



Girls on Board: Academic Research, and the Equality Act, 2010

This appendix presents in detail the academic research that underpins the tenets and principles that are the basis of the *Girls on Board* approach. It then examines the relationship between the Equality Act 2010 and a gendered approach to improving social connections.

Research Background

Given that Girls on Board is a gendered approach to improving social connections we ask: what academic evidence is there that shows that girls and boys resolve friendship difficulties differently?

Research in this area was first conducted by a team led by Kaj Bjorkqvist¹. He interviewed 11- and 12-year-old girls about their behaviour towards one another. The team's conclusion was that girls have the potential to be just as aggressive as boys, though in a different way. They were not as likely to engage in physical fights, for example, but their superior social intelligence enables them to wage complicated battles with other girls aimed at damaging relationships or reputations - leaving nasty messages or spreading scurrilous rumours by e-mail. Turning the notion of women's greater empathy on its head, Bjorkqvist focuses on the destructive uses to which such emotional attunement could be put. "Girls can better understand how other girls feel," as he puts it, "so they know better how to harm them."

Researchers^{2,3,4} following in Bjorkqvist's footsteps focused on pre-school age girls. They noticed that at this age, girls were just as aggressive as boys (they snatch toys, they pinch etc), but later on, "social expectations force their hostilities underground, where their assaults on one another are more indirect, less physical and less visible to adults. Secrets they share in one context, for example, can sometimes be used against them in another."⁵

Numerous researchers⁶ have since examined the nature of relational aggression in girls and there is overwhelming evidence that girls tend to manage the dynamics of their friendships differently from boys. **Academic research justifies a gendered approach to supporting girls in their friendships.**

The first central tenet of *Girls on Board* is the idea that nearly every girl, of school age, must have at least one other girl, in her year group, in her school to call a friend. Without such friendships girls experience emotional distress and reduced academic performance. What does the academic literature say about this?

Research shows that the need for friendship bonds among school-age girls is strongly rooted in primeval survival mechanisms, including a deep-seated biological drive for "safety in numbers." Evolution has favoured girls and women who maintain strong, supportive social ties, as these bonds historically provided crucial advantages for



individual safety, stress buffering, and communal resource sharing. Thus, modern girls' emotional reliance on friendship is not only social but also an echo of ancient adaptive strategies for survival and thriving.^{7,8}

Neurobiological and psychological evidence supports the idea that girls are especially sensitive to the social landscape, making the pain of exclusion and the drive for connection particularly pronounced for them⁹.

An article in *Mind Shift* (2020) cites the large-scale literature review done by Rudolph and Dobson¹⁰. The article says, '[...] research has confirmed two things many teachers have long believed to be true. First, social-emotional benefits and academic ones don't operate in isolation. Second, friendships in school can be harnessed to drive academic growth.' Brett Laursen, editor in chief of the *International Journal of Behavioural Development*, is quoted: 'There is a massive gap between being friended and friendless,' he says, and 'studies, that are as close to causation as you can get, show that becoming friendless produces a meaningful decline in mental health. Research has also tied friendlessness and exclusion to truancy, susceptibility to peer pressure, inability to focus, deficits in working memory, and lack of classroom participation.'

Riegle-Crumb, Farkas and Muller¹¹ show how better academic performances are achieved by girls with strong friendships than those without in maths and science.

So strong is the link between friendship and general wellbeing in girls and women that women with breast cancer are 4 times more likely to survive if they have strong social bonds than if they do not¹².

Girls on Board's central tenet that 'every girl needs a friend' (with a few exceptions) is validated by academic research.

The other central tenet of Girls on Board is that adult involvement in the dynamics of girls' friendship conflict tends to make the situation worse not better for the girls. That is because the adults tend to want to attribute blame in order to hold individuals to account and incentivise correct behaviours in the future. So, is replacing blame with empathy as a way of supporting girls' relational cultures justified in academic literature?

Research shows that including the participants in the strategies used to reduce friendship conflict is effective¹³. Interventions that simply impose a punitive framework on relational turbulence reduce the power of the young individuals concerned to resolve matters for themselves thus effectively de-skilling them and denying them the opportunity to build resilience and robust conflict resolution skills¹⁴.

John Burton's¹⁵ Human Needs theory presents a fundamental challenge to traditional approaches to coercion and social order, arguing that existing power structures and deterrence-based systems are not only ineffective but counterproductive when basic



human needs are unmet. His ideas map neatly on to the relational turbulence of girls in school. The traditional approaches to coercion through the application of the school's behaviour policy are often ineffective in supporting girls through relational conflict. This is because they ignore girls' unmet needs which are to re-bond when fallouts have fractured established friendships.

While Burton does not extensively theorise empathy as a concept, empathic understanding is central to his problem-solving workshop methodology. His approach requires facilitators to help participants understand "the depths of feelings and the frustrations experienced by the other", which the academic literature recognizes as an "[empathic] relational social dynamic"¹⁶. Burton's problem-solving workshops are specifically designed to create conditions where empathy can emerge naturally. Research on these workshops shows that, as they progress through the process, participants experience "increases in empathy, joint thinking, conciliatory language, and reassurances and acknowledgments"¹⁷. The workshops move participants from "unilateral expression of their own needs and concerns to cognitive comprehension of the needs, concerns, and aspirations of both parties"¹⁷.

Girls on Board sessions work on the same principles. **The academic research shows that empathy is a more effective tool to resolve relational conflict than the attributing of blame.**

What does the academic literature reveal about the current ways girls in school experience conflict in their friendships – outside of the *Girls on Board* approach?

Writing in the *British Journal of Sociology in Education*, Professor Jessica Ringrose¹⁸ of the University of London argues that there is a gap in the tools that schools use to support girls who are in conflict. She says that, when seen from the binary point of view of official school policies, girls are either happy or they are being bullied. There is no policy guidance for the conflict that might arise in the vast space between those two extremes.

Her article ends with, "In concluding, it would seem new conceptual frameworks for approaching girls' conflict are needed that critically engage with the limitations of the [...] discourses of aggression and bullying, which dominate [...] policy and research."

It is our belief that the *Girls on Board* approach is the new conceptual framework Ringrose is calling for. *Girls on Board* fills the gap between 'happy' and 'bullied' with a carefully prescribed method to support girls through friendship turbulence.

Ringrose goes on to describe the effect of using anti-bullying policies in schools. These policies can be blunt instruments when it comes to resolving conflict. She argues that these policies, "[...] miss the complexity of the dynamics at play among girls and also neglect the power relations of parenting, ethnicity, class and school choice, which can inform how, why and when bullying [policies] are mobilized."



If teachers apply the anti-bullying policy because they have no other strategy at their disposal they can unwittingly, “[...] escalate conflict and heighten anxiety and defensiveness.”

This is borne out in the *Girls on Board* approach which invites girls in school to consider whether things get better or worse for them when the grownups get involved. The girls have reliably, since the inception of *Girls on Board* in 2012 at Thorpe Hall School, Essex, told founder, Andrew Hampton, that things get worse. In response to this evidence, both academically discussed and proven through extensive action research ¹⁹, the *Girls on Board* approach seeks to replace blame with empathy.

The Equality Act 2010

Is a gendered approach to conflict resolution compatible with the Equality Act 2010?

The Equality Act 2010 lists nine protected characteristics, of which sex is one. The effect of making sex a protected characteristic is to acknowledge that males and females are different but must, by law, have equal access to opportunity and justice.

In education this plays out in different ways. For example, it is illegal for a school to give access to cookery lesson exclusively to girls and not boys, or woodwork lessons to boys and not girls. On the other hand, it is illegal to require girls to play sport with boys once the physical differences in strength and height emerge in early adolescence.

We have seen in the literature review above that boys and girls make friends in different ways. A Relationships and Sex Education lesson which attempted to teach that the dynamics and social constructs that govern the friendships of boys and girls are exclusively the same would be denying the rights of both genders and would therefore be in breach of their protected characteristics.

Not only is the deployment of a gendered approach to improving social connection compliant with the Equality Act 2010, but the act also requires that the differences between the sexes is acknowledged and acted upon.

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 19. Action research is a research methodology that simultaneously investigates and solves problems by actively engaging researchers and participants in collaborative inquiry. Kurt Lewin, then a professor at MIT, first coined the term "action research" in 1944. In his 1946 paper "Action Research and Minority Problems" he described action research as "a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action" that uses "a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action.”