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DEC 15, 2017 @ 01:50 PM 365 👁

# Improv Shows Young Girls How To Lean In

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Photo courtesy of Brittany Buongiorno

*Improv teaches girls there are no wrong answers and that every contribution is valued.*

The leadership gap starts early, according to a [recent Harvard study](#) that finds many young boys and girls express bias against girls as leaders in powerful professions. Even some mothers are biased against girls being leaders, the study finds.

The study explores whether girls think of themselves as leaders, and whether parents think of their daughters as leaders, says Jenny Raymond, executive director of The Harnisch Foundation. The study finds that girls are thinking to themselves, “I’m not a leader,” and their parents are reinforcing this by thinking, “I don’t know if you’re leader, you’re a girl.”

To help close this gender gap, The Harnisch Foundation started Funny Girls, a program that teaches girls, ages 8 to 13, leadership skills through improv. The five leadership skills taught—collaboration, agility, self-awareness, empathy and resiliency—are the same skills taught in executive women’s leadership programs, Raymond says. The program is offered to girls in third to eighth grade at five after-school programs that serve under-resourced neighborhoods in the Bronx, Washington Heights, Queens and Richmond, Virginia, through a grant from the foundation. The focus is on preteens because eight-year-old girls are full of confidence but by age 13, they start to second-guess themselves and often hesitate to raise their hand and participate, Raymond says.

Harnisch chose this methodology as a means to impart leadership skills because in improv there are no wrong answers and every contribution is heard and valued, allowing the girls to contribute and learn without inhibition, says Carla Blumenthal, Funny Girls' program manager. “Our theory is that being supported and affirmed — no matter how seemingly big or small, wild or wacky the contribution — bolsters girls’ confidence at a pivotal time in their development,” she said. In fact, much has been written about the [ways improv can boost leadership skills](#).



Photo courtesy of Brittany Buongiorno

*The girls in the program are more willing to take on leadership roles at school.*

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Early anecdotes show that the program is having a positive effect. For instance, when one of the girls in the program found out her classmates took out her contributions to a group science lab presentation without first talking with her, the girl had the ability to identify how it made her feel as well as the confidence to talk with her classmates about it, Blumenthal says. She was able to say to them, “I feel rejected because you removed my work,” and then she was able to move on and collaborate with them, she said.

Lisalee Ibanez, associate director of middle school programs at Global Kids, says the girls in the program are more willing to speak up and volunteer to take on leadership roles at school and in other activities. “Middle school is such a formative time,” Ibanez said. “Girls are gaining more independence but they are still learning how to make friends and develop relationship with adults.” Programs like Funny Girls can teach girls how to empower themselves, to make their voices heard, take on leadership roles and stand up for themselves instead of shying away from opportunities, she said. Global Kids offers Funny Girls at its sites in Washington Heights and the Bronx.

Funny Girls allows these girls to cultivate their kinetic intelligence, says Riti Sachdeva, who teaches the Funny Girls curriculum at South Asian Youth Action in Queens. Improv gives them a better understanding of what their body language is saying, how to read other people’s body language, and to think on their feet. “At school, there is a level of competition but in the improv class we really focus on collaboration and the practical skills of how to collaborate, how to listen, how to hear out an idea, and then pick one idea and add onto it,” she said.

The girls in the program are becoming much more conscious of how to include everyone in an activity, Sachdeva says. Overall, she says, they are much more confident, especially the shier and quieter girls. “The ones who tend to be more social, louder and outspoken are creating more space and the ones who are quiet and shy are taking up more space,” she said.

The Harnisch Foundation plans to partner with additional afterschool programs each year, Blumenthal says. While most of its partners will initially be in the New York City metro area, Harnisch plans to expand geographically in the future.