



Equipping Young Girls with Leadership Skills

RESEARCH BRIEF | September 2025

Why is it important to facilitate the identification and development of leadership skills in fourth grade girls?

- Women outpace men in college completion, yet they still make up only 29% of C-suite positions, and only 81 women for every 100 men are promoted from entry-level positions to manager.¹
- This “leaky pipeline” in women’s leadership is attributed to many complex factors, including but not limited to work environments, social constructs of gender roles, women’s own aspirations, and lack of preparation to face gendered barriers and models of overcoming.²
- Research names adolescence (ages 10-19) as a critically formative period that influences one’s adult characteristics, including personality and propensity for civic action.³

At Hewitt, leadership skills are woven throughout our K-12 program. Starting in 4th grade and continuing through graduation, our students also benefit from courses and opportunities designed to build their leadership capacity within and beyond the schoolhouse.

Key Components of an Effective Leadership Program for Girls and Young Women

Brave Spaces

Predominantly female spaces where students can take risks as they build working understandings of leadership, power, privilege, and discrimination connected to the experiences of women in our community and the world.⁴

Critical Hope

Students develop both an awareness of injustice as well as the belief that change is possible. Teachers genuinely listen to students, their curiosities, and their emotions.⁶

Female Leadership Models

Exposure to various models of female leadership in the community, world, and in history contributes to self-identity development and validation of leadership styles. These models also provide examples of overcoming obstacles, perseverance, and collaboration.⁵

Opportunities to Lead

Adolescent girls specifically need to observe the leadership of others and have opportunities to lead as they develop their sense of self. These experiences make students more aware of when, how, and why to take action in their community.⁷

At Hewitt by Fourth Grade Teachers Mawa Ballo and Katie Willis



Last year, we shifted the 4th grade reading curriculum away from the independent reading model and instead engaged students in small book clubs centered on the common theme of girlhood. Inspired by Hewitt's mission to nurture women game changers, our book clubs explored what it means to be a girl in our world, how one's intersectional identities can affect the experience of girlhood, and how we can empower our students to break down the complex and diverse barriers women face in order to become strong leaders. Last year's book clubs focused on the experience of being the daughter of Southeast Asian immigrants, with groups concurrently reading *Amina's Voice* by Hena Khan, *American as Paneer Pie* by Supriya Kelkar, and *The Whole Story of Half a Girl* by Veera Hiranandani. Later, we focused on Black girlhood, reading *Fast Pitch* by Nic Stone, *Some Places More than Others* by Renee Watson, and *Something to Say* by Lisa Moore Ramée.

Hewitt's book club model allows teachers to scaffold crucial reading skills such as vocabulary development and building background knowledge. While vocabulary and historical, cultural, and literary concepts will differ from book to book, our 4th graders learn how to approach unfamiliar concepts with confidence, accessing what they already know and developing plans to figure out what they need to know to be successful readers. As students engaged with their texts, they practiced making meaningful connections between the stories they read and the complex world around them. In doing so, 4th graders grew their own leadership skills by learning to identify, challenge, and overcome the barriers women face in their schools, workplaces, and communities.

Fourth Grade Leadership by Student Action Researcher Sophie de Lavandeyra '26



I sat with a focus group of 4th grade students and asked them to think about what their book clubs, leadership class conversations, and personal experiences have taught them about what it means to be a leader and a girl in today's society. In the conversation, one student eagerly and confidently said, "What I think it means to be a leader is to have integrity...to do the right thing when nobody is watching and just tell the truth and set a good example." Other students added that fairness, listening, and standing up for what is right, even when it is hard, were also important leadership qualities. The 4th graders I spoke with saw themselves as role models for younger students in the lower school. They also believed that leadership meant lifting others rather than leading alone.

When asked about the challenges girls and women face today, 4th graders spoke about discrimination, cultural stereotypes, and the unequal expectations placed on women in politics, work, and daily life. One student pointed out that, even now, some girls are told they cannot pursue specific jobs simply because they are not considered "for women." Others discussed how media portrayals can shape public opinion, especially when jokes aimed at female leaders are taken more seriously than those aimed at men. They drew inspiration from figures like Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Jane Goodall, who pushed against limits and created new paths for others. When asked what they would want to tell next year's 4th graders, the students were direct, sharing that they want to pass along that there are no jobs or interests that belong to only one gender. "There's no such thing as stuff for girls and stuff for boys," one student explained. They collectively agreed that real leadership means knowing what matters to you and standing firm in it, even when others try to tell you otherwise.

- 1 Krivkovich, A., Liu, W. W., Nguyen, H., Rambachan, I., Robinson, N., Williams, M., & Yee, L. (2022). Women in the workplace 2022. McKinsey & Company.
- 2 Shapiro, M., Grossman, D., Carter, S., Martin, K., Deyton, P., & Hammer, D. (2015). Middle school girls and the "Leaky Pipeline" to leadership. *Middle School Journal*, 46(5), 3-13.
- 3 Fine, M., Burns, A., Payne, Y. A., & Torre, M. E. (2004). Civics lessons: The color and class of betrayal. *Teachers College Record*, 106(11), 2193-2223.
- 4 Hoyt, M. A., & Kennedy, C. L. (2008). Leadership and adolescent girls: A qualitative study of leadership development. *American journal of community psychology*, 42(3-4), 203-219
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Duncan-Andrade, J. (2009). Note to educators: Hope required when growing roses in concrete. *Harvard educational review*, 79(2), 181-194; O'Neil, T., & Plank, G. (2015). Support to women and girls' leadership: a rapid review of the evidence--Research reports and studies.
- 7 Metz, E., McLellan, J., & Youniss, J. (2003). Types of voluntary service and adolescents' civic development. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 18(2), 188-203; Van Linden, J. A., & Fertman, C. I. (1998). Youth leadership: A guide to understanding leadership development in adolescents. Jossey-Bass.