



Building the Independence of Girls Developing Life Skills

Western Australia | Julie Townsend

“It’s not what we do but *how* we develop skills that makes the difference” says Julie Townsend, from Western Australia. “I think it’s very important to understand this”. As an Educational and Developmental Psychologist, and a Girl Guide Unit leader with 25 years experience, (currently Julie runs a unit of 24 girls between the ages of 10 and 14 years), she understands clearly the developmental needs of growing girls and young women.

With this perspective, Julie appreciates how the lives of Australian girls have changed, and how they have stayed the same. “In some ways many things don’t change”, she says. “The girls have always enjoyed “patrol nights” where they decide what they can do – it usually involves food, being together, having silly games and dressing in pjs!

What has changed is the pace of life. Schools are noticing this too. Technology is making life move faster and young people don’t have the time to develop those less tangible skills.

It is much harder than 15 to 20 years ago. We see that kids just want to do something quickly. With modern technology and things being so quick, people haven’t learnt to persist and develop grit.”



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Julie notes the impact of home life can sometimes not provide the right context for developing life skills. "Sometimes at home life is too busy and it is easier to do the thing yourself."

"Our mission as Girl Guides is to develop girls who are confident and have self-respect and are part of a community. These are not quick things to learn – they take time. We need to provide girls with the time to learn these skills – the way that their neurology develops is through repeated learning opportunities. Guiding is a way to do this."

"The Guiding way is to develop the girls to be independent. These are the skills that are important for adult life and the best predictors for success in life. We know that being able to plan, being organised and being able to control our impulses are better predictors of success in life than intelligence or good school grades. Guiding provides the opportunities to learn and practice these skills."

Julie sees the clear connection between the way that Guiding develops its girls and young women and the Promise and Law that all Girl Guides make. "Implicit in our Promise and Law is learning to make wise choices, being considerate and learning self-control. It is about knowing when is the right time to speak and when to say something, and when not to - waiting to take your turn. It's about knowing and learning that if you make a mess, then you have to clean it up and nobody is going to do that for you. For some girls, that is a real challenge but we remind them about the Promise and Law in relation to their behaviour; about being respectful and thoughtful."

"We have some great activities and make the connections between those activities and developing life skills. We explicitly link them for the girls and keep making the connections and slowly these young girls start to make them for themselves"

We provide the girls with the opportunity to decide things for themselves, show leadership and where the girls have to stick at things and develop persistence."

"A large part of the 'how' of Guiding is to enable the girls to make those decisions and plan for themselves rather than handing it to them on a plate. Clearly, there is a safety net, but the little failures are a part of the learning – you have to let the girls understand the reason why the cake didn't rise properly (because not all the ingredients were used), or why you missed out on that activity (because you didn't pack up your camp in time)."



"You give the prompts but if other teams have managed to do their work on time, then there are natural consequences presented that young people learn from."

Julie is driven by her life-long love of guiding and the experiences it has provided her with. She has travelled with Girl Guides internationally and has built up a strong network of friends across the world. It is this potential for such lasting friendships that she is keen to share and extend. "Guiding opportunities is what keeps me going and I hope that my Guides can experience this." As a young girl, moving across Australia with her family, Girl Guides provided an "instant" friendship network. "It's a friendship network all across the world – the Guiding spirit and bond is there, and people from all over the world have the same ideals – they are there wherever you go."

"What is important to realise is that Guiding in Australia is based on the principle of "Girl Led" Guiding. What this means is that we empower girls and young women to make decisions about their world in a safe environment" says Brenda Hamlett, the State Commissioner of Girl Guides Western Australia. "What we learn from Julie's practice is that this is a great environment for growth and learning."

Julie's advice to new leaders is simple: "Don't think you have to know everything. Listen to the girls and know that you don't have to come up with the perfect program. Brain storming with the girls gives you some good ideas. Also, remember that you are surrounded by a whole lot of other leaders who are willing to share. Everyone has got great ideas and tapping into some of the existing resources is good."



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