



Travel, team sport and leadership are the keys to self-confidence

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The recent release of the *Hands Up for Gender Equality* report by the Australian Gender Equality Council has highlighted that — unlike in the mixed-gender ‘real’ world where studies consistently show that women are less confident than men — girls in single-sex schools are equally as self-confident as boys in single-sex schools. But what is it about girls’ schools that provides their students with the same levels of social efficacy and self-confidence as boys?

The *Hands Up* report investigated over twenty activities commonly undertaken by children and teens and pinpointed the top three contributors to self-confidence in both girls and boys as being travel, team sport, and leadership opportunities. Other significant contributing factors include having a part-time job, doing chores, playing a musical instrument, and participating in unsupervised activities.

The *Hands up for Gender Equality* project was undertaken by Dr Terrance (Terry) Fitzsimmons, Dr Miriam Yates and Professor Victor Callan of the University of Queensland Business School in cooperation with the Alliance of Girls’ Schools Australasia and the Australian Gender Equality Council. Over 10,000 students in Years 7 to 11 at thirteen single-sex schools in Queensland were surveyed for the report which found that girls and boys “are not innately less or more confident than one another, and that confidence levels are developed or undermined by contextual factors”.

In general terms, the study authors found that activities that are not supervised by adults provide a greater source of self-confidence than those that are supervised. That is not to say that children’s activities should be completely unsupervised, but that “the confidence boost comes from implementing or engaging in the activity, or significant proportions of the activity, without direct adult oversight”.

The researchers note while there is a temptation in this age of increased scrutiny and legal liability to not allow children as much freedom and free time as in the past, “this comes at a potential cost to children’s levels of self-efficacy”. Therefore, “wherever possible, children should be given unsupervised freedom to explore, interact and learn about their environment”.

It is for this reason that, while all travel boosts self-confidence, it is local and inter-country travel, rather than international travel, that provides the greatest contribution. In particular, the *Hands up for Gender Equality* study found the greatest effect size for local travel where children and teens are more likely to be allowed to spend unsupervised time away from adults.

Alongside local travel, school excursions have been identified as vital to the development of self-confidence. Excursions which take children outside of their immediate town or city environment, involve leadership development, enhance outdoor skills, and involve minimal supervision were found to be most valuable. In fact, write the report authors:

While there is a great deal of focus on academic performance of children and pressures from parents to ensure maximum classroom time in this regard, the results of this study identify excursions and family travel as the primary source of the development of self-confidence.

Participation in team sport was found to produce the second highest overall contribution to self-confidence, particularly where girls and boys hold sports leadership roles such as team captain. There was no difference between genders, with the study finding that girls attending single-sex schools derive just as much confidence from participating in team sports as boys attending single-sex schools.



The researchers found that, on average, girls spend nearly 4.5 hours per week playing team sports while boys spend nearly 6 hours per week. Both boys and girls spend just over four hours per week playing individual sport and 2.5 hours per week walking/hiking/orienteering. In addition, girls spend four hours per week horse and/or bike riding compared with just over three hours spent by boys on these activities. However, boys spend more time than girls on other outdoor activities including camping, fishing and boating.

The third most influential factor in developing self-confidence is leadership development. The University of Queensland study found that leadership experiences — whether holding a leadership role or taking part in leadership courses — provide equally positive benefits for students. In addition, the boost to self-confidence occurs whether the leadership role is current or past, and is independent of year level or the age of the student.

It is interesting to note that of the more than twenty activities examined for the *Hands up for Gender Equality* report, the greatest detractors from the development of self-confidence were social media usage and computer gaming.

Furthermore, the findings of this report that travel, team sport and leadership opportunities provide the greatest boost to self-confidence in children directly mirror the results of Dr Terry Fitzsimmon's 2011 study of self-confidence in Chief Executive Officers which found that successful CEOs had:

- engaged in significant amounts of non-structured play, adventure and exploration of their local environment as children,
- travelled broadly, both nationally and internationally,
- participated extensively in team sport, including in sport leadership roles, and
- worked in part-time jobs during high school which had provided them with confidence in entering the full-time workforce.

In addition, Fitzsimmon's 2011 study found that, as children, most male CEOs were granted the freedom to be away from their homes unsupervised and that female CEOs worked in their family business or grew up in families where strong female role models were employed outside the home.

Nearly a decade on, the *Hands up for Gender Equality* report has confirmed that girls at single-sex schools are equally as confident as single-sex boys, and that the three most important contributors to providing this self-confidence are activities that girls' schools have long prided themselves on excelling in — excursions and travel opportunities, team and individual sports, and the opportunity for girls to hold every leadership position at every level across multiple fields and activities.

References

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