Age 12

**M**uch of the information Americans receive on safety emphasizes the prevention or treatment of physical injury. But girls do not define feeling safe as just protection from bodily harm—feeling emotionally safe is also very important.

#### SAFETY METER

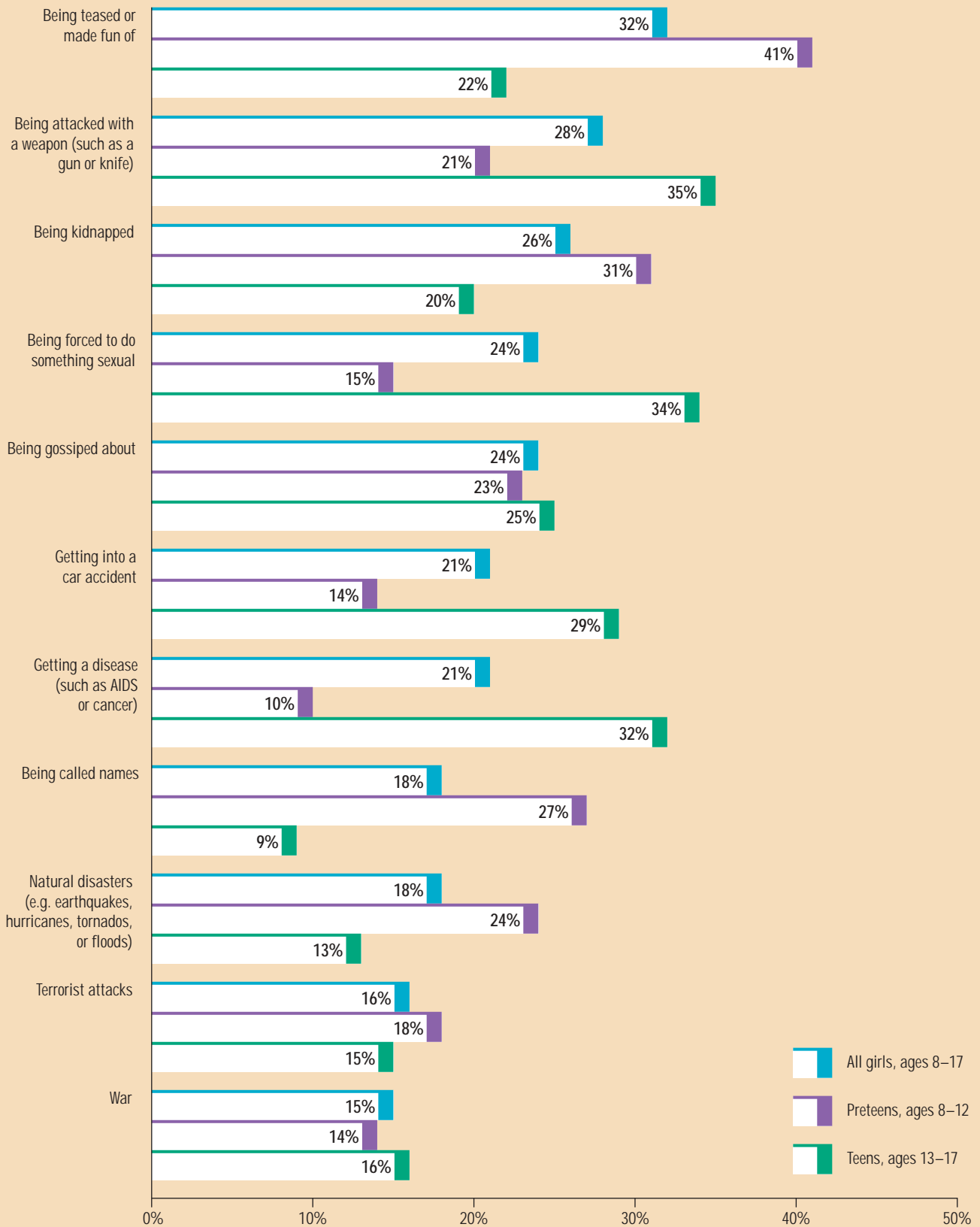
In the online survey, 72 percent of girls defined safety as not being physically hurt and 46 percent defined it

as not having their feelings hurt. **But when asked what actually worried them the most, the number one concern, noted by 32 percent, was being teased or being made fun of.**

As one 13-year-old explained, “It takes a longer time to recover from having your feelings hurt.” And a 12-year-old also expressed this same concern by saying, “A broken leg can heal, but what about a broken heart? Words can hurt a lot.”

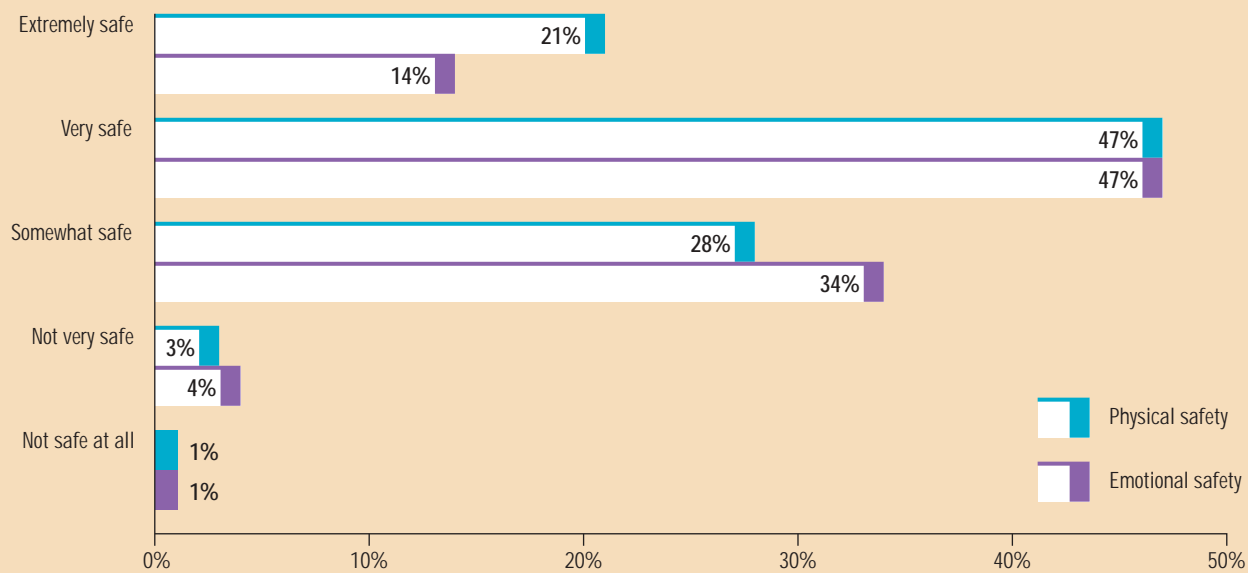


## SAFETY—WHAT CONCERNS GIRLS MOST



Results of online survey April 16-30, 2003, with 2,279 girls 8-17 responding.

## PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY METER FOR A TYPICAL DAY



Results of online survey April 16–30, 2003, with 2,279 girls 8–17 responding.

So, how safe do girls feel? Sixty-eight percent say they feel “extremely” or “very” safe physically and 61 percent say they feel “extremely” or “very” safe emotionally. Though these are notable percentages, the more important statistics are that 34 percent say they feel only “somewhat” emotionally safe, and that 28 percent feel only “somewhat” safe physically. This is a substantial minority, and the implications of such feelings have been associated with a negative impact on family relationships and academic performance, and a lessened ability to form friendships, obtain social support, and feel competent.

### DIFFERENCES ACCORDING TO GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION

Data suggest that rural girls are more concerned about emotional safety, while suburban and urban girls are more concerned about physical safety. More rural girls (40%) than suburban (31%) or urban (29%) report worrying about being teased or made fun of. More rural girls (25%) than suburban (19%) or urban (15%) fear being called names. On the other hand, more urban (32%) and suburban (29%) than rural girls (21%) say they worry about being attacked with a gun or a knife. And more urban (30%) than suburban (23%) or rural (20%) girls fear being forced to do something sexual.

### SAFETY DETECTORS

Proactive attitudes positively impact feelings of safety. Most girls (51%) strongly believe that they can keep themselves safe and many report intuitive ways of noticing signals that help them avoid danger—their own “safety detectors.” For example, when it comes to physical safety, a 10-year-old says she “stay[s] away from all strangers because outside might be nice and happy but they could steal you.”

But for those girls who are not proactive (roughly 30 percent report feeling only somewhat safe emotionally and physically), everyday interactions can be threatening. A 16-year-old states she feels unsafe when, “someone I trust shows me that I was mistaken about their loyalty or trustworthiness.” A 9-year-old says she tries to “protect feelings by not talking to others [unless she is] talked [to] first,” and a 10-year-old says she “just walk[s] away” from unfriendly people.

Threats to physical safety generally relate to being left alone, either in an unfamiliar place or without family to provide love and protection. Theft of belongings, home invasion, gang violence, school shootings, drug- and alcohol-related accidents/crimes are also concerns. Girls also report feeling fearful of “kidnappers, terrorists, bomb threats” (15-year-old), “the war [in Iraq and

## WHAT MAKES PRETEEN GIRLS FEEL SAFE?

1. Family and Friends	<b>Trusted Loved Ones:</b> “[my sister] knows she has to be an adult in the house.” (10-year-old) “With your friend, if something happens, you’ll be with someone.” (8-year-old)
2. Pets	<b>Signal When Danger Is Near:</b> “Animals will start barking if someone comes near your house.” (10-year-old) “Animals can tell if an earthquake is coming.” (8-year-old)
3. Treasured Objects	<b>Represent Relationship:</b> “My teddy bear makes me feel like I’m really with someone because it feels like it’s alive.” (9-year-old) “A stuffed animal you can tell when you’re happy or when you’re sad.” (10-year-old)
4. God	<b>Omnipotent Protector:</b> “I know He’s always watching over me.” (9-year-old)

Afghanistan]” (15-year-old), “gangs, kidnappers, Osama Bin Laden, Saddam Hussein” (11-year-old). Overall, Asian/Pacific Islander (82%) and Hispanic girls (80%) report thinking about physical safety more than Caucasian (74%) or African-American girls (68%).

Girls say they feel safest when they are with people they love, such as parents and close relatives. Trusted friends are also important, especially to older girls,

who are less likely to turn to their parents. According to one 16-year-old, **“There’s not really many objects that make you feel safe—it’s a person that makes you feel safe.”**

Younger girls, however, relate that besides relying on people they love, they are more likely to turn to pets, treasured objects and/or their religious faith when feeling vulnerable.

## PEOPLE VS. PLACES

*“It’s not where I am, but who I’m with.”*

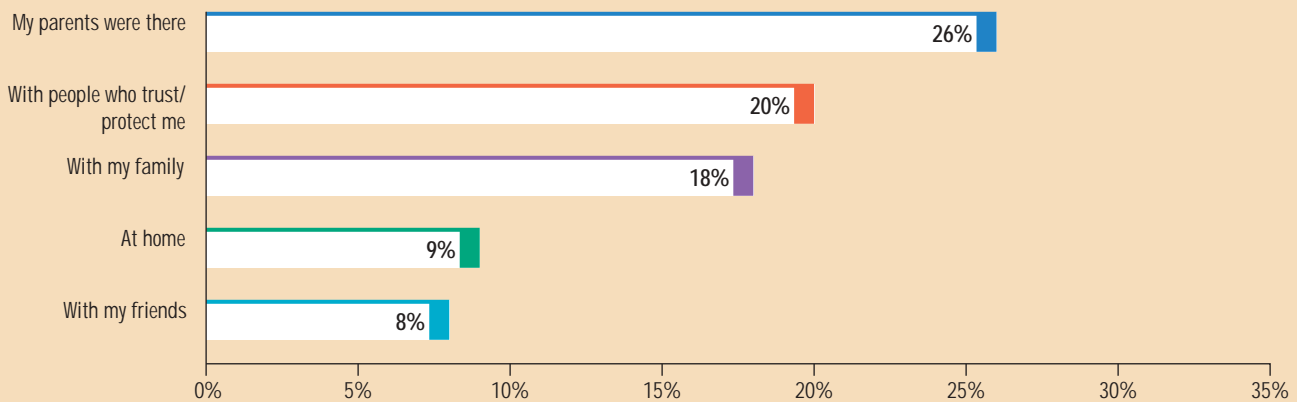
—Age 16

According to the research, most girls define safety in terms of relationships—when they trust the people around them, they feel safe. Consequently, feeling most safe involves people—e.g., feeling safe because their parents were present (26%), because they were with people they trusted (20%), and because they were with family (20%). **One-third of girls (36%) say they were with a teacher and nearly two in ten girls (18%) say they were with their youth group leader when they felt safest.**

### FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Family members are integral to feelings of safety, with mothers (76%) and fathers (60%) topping the list of relatives girls were with when they felt most safe. One 11-year-old recalled feeling safe “because I was with the people I loved and who love me.” Higher percentages of African-American (81%) and Caucasian (78%) than Hispanic (67%) or Asian/Pacific Islander girls (62%) report that they felt the most safe and secure

## REASONS GIRLS FEEL MOST SAFE



Results of online survey April 16–30, 2003, with 2,279 girls 8–17 responding.

when with their mother or female guardian. More Caucasian (67%) than African-American (55%) or Hispanic girls (52%) report that the time they felt most safe and secure they were with their father or male guardian.

But acts of violence perpetrated by friends or family also are cause for concern. One 17-year-old recounted fearing "...my ex-boyfriend who hit me and sexually abused me coming back to get me again." Another says she worries about "...my mom and how I can keep her safe 'cause I am the strongest one of the family. My dad is an alcoholic and he used to abuse me and my mom but now he yells at us but nothing more."

Teens especially rely on their friends when it comes to feeling safe. More girls ages 16–17 (15%) than those 13–15 (7%) and 11–12 (1%) report being with friends when feeling most safe and secure. "I feel safest with my best friend," said a 15-year-old. "...We understand each other and I know that she always has my back." Greater numbers of Asian/Pacific Islander (15%) than Caucasian (7%) and African-American girls (3%) report feeling most safe and secure when with friends. And 20 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander, compared with 9 percent of Hispanic, 7 percent of Caucasian, and 6 percent of African-American girls, said they felt most safe and secure *because* they were with friends.

Girls also report feeling vulnerable when those they trust are absent or betray their trust. In fact, 23 percent reported feeling least safe when alone. Some teens

related feeling unsafe with their boyfriends, fearing being forced to do something sexual or being confronted with other unwanted behavior.

Many girls talked about feeling the safest even when in unsafe situations because they trusted the people they were with at the time to protect them. A 17-year-old recounted that when she was in a bus accident "...my family came and my friends came and they hugged me and I felt safe." A 16-year-old remembered, "when I was 4 years old I was in a haunted house with my uncle and he held my hand and I felt like nothing was going to get me."

### PLACES

Though girls say "place" is less important than people, 56 percent still report being at home when they felt most safe, as well as the place they felt safest from bodily harm (87%) and emotional harm (83%). This may be because home is where girls often find the people who love them. More Caucasian (84%) than Asian/Pacific Islander (75%) girls report feeling emotionally safe at home, and more Caucasian (88%) than Asian/Pacific Islander (79%) girls report feeling physically safe at home.

Neighborhoods also appear to play a role in feelings of physical and emotional safety. Higher percentages of suburban (71%) and rural girls (70%) than urban girls (58%) reported feeling safe in their neighborhoods.

# THE ORDINARY AS EXTRAORDINARY

*“As much as it scares me [the war in Iraq], I don’t think about it or let it affect me.”*

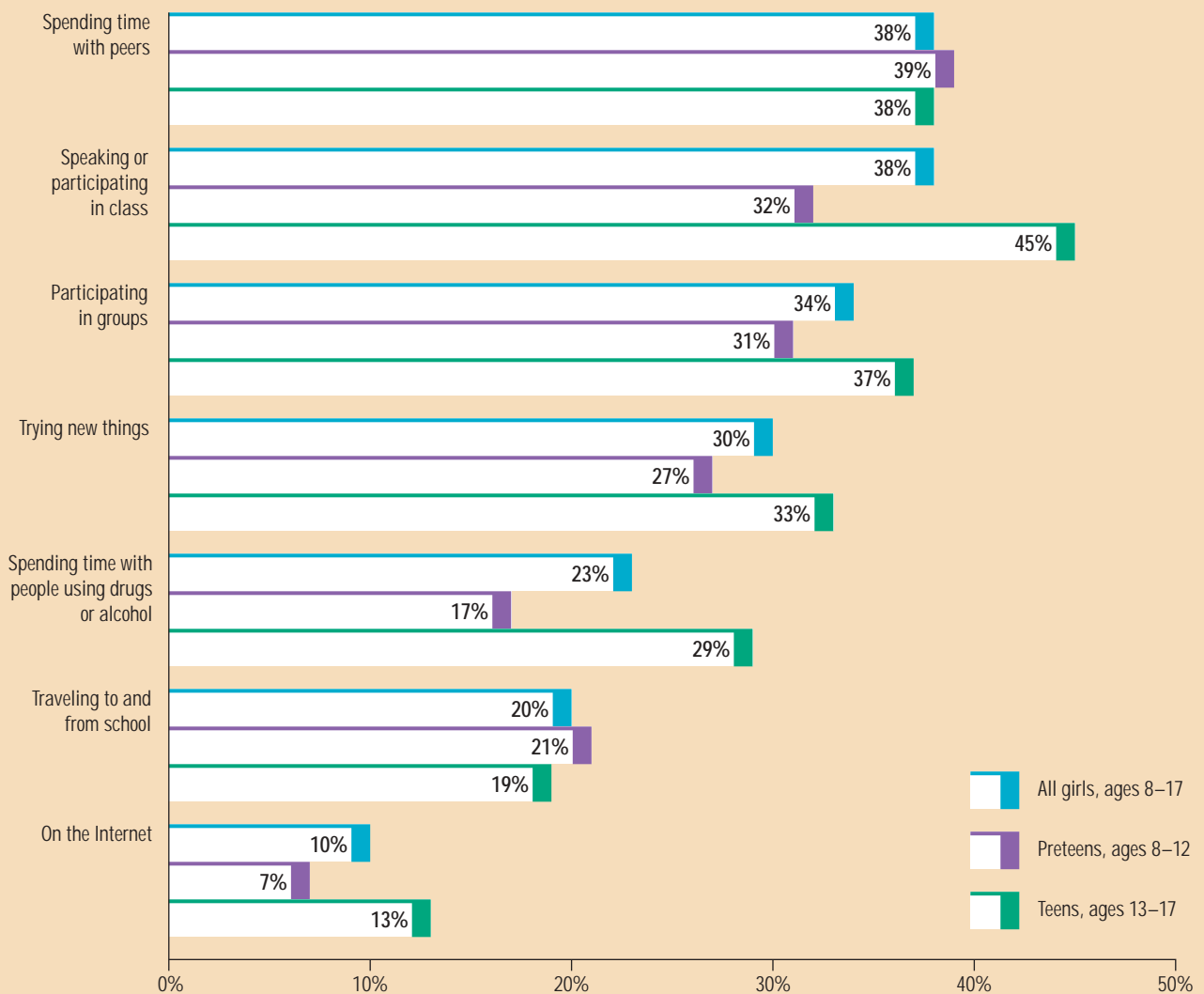
– Age 15

Findings also demonstrate that although girls certainly are aware of terrorism, they are more concerned about the safety of loved ones and/or being separated from them than they are about acts of mass destruction. Though only 17 percent of girls felt

less safe because of the war in Iraq, more than one-third worried about their friends and family getting harmed as a result of the war. The issues of trusting others and keeping loved ones close by seem to be of greater concern to girls than national security.

## EMOTIONAL SAFETY IN EVERYDAY SITUATIONS

Concerns about being teased, bullied, threatened, or having feelings hurt while...



Results of online survey April 16–30, 2003, with 2,279 girls 8–17 responding.

And though girls talked about the war and terrorism as a threat to themselves and others, fully 37 percent said they did not think about the war in Iraq at all. One explanation, according to a 10-year-old, was because “They’re fighting overseas.” Another, age 13, commented, “As much as it scares me [the war on Iraq], I don’t think about it or let it affect me.”

*“I have insecurities—if I feel insecure, I don’t feel safe.”*

—Age 15

Interestingly, what was of much more concern to girls was navigating their everyday world—the threat of being embarrassed or humiliated in some way while hanging out with friends, going to school, and/or participating in class—or any other seemingly routine activity assumed to be safe and comfortable. For example:

- **Forty-five percent of girls ages 13–17 consider speaking and participating in class a threat to their emotional safety, and over a third expressed concerns about being teased, bullied or threatened during a typical day.**
- **Thirty-eight percent of all girls surveyed said they worry about their emotional safety when spending time with people their own age and/or when speaking or participating in class, and participating in groups (34%).**

There are no differences among girls regarding concerns for emotional safety based on race/ethnicity or geographic location, but teen girls worry more about their emotional safety in many everyday activities than do preteens.

While going about daily routines, many girls feel vulnerable to emotional hurt. “A lot of people tease,” reports one 8-year-old. A 15-year-old

says, “Rather than physical bullying, there’s a lot of emotional bullying—judging—I don’t like that.” And according to an 11-year-old, hanging out with friends and people you think you can trust has hidden dangers. “It’s how long you’ve known them or how well you know them; like, if they’re a back-stabber; sometimes you try to trust them and realize they are untrustworthy.”

A 15-year-old girl explains how feelings of insecurity can create a destructive cycle: “I have insecurities—if I feel insecure, I don’t feel safe.” And insecurity can be heightened when dealing with new people. A 10-year-old shares that “...meeting new people your age—you might not know them and they might be bad; but they might be good.”

## PRETEENS AND TEENS: THE TRUST FACTOR

*“If I can't trust you, which I don't trust many people, then I'm not safe.”*

—Age 15

**T**here is a perception among some adults that teens are reckless, feel invincible and do not seem to consider the consequences of risky behavior (such as smoking, using drugs and alcohol, driving recklessly and/or engaging in sex). Though many adults assume that these behaviors imply fearlessness and/or a disregard for the future, findings actually reveal that teen girls feel less safe in the world than younger girls. **Teens (13–17) are less likely than preteens (8–12) to feel physically (62% vs. 72%) and emotionally (57% vs. 64%) safe.**

As girls get older and more independent, they also become more focused on their physical safety. At the same time, teens are less likely (than preteens) to trust

peers and adults—an unfortunate situation as this often is the time when teens most need emotional support. As one 14-year-old relates, “If there’s someone you don’t trust, it’s not safe.” A 17-year-old describes concerns about trusting new people. “When you’re with people you don’t know, you wonder what they’re thinking.” A 15-year-old relates that she must rely on herself because, “You can trust yourself more than you can others.” And a 16-year-old states she feels vulnerable when, “someone I trust shows me that I was mistaken about their loyalty or trustworthiness.”

Preteens say their safest times are associated with parents and home, and they most frequently turn to parents for support when their emotional or physical

## TOP SAFETY CONCERNS FOR TEENS

- Being attacked with a weapon (35%)
- Being forced to do something sexual (34%)
- Getting a disease (32%)
- Getting into a car accident (29%)

## TOP SAFETY CONCERNS FOR PRETEENS

- Being teased or made fun of (41%)
- Being kidnapped (31%)
- Natural disasters (24%)
- Being gossiped about (23%)

safety is threatened. “I trust my mom because she was the first person to hold me,” relates a 9-year-old. Preteens also are more likely to trust. “People you know and have talked to and know a lot about are people you can trust,” states a 10-year-old.

**Though teens have a growing concern about the threat of physical harm, the issue of trust is still very important to them. More than one-third (34%) of teens worry about finding people their own age to talk to and trust, and two in ten (23%) take a long time to trust new peers.** “I had a friend that I trusted from the beginning,” a 14-year-old recalled. “I don’t do that anymore.” This finding is relevant given the focus teens place on peer relationships, and their preference for turning to friends when concerned about emotional or physical safety issues.

### SUPPORT FOR TEENS

Teens take almost twice as long as preteens (40% vs. 28%) to trust new adults and peers (21% vs. 11%), and are less likely than younger girls to get along well with their parents (34% vs. 59%). **Almost one quarter of teens (23%) have fewer than three adults they could go to if they were in trouble or needed help, compared with only 11% of preteens who feel this way.**

A 16-year-old explains why teens often are reluctant to discuss issues they consider important with their parents: “When you are a teenager, you’re not so sure of yourself and you don’t have self-esteem and your parents [just] say get over it.”

## OLDER AND MORE WORRIED

	TEENS (13–17)	PRETEENS (8–12)
<b>Teens are less likely to:</b>		
Feel physically safe	62%	72%
Feel emotionally safe	57%	64%
Get along well with parents	34%	59%
<b>Teens worry more about:</b>		
Finding people own age can talk to and trust	34%	23%
Finding adults they can talk to and trust	23%	14%
<b>Teens are more likely to:</b>		
Take a long time to trust peers	21%	11%
Take a long time to trust adults	40%	28%
Have fewer than 3 adults to turn to when they are in trouble	23%	11%

# WHY SAFETY MATTERS

## FEELING UNSAFE—THE COSTS

*“My mental health is most important because if I don’t think clearly then I can’t act right.”*

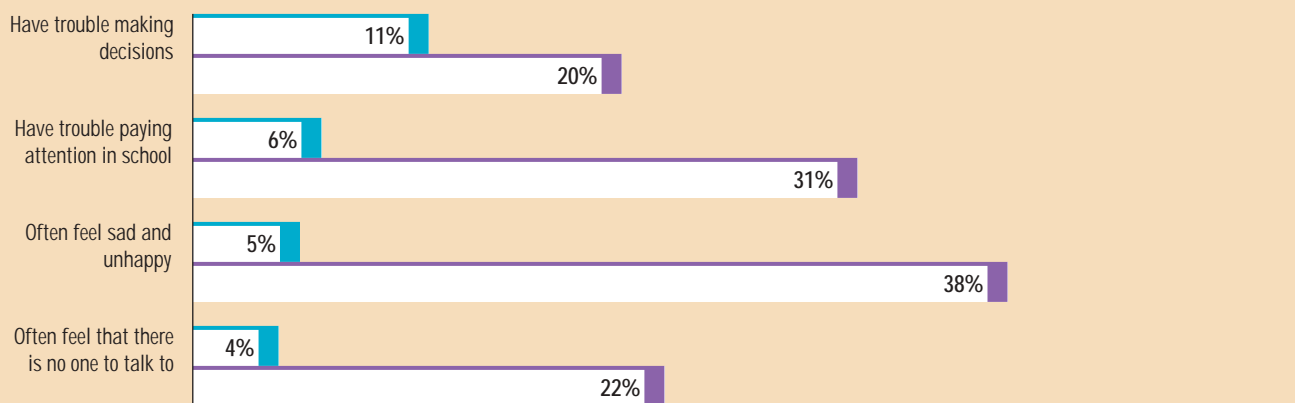
—Age 16

A variety of negative aspects are associated with feeling emotionally unsafe—a diminishment in academic performance, decision-making abilities, self-confidence and the quality of social support girls receive. One 16-year-old noted a link between her emotional health and her overall behavior. “My mental

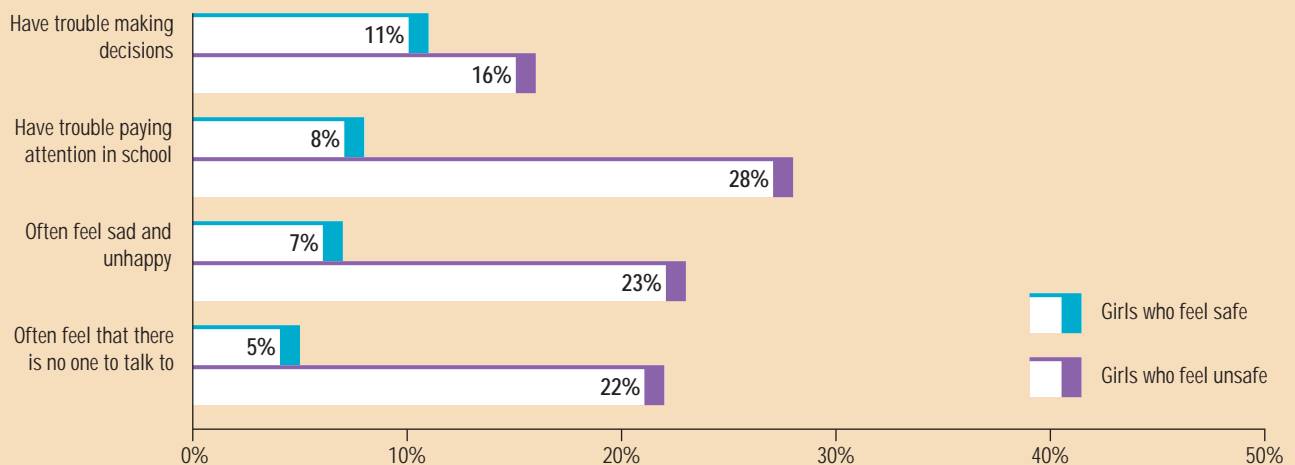
health is most important because if I don’t think clearly then I can’t act right.” And a 16-year-old described emotional harm this way: “Emotional abuse and physical abuse are different. A person’s reputation could be ruined and people don’t realize that till it happens. So emotional [abuse] is worse.”

## FEELING UNSAFE—THE NEGATIVES

### Feeling Emotionally Unsafe



### Feeling Physically Unsafe



Results of online survey April 16–30, 2003, with 2,279 girls 8–17 responding.



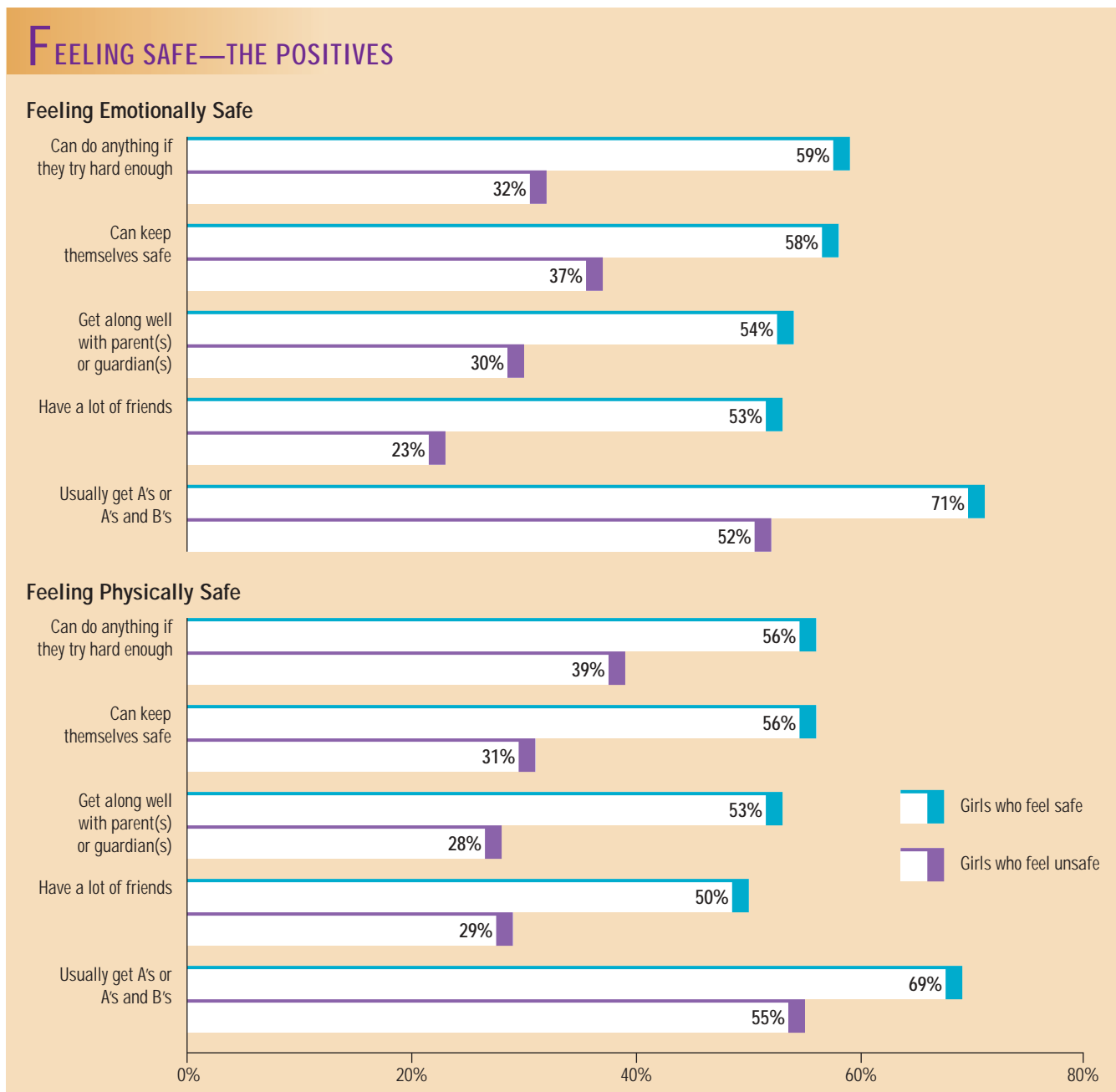
## THE NEGATIVES

Girls who do not feel safe are more likely to feel sad and unhappy, have trouble paying attention in school, get grades below A's and B's, and have trouble making decisions. They also are more likely to feel that they cannot keep themselves safe, are less likely to feel that they can do anything if they try hard enough, and are more likely to worry about making new friends and about finding adults and peers they can talk to and trust. **Girls who feel unsafe are also less likely to have at least three supportive adults in their life, less likely to get along well with their**

parents, less likely to have a lot of friends and are more likely to take a long time to trust their peers.

One 17-year-old relates emotional instability to depression and suicidal thoughts, which may go undetected. "I know a lot of people who are depressed and on the brink of suicide. I was depressed for two years straight and I didn't even know until after."

A 16-year-old notes the connection between emotional safety and feeling at ease. "When I'm happy—there is nothing to worry about." Girls who feel safe are more confident, perform better in school, and have stronger



Results of online survey April 16–30, 2003, with 2,279 girls 8–17 responding.

social supports. One 14-year-old says, “When I am fearless, I feel safe and I can do anything,” and another asserts, “I respect myself, I can protect myself.” **Girls who feel safe are also more likely to have a lot of friends, get along well with their parents, and to have at least three adults they could go to for help if they were in trouble.**

### Emotional Health

Girls who feel emotionally unsafe (compared to those who feel safe):

- often feel sad and unhappy (38% vs. 5%)
- often feel that there is no one to talk to (22% vs. 4%)
- worry about making new friends (42% vs. 23%)
- worry about finding people their own age to talk to and trust (49% vs. 23%)
- worry about finding adults to talk to and trust (38% vs. 17%)

### Self Efficacy

Girls who feel emotionally unsafe are:

- less likely to feel competent (32% vs. 59%)

- less likely to feel they can keep themselves safe (37% vs. 58%)
- more likely to have trouble making decisions (20% vs. 11%)

### Social Support

Girls who feel emotionally unsafe are:

- less likely to have at least 3 supportive adults in their life (73% vs. 86%)
- less likely to get along well with their parents (30% vs. 54%)
- less likely to have a lot of friends (23% vs. 53%)

*“Emotional abuse and physical abuse are different. A person’s reputation could be ruined and people don’t realize that till it happens. So emotional [abuse] is worse.”*

—Age 16

- more likely to take a long time to trust a peer (28% vs. 12%) or adult (45% vs. 30%)

### Academic Performance

Girls who feel emotionally unsafe are:

- more likely to have trouble paying attention in school (31% vs. 6%)
- less likely to get mostly A’s and B’s in school (52% vs. 71%)

## COPING STRATEGIES

*“Either stay away from the problem or try and solve it.”*

—Age 15

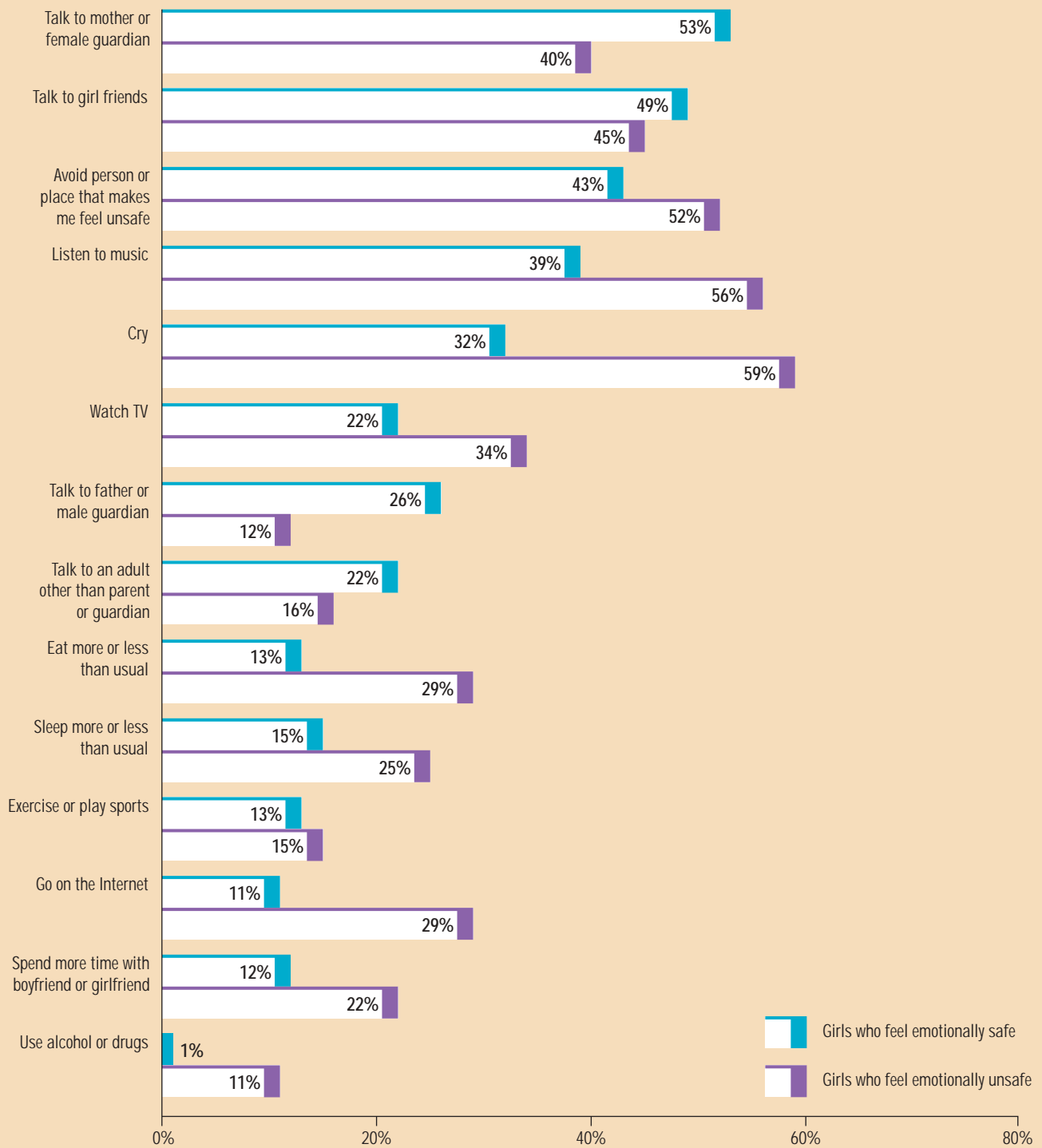
**R**esiliency and coping skills are critical components of feelings of overall safety. Girls use different strategies when dealing with potential or real danger, and how they respond to such situations can affect how they feel.

When girls feel emotionally unsafe, their most common coping strategy is talking to others—their mothers (50%) or female friends (47%). When facing physically unsafe situations, almost half (49%) talk to their mother and four in ten (37%) talk to female friends. A 17-year-old shares that, “I talk to people—to get my emotions out.”

### BEING PROACTIVE

According to one 14-year-old, “Your safety depends on you.” A 12-year-old described dealing with anticipated danger this way: “I strategize if I know something is about to happen. I think of things to do if I was in that situation—write a note to keep it around me—to remind myself, but also to give to someone else to tell them how I feel.” Others try to avoid the person or place making them feel unsafe. One 14-year-old recalled her strategy: “My mom helped me find a new group of friends and how to try and ignore the girl that was bothering me.” A 12-year-old describes her anger

## COPING MECHANISMS IN EMOTIONALLY UNSAFE SITUATIONS

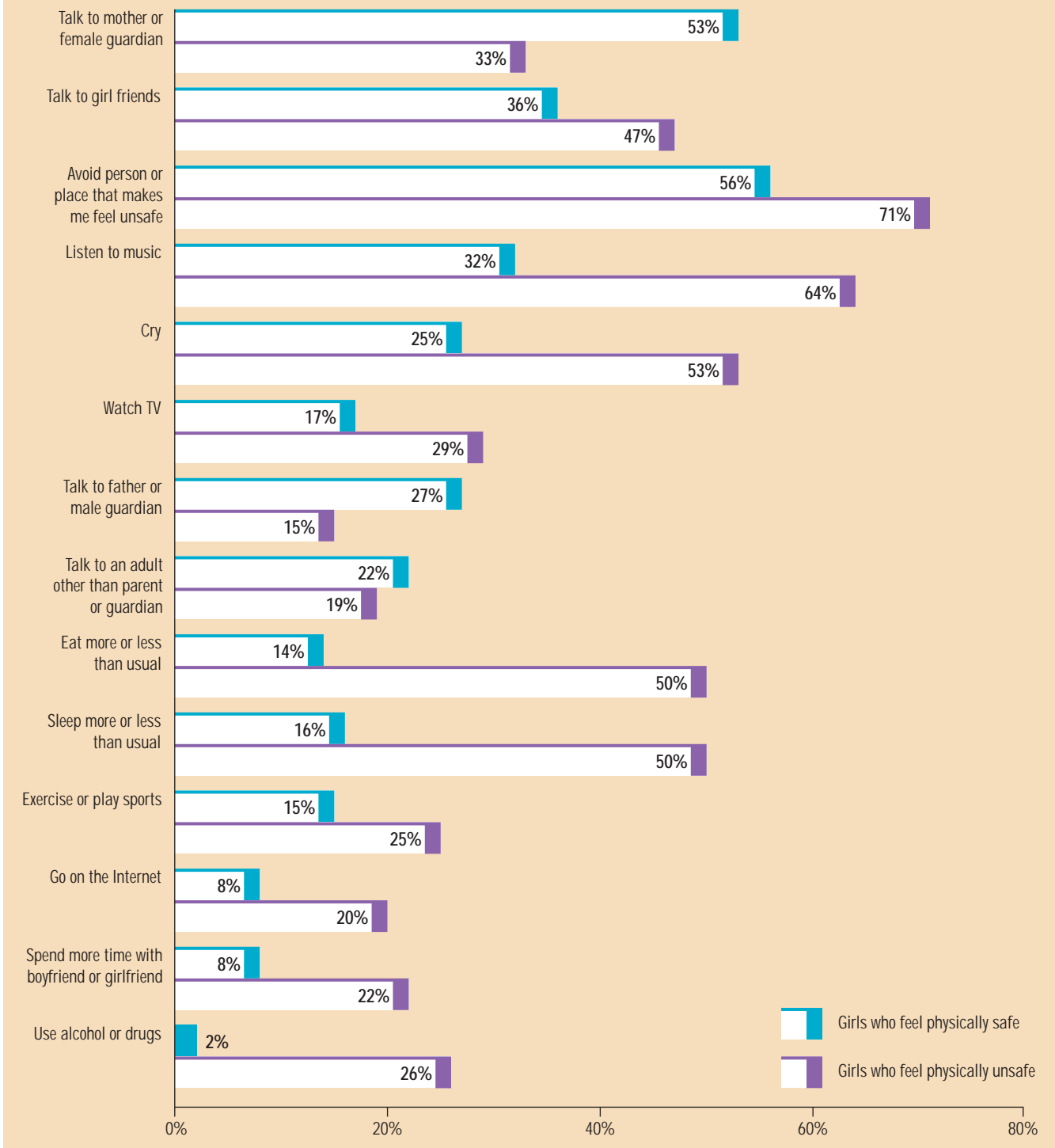


Results of online survey April 16–30, 2003, with 2,279 girls 8–17 responding.

management system: “I draw targets and get a pencil that breaks easily and I can sharpen and stick the pencil in the target. If I miss the target I should just get over it and if I hit it I have to write about it—hopefully I’ll miss it and that means I’m not that mad.”

Girls need help developing skills to cope with unsafe situations and the feelings they can create—insecurity, doubt, distrust, anger, depression, alienation, guilt and shame.

## COPING MECHANISMS IN PHYSICALLY UNSAFE SITUATIONS



Results of online survey April 16–30, 2003, with 2,279 girls 8–17 responding.

**Girls who feel safe have strategies that emphasize family and friends, while girls who do not feel safe, cope by withdrawing and isolating themselves.** Girls who do not feel emotionally safe, compared to those who do, are more likely to cry (59% vs. 32%), listen to

music (56% vs. 39%), and watch TV (34% vs. 22%). They also are more likely to eat more or less than usual (29% vs. 13%), sleep more or less than usual (25% vs. 15%), and use alcohol or drugs (11% vs. 1%).

Coping strategies for emotional dangers, more common for girls ages 8-12 than for teens, include: talking to their mothers (69% vs. 30%), talking to their fathers (37% vs. 11%), and talking to an adult other than a parent or guardian (27% vs. 14%).

#### Teens are more likely than preteens to:

- Talk to female friends (55% vs. 40%)
- Listen to music (61% vs. 25%)
- Cry (44% vs. 29%)
- Watch TV (27% vs. 22%)
- Eat more or less than usual (27% vs. 9%)
- Sleep more or less than usual (28% vs. 8%)
- Talk to male friends (29% vs. 6%)
- Exercise or play sports (21% vs. 7%)

- Use the Internet (22% vs. 5%)
- Spend time with a boyfriend (22% vs. 3%)
- Go to a chat room (4% vs. 2%)
- Use drugs or alcohol (4% vs. less than 0.5%)

For girls of Asian/Pacific Islander and Hispanic descent, talking to girlfriends and listening to music are more common coping strategies than talking to their mothers. They also are at least twice as likely as girls from other racial/ethnic backgrounds to spend time on the Internet to deal with emotional danger. When worried about physical safety, Hispanic girls are at least twice as likely as girls from other racial/ethnic backgrounds to spend time with their boyfriends, while Caucasian girls are more likely to talk to their fathers. There are no major differences in coping strategies among girls based on geographic regions.

## ALCOHOL AND DRUGS—CATALYST AND COPING MECHANISM

*“The people around me were using drugs and alcohol and I felt very uncomfortable and unsafe.”*

—Age 12

Although some adults may believe that teens are oblivious to the dangers of risky behaviors, girls report that using alcohol and drugs—or being around those who do—makes them feel vulnerable. One 16-year-old recalled how scared she felt when “...at the party I was under the influence of alcohol and marijuana so guys kept approaching me and bothering me.” A 12-year old recollected a time when “...the people around me were using drugs and alcohol and I felt very uncomfortable and unsafe.”

*“I was leaving a party and everyone was drinking and I didn’t want to drive with them so I walked home alone in the dark and it was scary.”*

—Age 16

**More than one-third of teens (35%) are spending time with people who are using drugs or alcohol at least a few times a month, including two in ten teens (19%) who are in such situations at least a few times a week.** Girls ages 8–17 in urban areas (13%) are more likely than those in rural areas (8%) to say this happens to them at least a few times a week.

One 15-year-old recalled a time with her boyfriend when “he and his friends were drunk and they kept trying to get us to drink and do stuff that we weren’t comfortable with doing.” Thirty percent of all girls worry about their physical safety when around people using drugs or alcohol, and teens are twice as likely as preteens to worry about their physical safety in this situation (40% vs. 21%). These concerns also differ by race/ethnicity. Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and Caucasian girls (38, 35, and 32 percent respectively) say they worry more about their physical safety when around people using drugs and alcohol than do girls who are African-American (15%).

Family members also can be threatening. One 17-year-old remembers, “My brother was drinking and he got angry at me and I thought he was going to hit me.” A 14-year-old recalled feeling unsafe “...because I

was home alone with my dad, he was drunk, and he hit me.”

## A DESTRUCTIVE CYCLE

Being around drugs and alcohol not only causes girls to feel less safe, but those who feel unsafe (for a variety of reasons), are more often around people who use drugs and alcohol. And using drugs and alcohol is how many girls cope with their feelings of vulnerability.

**Girls who feel physically unsafe are more likely to cope with emotionally dangerous situations by using alcohol or drugs than girls who feel safe (13% vs. 1%), and are nearly three times as likely as those who feel safe to spend time with people who use drugs or alcohol (26% vs. 9%).**

One teen, concerned about driving with peers who were drinking, found herself facing an additional, and

unforeseen safety concern. “I was leaving a party,” she related, “and everyone was drinking and I didn’t want to drive with them so I walked home alone in the dark and it was scary.”

**Girls who feel emotionally unsafe are twice as likely to spend time with people who use drugs or alcohol as those who feel emotionally safe (20% vs. 9%).**

Some girls are proactive in dealing with their safety. One 13-year-old advised “...watching out who you hang out with.” And a 16-year-old cautioned, “Make sure you don’t get involved in gangs and drugs; choose the right friends.” A 12-year-old relates a plan she and her mother devised to avoid embarrassment around her peers: “My mom...told me that if I’m at a party with alcohol and I don’t feel comfortable, to say that I feel nauseous and have to go home.”

## GIRLS-ONLY—NOT NECESSARILY SAFER

*“Girls go through a lot of jealousy issues...and judging is a big thing.”*

—Age 12

**S**eventy-six percent of girls in the study have participated in girls-only groups and one-third are currently in such groups. Though many believe that girls-only groups are safer than coed ones, this research shows that, despite real benefits, feeling physically and/or emotionally safer in them is not guaranteed.

Twenty-five percent of girls say they believe they will be *physically* safer in girls-only groups, but only 16 percent believe they will be emotionally safer. More Asian/Pacific Islander (17%) than Hispanic girls (8%) say they feel safer because they know they are valued and respected when they express their feelings. Higher percentages of African-American (25%) and Asian/ Pacific Islander (24%) than Caucasian girls (14%) report feeling less safe around other girls when there are verbal conflicts or tensions.

Feeling safe in girls-only groups is most frequently attributed to sharing the same problems. “You can talk about things you can’t talk about with boys—what’s the

word—serious topics,” says a 14-year-old. A 12-year-old concurs: “...they (girls) know your problems. They’re going through the same thing.”

*“You can talk about things you can’t talk about with boys—what’s the word—serious topics.”*

—Age 14

Girls report their greatest concerns regarding girls-only groups are gossip (30%) and having a trust betrayed (28%). A 10-year-old says, “I trust boys a little more because girls are known for gossiping.” Expressing her frustration with some same-sex settings, a 16-year-old says, “girls worry too much about everything.” Many 16–18-year-olds in the study agree that, “girls go through a lot of jealousy issues,” and “judging is a big thing.” And one 10-year-old girl expressed concerns about being in an all-girl group because “...there might be other moms—they might tell (things I say).”

Freedom from competition can be a positive aspect of girls-only groups. For example, a group of 16- and 17-year-olds say there is “less competition...[you’re] not trying to get somebody...” and there is “not pressure about the way you look or the way you act.”



# IMPLICATIONS

**T**he findings in this study demonstrate that feeling emotionally safe is as important as being physically safe—and that threats to feelings of well-being indicate a diminishment in the quality of a girl's life.

Safety should be a shared goal between adults and girls. Many girls view their own safety as a personal problem—one they believe they have to deal with alone. Girl Scouts of the USA, for example, has always addressed the emotional and physical safety of girls, and believes in partnering with them to address their concerns. One national initiative, *P.A.V.E. the Way* (Project Anti-Violence Education), teaches conflict resolution skills. Another option, for girls 11–17, *STUDIO 2B<sub>sm</sub>*, also provides the resources that encourage girls to share their real-life concerns.

The more adults know about how girls perceive safety, the better they will be able to help them develop effective strategies for coping with emotionally and/or physically dangerous situations. With this in mind, adults living or working with girls should consider the following:

1. Don't assume to know what girls consider important, and don't expect them to automatically share their concerns with parents or other adults. Be proactive about asking how they are feeling, even if they are reluctant to talk.
2. Do not judge, threaten, lecture, issue orders, and/or try to “teach girls a lesson” by withholding help—especially when dealing with issues of drugs and alcohol. Encourage working together to establish guidelines for responsible behavior.
3. Realize that a safe location is not enough. Trusted relationships, in which girls feel valued and supported, are what make girls feel emotionally safe.
4. Take emotional harm seriously. Typical environments, such as classrooms, sports fields, or group meetings, often create situations that cause girls anxiety. Teasing, gossiping and name-calling that is unwanted should be addressed by adults.

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# WEB SITES

## [www.girlscouts.org](http://www.girlscouts.org)

The Girl Scouts of the USA Web site addresses many issues of interest, including safety.

## [www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/safety.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/safety.html)

The National Institutes of Health Web site has sections related to preventing physical harm (e.g., safety in motor vehicles, sports, first aid, preventing household accidents, natural disasters and terrorist emergencies, infection control).

## [www.studio2b.org](http://www.studio2b.org)

The Girl Scouts of the USA as a special Web site for teens which addresses many safety-related issues.

## [www.talkingwithkids.org](http://www.talkingwithkids.org)

Talking with Kids About Tough Issues is a national initiative by Children Now ([www.childrennow.org/](http://www.childrennow.org/)) and the Kaiser Family Foundation ([www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org)) to encourage parents to talk with their children about tough issues like sex, HIV/AIDS, violence, and drug abuse.







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