

When I Grow Up: A Look at Middle School Girls Patterns in Choosing a Role Model

Audrey Amann

The Ohio State University

2016

### Abstract

Role models chosen by young girls influence their success in life. Role models can have an important impact on self-esteem and act as a protective factor against risky behavior. Several studies have explored and explained the importance of role models in young people's lives, especially during formative years. Understanding role modeling can inform the needed relationships for young girls to have a successful future. *When I Grow Up: A Look at Middle School Girls' Patterns in Choosing a Role Model* is a study that explores and describes the role models and relationships chosen by middle school girls. Twenty-two individual interviews of female students between the fourth and eighth grades attending a Montessori school in the Midwest were completed. The interview questions pertained to the girls' relationship to her role model, why she chose that specific role model, qualities she admires in the role model, what is discussed with the role model, and what the girl wants to be when she grows up. The ethnographic data were analyzed through the qualitative method thematic analysis. This form of analysis involves a deductive process through which themes and concepts are coded from the data using a collective comparison process. Themes uncovered through data analysis included the girl's choice of a woman whom she had near daily exposure, role models were described as having a strong sense-of-self and confidence, the girl interviewee trusted the role model to help her learn problem solving skills and provide support during times of stress, and the role model tended to influence occupational choice.

### Introduction

This study seeks to find emerging patterns when young females in middle school (ages 10-13) choose a personal female role model. There are many factors that go into role modeling and how they specifically relate to girls in the middle school age range. Many studies have divulged the development cycles of children and the importance of role models during certain phases of childhood and young adulthood, but are limited in the specifics regarding young girls and the influence female role models can have on them. The importance of role models in young people's lives has been studied in many different aspects, including the influence they have and the common characteristics they possess. Studying the relationships between youth and role models is important because of the known impact role models have on adolescents. Research can help one better understand what makes a strong, positive, and influential role model that will help a child succeed.

Some doubt the true effectiveness of role models, and whether or not they can be credited with lowering youth and adolescent risky behavior. Hurd, Zimmerman, and Xue (2008) suggested that role models provide two different ways to lower negative outcomes in youth. First, they designed a research study using a compensatory model, which suggests positive factors in an individual's life can counteract with and compensate for negative and risk factors they encounter. The study was created to show concrete reasoning for the importance of role models for youth. Their goal was to test whether negative adult influences actually lead to an increase in adolescents' risk for negative outcomes, and whether role models contributed to the resilience of adolescents exposed

to negative adult influences. The study included 659 urban African-American ninth grade students, 51% of whom were female. Participants were asked questions which determined if they had no role model, one role model, or two role models in their lives. A series of questions were asked relating to negative adult behaviors in participants' lives, externalized behavior such as participation in violent or delinquent activity, and internalized behavior including feelings of depression, anxiety, or discomfort. Hurd et al. (2008) also tracked students' grade point averages at the end of the school year, and the participants' levels of attachment to school.

From their data, Hurd et al. (2008) found negative adult influences to be a major predictor for adolescents' risk for both negative externalized and internalized behavior. This prediction was strongest with participants with no identified role model. In participants who identified one role model, predictor for negative adolescent outcomes was significantly lower, and even more so in participants with two identified role models. With their research, Hurd et al. (2008) were able to confirm the importance of role models for youth, especially those exposed to negative adult influences.

There are several aspects to look at when studying role models for youth. Bagès and Martinot (2011) conducted a study regarding whether a hard working role model or a self-proclaimed 'gifted' role model is more influential to children while learning mathematics. Bagès and Martinot's (2011) hypothesis was that gender had less of a difference between role models and adolescents than the actual type of role model, i.e., a hard working person who learned to be proficient at math vs. a person with a natural gift for mathematics. The results of the experiment proved Bagès and Martinot (2011)

correct, as both the boys and girls in the study performed more successfully with the help of a hard working role model. Both boys and girls in the study had more success when working with a female role model, regardless of type. The findings from this study suggest more than whether youths succeed with general role models; they reveal that role models with certain characteristics are more effective than others.

In regards to the age range for this study, girls between ten and thirteen years old were chosen for several reasons, including that these are the average ages an American child is enrolled in middle school. This is a very transitional time for children, as they leave elementary school and prepare for adolescence and high school. During this time, children depend increasingly on social support, and seek validation from others. Psychosocial development theories support this theory, including Erik Erikson's description of developmental life stages. According to Erikson (1980), children between the ages of five and twelve are in a stage of industry versus inferiority. In this stage, children begin to demonstrate new competencies and take more initiative in their lives. If their social supports encourage these behaviors, the child will grow to feel industrious and capable. If the child does not receive positive feedback from others, he or she could feel inferior and lacking. As this stage fades, children ages twelve to eighteen begin to enter adolescence and a stage of identity versus role confusion. During this time, children become more independent and future-oriented. They consider possible careers and relationships and how they will fit into society. With positive social support and encouragement, children are able to form an identity for themselves, and their confidence and self-esteem will rise. If they do not receive this support, however, children will

become unsure of their role in society and their futures. For these reasons, it is important to see what types of support females in this age range are most drawn to in a role model.

This study aims to discover what characteristics middle school-aged girls are more likely to be drawn to in a role model. The study seeks to find patterns and themes in the ways young, middle school age girls choose their personal female role models. Through the process of individual interviews between the participants and researcher, the data collected are used to explain the characteristics, personality traits, and identities girls are most drawn to when identifying a female role model. The interviews consist of ten questions, regarding who the individual's chosen role model is, the reason the role model was chosen, the traits she admires about her, what she talks about with her, and what she has learned from her. The study also seeks to examine whether there is a connection between the role model's occupation and the participant's career aspirations.

#### Literature Review

In addition to the successes role models can help adolescents achieve, they also have the power to act as protective factors against risky behaviors. Yancey, Siegal, and McDaniel (2002) studied role models and adolescents in an urban area and examined relationships between role model characteristics and adolescent health-risk behaviors. Their study consisted of interviews with a group of urban adolescents, both male and female, with questions regarding their role models, substance use, self-esteem, and grades. Yancey et. al (2002) concluded that the largest difference between adolescents with role models, both known and figure, i.e. celebrities, famous athletes, etc., versus those without were higher average grades and a lower frequency of substance use. This is

significant to all role model research because it finds correlation between role models and health-risk factors that previous research did not cover.

#### Parental Influence

While it is known role models can come from various aspects of an adolescent's life, the impact parents have on their children cannot be denied. Baird and Hardy (2004) directed a study regarding parental occupation status and its effect on their children's career aspirations and gender ideology. They hypothesized that a mother's employment status provides a role model for daughters but not sons, and gender ideology affects expectations for young women but not young men. Baird and Hardy (2004) concluded through their study that a mother's employment status does have a large effect on young women's career aspirations, i.e. if the mother works, her daughter will aspire to have a career in the future, but if she does not work, the daughter will likely not expect to either. They also found an unemployed mother with egalitarian gender ideologies has a very positive effect on both young women and men's life aspirations. Derived from this study, one could conclude that a mother's attitudes toward employment and her gender ideologies have more of an effect on both young men and women than her actual employment status. These findings are significant because they begin to highlight the influence parental belief systems have on adolescents.

#### Gendered Role Models

Some research has also been done regarding the influence of gendered role models and if there is a significant difference in this. Adriaanse and Crosswhite (2008) explored how adolescent girls choose a sports role model, and to what extent gender play

a significant role in the selection process. They hypothesize that choosing a role model of the same gender might matter less for young girls with a sports role model because female athletes tend to be less well known and therefore a less attractive role model. Adriaanse and Crosswhite's (2008)'s study concluded that 73.3% of the sports role models identified by the adolescent girls in the study were female, and 26.7% of them were male. These results show that the majority of adolescent females still tend to choose other females as their role models regardless of the possible lack of availability. The study also showed that when the young girls were identifying general role models, 86.6% of them chose women, both known and celebrities, 41% of them chose family members and 21.1% identified friends. These findings show that even when given the choice between people they know and celebrities, young girls are more likely to choose women they personally know and to whom they feel close. Yancey et. al (2002) discovered similar findings in their previously mentioned study. They found that when asked to identify role models, females were more likely to name known individuals than males, and 86% of them chose a role model of the same sex. These findings highlight the importance of the availability of same-sex role models personally involved in young people, especially girls' lives. This study acts an important addition to the other studies conducted because they incorporate more of the aspect of gender influence on role model selection.

#### Presenters versus Known Role Models

Arthur Hernandez (1995) conducted a study with high school age females and the influence role model presentations had on their self-efficacy and levels aspiration.

Hernandez focused on a non-profit in Texas for young Hispanic women, the Hispanic Mother-Daughter Program, which provides long-term academic assistance, career development, and other activities designed to increase participants' self-concept and self-image. In the study, 47 high school females involved in the Hispanic Mother-Daughter Program partook in a seminar with 40-50 minute presentations from three Hispanic women successful in business, academic, and professional careers. These women discussed their careers, personal experiences, and their paths when overcoming challenges throughout their lives.

After the presentations, the participants completed a questionnaire, and participated in a focus group to discuss the topics offered during the presentations. While Hernandez (1995) hypothesized the presentations from successful role models would improve the participant's self-efficacy and levels of aspiration, the results conflicted with this hypothesis. The questionnaire responses were, in general, positive, and all participants indicated high levels of self-efficacy and education, as well as all participants indicated interest in pursuing a professional-level career. Reviews of the presentations were extremely positive as well. The results from the focus groups, however, conflicted with the positivity seen in the questionnaires. Discussion in the focus groups centered around a lack of control over circumstance, and the challenge of battling prejudice and stereotypes as Hispanic young women. Other conversations presented a lack of resources to aid the participants in their path towards success, and an overwhelming feeling of impending failure from trying to succeed.

These contradictory results highlight the challenges of having role models as “presenters”. Hernandez (1995) found that while the presenting women inspired the participants to set higher goals for themselves, they did not offer the long-term assistance and guidance of an ongoing relationship to achieve those goals.

### Feminist Research

This study was conducted with a feminist lens, meaning the researcher considered the subjects’ genders to be an important piece of their personalities and interview responses. Padgett (2004) elaborates that when research is done regarding women’s experiences with their gender in mind, this increases the researcher’s “efforts to understand and meet challenges related to their status as women” (p. 50). While there are several methods in which a researcher can utilize a feminist perspective, this study was concerned with feminist qualitative research. Padgett continues, noting feminist qualitative research holds an understanding that girls and women have different experiences than other genders simply because they are women, and these experiences need to be taken into consideration in research.

Henwood and Pidgeon (1995) also explain the benefits and importance of research from a feminist perspective. They write that researchers in qualitative and feminist viewpoints “will often seek to build up rapport and cooperative relationships with their participants, and divest themselves of preconceptions and cultural assumptions which might form a barrier to understanding” (p. 10). As this study seeks to explore relationships between young girls and their female role models, rapport between the researcher and the participants was important to uphold. Padgett agrees with this idea,

stating, “Another characteristic of feminist research is that it is collaborative” (p. 50). The researcher and the participants work together to find the participants’ voices and accurately portray their experiences. By using a feminist perspective throughout the interview and analysis processes, the researcher was able to better understand the participants’ relationships with their role models, as well as their individual experiences as girls in American society, allowing for a more effective and impactful analysis of the collected interview data.

### Methodology

*When I Grow Up: A Look at Middle School Girls’ Patterns in Choosing a Role Model* is a qualitative study that seeks to explore and describe how young girls choose their female role models and the relationships between the individual and the role model, as well as the characteristics they are most attracted to in the act of choosing a role model. The study consisted of twenty-two individual interviews with girls between the fourth and eighth grades at a Montessori school in the Midwest. The interviews pertained to the girls’ relationship with her personal female role model, her reasons for choosing that specific role model, and qualities she admires in the role model. The specific interview questions were as follows:

1. Out of the women in your life that you know, who is your role model?
2. Why did you choose this woman to be your role model?
3. How long have you known this woman and how often do you see her?
4. What about this woman do you admire?
5. What is your favorite thing about her and why?

6. If you came to this woman with a problem, how would she respond?
7. What do you talk about with this woman?
8. What do you think you have learned from her?
9. What do you want to be when you grow up?
10. Do you think any of this has to do with your role model?

After meeting with the Head of School at the Montessori the study was to occur, and receiving his letter of support, details of this study were submitted to the Institutional Review Board at The Ohio State University, from which research approval was granted (Appendix A). Following permission granted from the Head of School at the Montessori and the Institutional Review Board, participants for this study were recruited through an e-mail sent to all parents of students at the Montessori. The e-mail included the researcher's credentials, the purpose of the study, and the requirements for participation, which included being a female between grades four and eight, and currently attending the Montessori. Attached to the e-mail were written parental consent forms and written participant assent forms to be submitted in the Montessori art instructor's room. When parental permission and participant assent forms were submitted, the researcher conducted interviews during school hours in the classroom of the Montessori's art teacher. Before the interviews began, each participant was labeled with a number between one and twenty-two to maintain participant confidentiality. Before the interview, participants were given a ten-dollar gift card to a local shopping mall for agreeing to complete the interview. Participants had the option to end the interview whenever they wanted, and were not required to answer each question, although all did. There were no

follow-up interviews. With the permission of each participant, the interviews were recorded, and later transcribed following the completion of all interviews.

The data were analyzed using qualitative methods and values, because this study seeks to explore patterns, rather than answer questions through a quantitative process. As Padgett (2004) explains, “Qualitative methods can direct our attention away from the blind pursuit of answers toward thinking about the questions” (p. 3). To expand, Neuman (1997) elaborates, “a [qualitative] researcher develops explanations or generalizations that are close to concrete data and contexts but are more than simple descriptions” (p. 420). Neuman continues, saying qualitative researchers build new theories to arouse a common understanding, rather than test a set of hypotheses. Silverman (1993) describes qualitative research differently, stating “social science observation is fundamentally about the routine rather than what appears to be exciting” (p. 30). He explains that qualitative research and analysis focuses on the smaller details, patterns, and themes, not a grand idea or hypothesis. The design of this study was based on these descriptions of the pillars of qualitative research. The ethnographic data were analyzed through the method of thematic analysis. As described by Glesne (2006), this method of analysis is a deductive process that involves coding themes and concepts through a collective comparison process. In other words, “thematic analyses move beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes” (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012, p. 13). In this study, the researcher and two research assistants analyzed the data, and coded themes individually through a collective group discussion. During the process of analysis, the data were

organized first by each individual interview, then by the questions and each coded response, and finally by the themes identified through the coding.

### Results

The following results are derived from the thematic analysis of the middle school girl's interviews. For clarity, the results of the study will be organized by each question of the interview.

#### Out of the women in your life that you know, who is your role model?

When middle school girls were asked to name a role model from the women in their lives, 61.5% (n = 16) of participants chose their mothers, and 15.4% (n=4) chose their current art teacher at the Montessori school in the Midwest. While the overwhelming majority of participants named their mothers as their role models, two (2) chose their older sisters, two (2) chose grandmothers, one (1) participant chose her aunt, and one (1) chose her au pair. Of the twenty-two (22) participants, four (4) girls chose to name two role models, causing the total number of role models chosen to be twenty-six (26). (Figure 1)

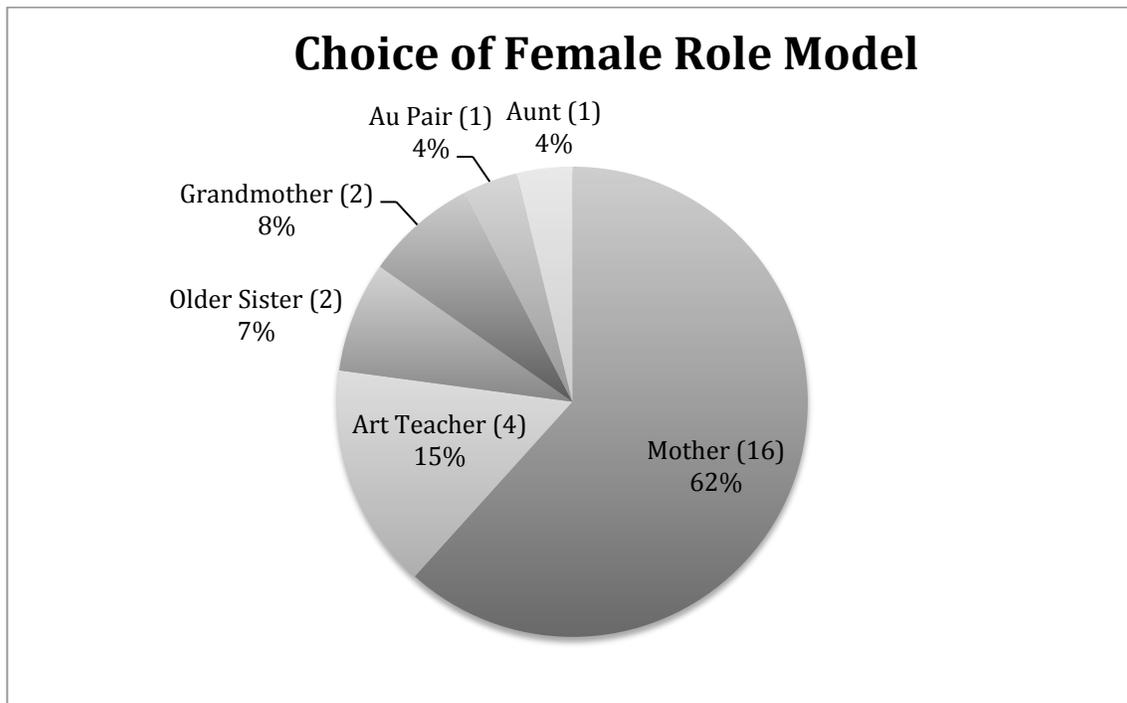


Figure 1. Choice of Female Role Model

Why did you choose this woman to be your role model?

When asked questions regarding why participants chose someone to be their role model, and what qualities they most admired in her, an overwhelming majority of responses pertained to personality traits related to possessing kindness, showing care for others, and providing support to the participant. In fact, the words “nice” and “kind” were used twenty-three (23) times throughout the interviews. As participants so frequently described their female role models as “nice”, “kind”, “caring”, “helpful” and “supportive”, they demonstrated the value they place on these attributes. The attributes of what it means to them to be a ‘good person’, or someone worth looking up to and admiring seems to be related to role model selection. In addition, participants said they chose their role models because of their strength and ability to overcome obstacles. The

role models' accomplishments and admirable careers were mentioned along with strength and the notion of overcoming obstacles ten (10) times during this section. For example, one participant stated, "... because they have accomplished so much, and I would like to accomplish a lot when I'm older, too".

How long have you known this woman and how often do you see her?

Throughout the interviews, it became obvious that exposure to an individual had influence on who the participants chose as their role models. For example, 69.3% (n=18) of participants had known their role model their entire life, and saw her every day. In addition, 15.5% (n=4) knew their role model for at least five years, and saw her multiple times per week. Participant responses supported this exposure factor when asked why they chose a certain woman to be their role model. Five (5) responses were simply due to exposure, and often used the phrase "She's my mom". This exemplifies the importance and impact the regular and engaged physical presence of role models has on youth.

What about this woman do you admire?

Another major theme surrounding the questions of why a participant chose a certain person to be her role model, and what she admired most about her was the role model's self-esteem. Several responses contributed to this finding. The participants identified the role model's confidence, as a factor by descriptions such as "she just wants to be herself", "she doesn't care what others think", and "she teaches me confidence" and "that it is okay to make mistakes". These responses provide insight into the function role models fulfill in boosting self-esteem in their mentees and encouraging an atmosphere for growing as an individual.

Participants also identified admirable traits in their role models such as being understanding and non-judgmental, encouraging passion and trying new things, and being smart, mature, and committed to their goals.

What is your favorite thing about her and why?

Responses to this question were similar to those of the previous one, but with more specificity. While the traits of “kind”, “nice”, and “helpful and supportive” were mentioned several times, there were more characteristics identified as well. For example, participants stated their role models often respect and validate their thoughts and feelings, as well as help them to regulate their emotions. One participant explained, “I like that she’s understanding. She understands the situation, like if it’s something embarrassing ... she understands that, she understands where you’re coming from, and she knows what you need to do to just make everyone feel good”. This response exemplifies the respect her role model has for her, regardless of the situation or problem. Having this validation and understanding with their role models allows the participants to trust them and bond with them through different experiences and expressions of feelings.

Several participants also noted their role models’ positivity through adversity as one of their favorite things about them. Demonstrating positivity and an optimistic outlook can help mentees develop these attitudes for themselves, which can lead to more confidence and self-awareness, as well as feelings of being in control during difficult situations. One participant described her role model as, “she always has a positive attitude, even if she has doubts or if she’s angry”, showing her role model’s optimism and self-control and regulation. As another participant explained, “they always have hope,

they're always positive". Attitudes like these contribute to the development of positive outlooks and hope in adverse situations. (Figure 2)

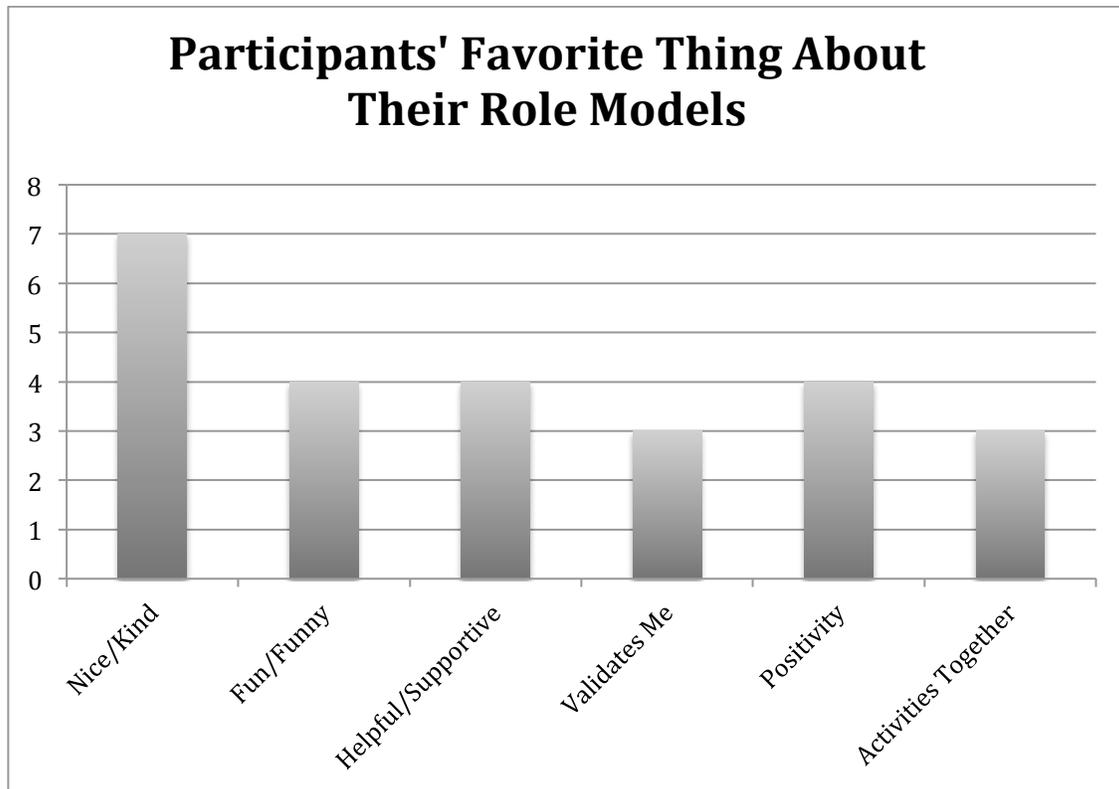


Figure 2. Participants' Favorite Things About Their Role Models

What do you talk about with her?

Participants were also asked to describe what they talk about with their role models, and the nature of their conversations. Nine (9) individuals identified talking to their role models about their daily lives, and six (6) said they go to their role models when they need advice or help with a problem they are having. Four (4) girls noted they often talk to their role model about their interpersonal relationships with friends, siblings, teachers, and others. Eight (8) participants simply responded to the question with a confident, "everything". Participants also mentioned sharing their feelings, secrets and

common interests with their role models, as well as discussing the future and reflecting on the past. The individuals in this study showed the trust and confidence they have with their role models in the way they share with them. Role models provide a form of security with these youth, by providing a safe, supportive, and encouraging environment. Within this environment, the youth can share their problems, daily activities, and feelings without experiencing judgment.

If you came to this woman with a problem, how would she respond?

This interview question provided further insight into the role model relationship. In every interview, the participants indicated they believed their role models would help them with any problem they had, in various and different ways. Fourteen (14) responded their role models would help them solve the problem by offering advice and guidance. Fourteen (14) individuals said they believed their role models would help with their problem through active engagement in the issue. These participants said their role models would not only offer guidance, but also take personal interest in their issues and work with them to make sure they are solved. The participants expressed trust in their role models. The interviewed participants responded unanimously that their role models would be encouraging and positive while listening and helping them through any problem. The interview responses indicated the impact these role models have on the participants in the ways they validate their feelings and work together with them to solve every day problems. The participants explained that the role models remained engaged by

following up on problem solving at a later time. (Figure 3)

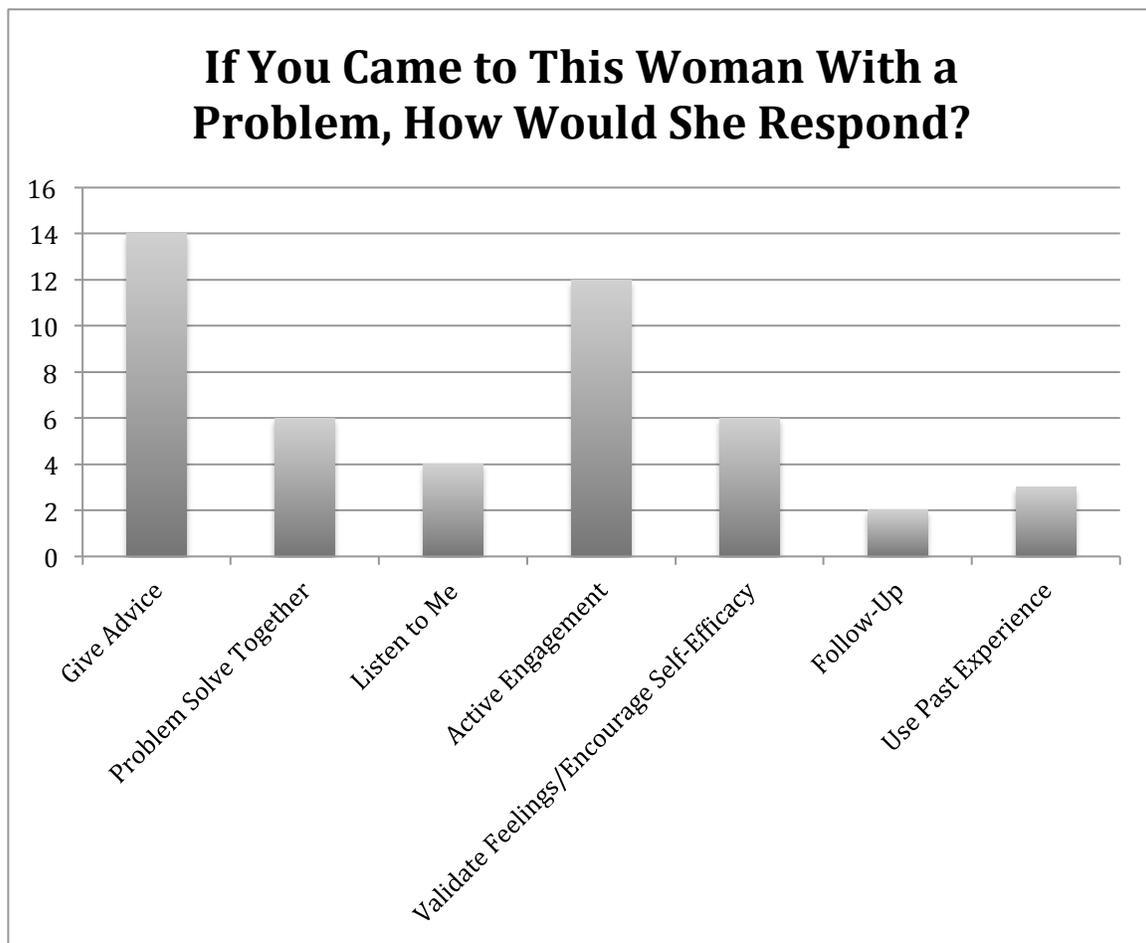


Figure 3. If You Came to This Woman With a Problem, How Would She Respond?

What do you think you have learned from her?

Participants were also asked to shed light on what they each have learned from their respective role models. While specific life skills were mentioned six (6) times in their answers, the overwhelming majority of responses pertained to growing as an individual and developing desired personality traits. Responses ranged from learning independence and confidence to practicing kindness and generosity towards others. One example of this is one participants response, “I’ve learned to be kind, nice, and to help

people who need help”. Other themes in responses surrounding learning confidence included the role models encouraging the girls to be themselves and that making mistakes is a part of the human experience. For example, responses such as, “My mom shows me how to be kind and be patient, and [my art teacher] shows me that sometimes you can make mistakes, but you can always fix them”, and “[I’ve learned] that it’s okay to be yourself, and if people don’t like you for who you are, you shouldn’t hang out with them”. These lessons, whether intentional or not, have a large impact on the participants’ sense of self. Overall, the participants indicated learning more than physical skills, and focused their responses on the admirable character traits their role models embody. The most obvious theme among responses for this question was that participants indicated learning to develop the personality traits they desired to be a “good person” and someone worthy of admiration from their role model. (Figure 4)

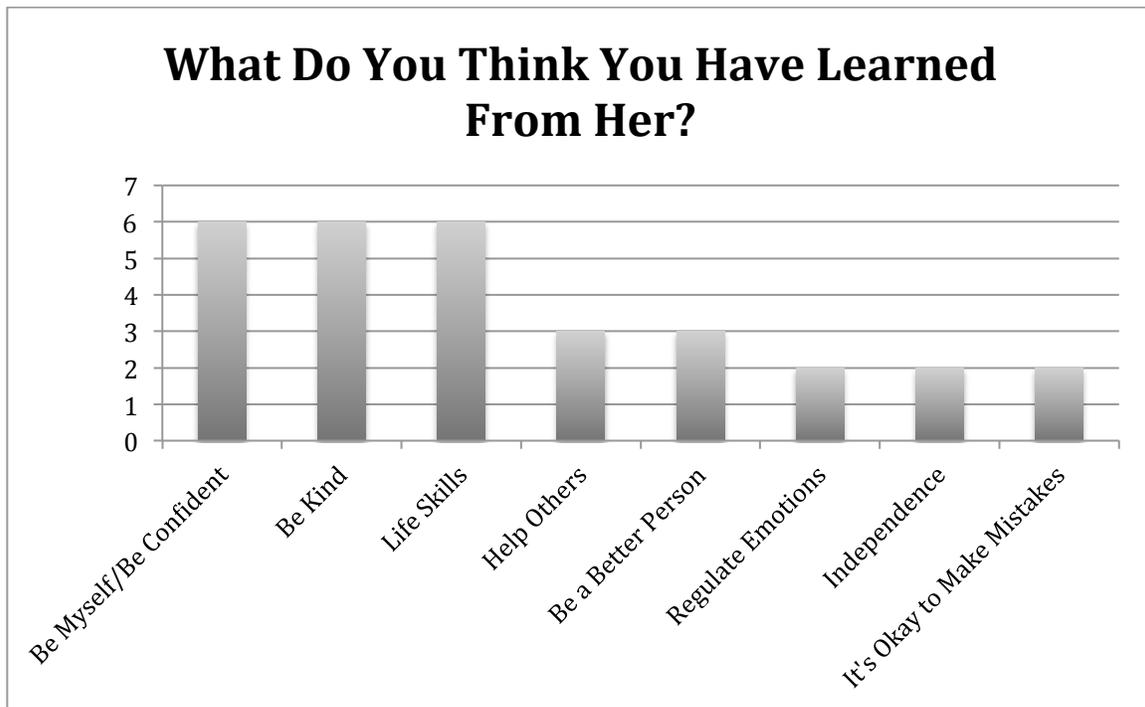


Figure 4. What Do You Think You Have Learned From Her?

What do you want to be when you grow up?

Do you think any of this has to do with your role model?

The final questions in the interviews regarded what the participants aspire to be when they grow up, career-wise, and whether or not they think their choice relates to their role models. Upon analysis, the results show 90.9% (n=20) of participants believed their role models inspired their career aspirations in various ways. Of those responses seven (7) participants aspire to the exact same career as their role model, seven (7) agreed their career choice was influenced and encouraged by their role model, and four (4) said their career aspirations were inspired by activities done together with their role model, for example, one participant replied, “I know my mom and I like to cook together a lot, so that’s probably a reason”. Two (2) participants responded that they thought their choice

was because of their role model, but did not elaborate, and two (2) participants did not know what their career aspirations were. Of these final two, one participant did indicate discussions of possible careers with her role model that help to influence her future decisions, saying, “I think a lot about [what I want to be], and she’s really good at school, so I strive to be like that”. This participant recognized a quality in her role model that she admired and knew would help her future self, and thus she tries to obtain the same hardworking academic mindset. (Figure 5)

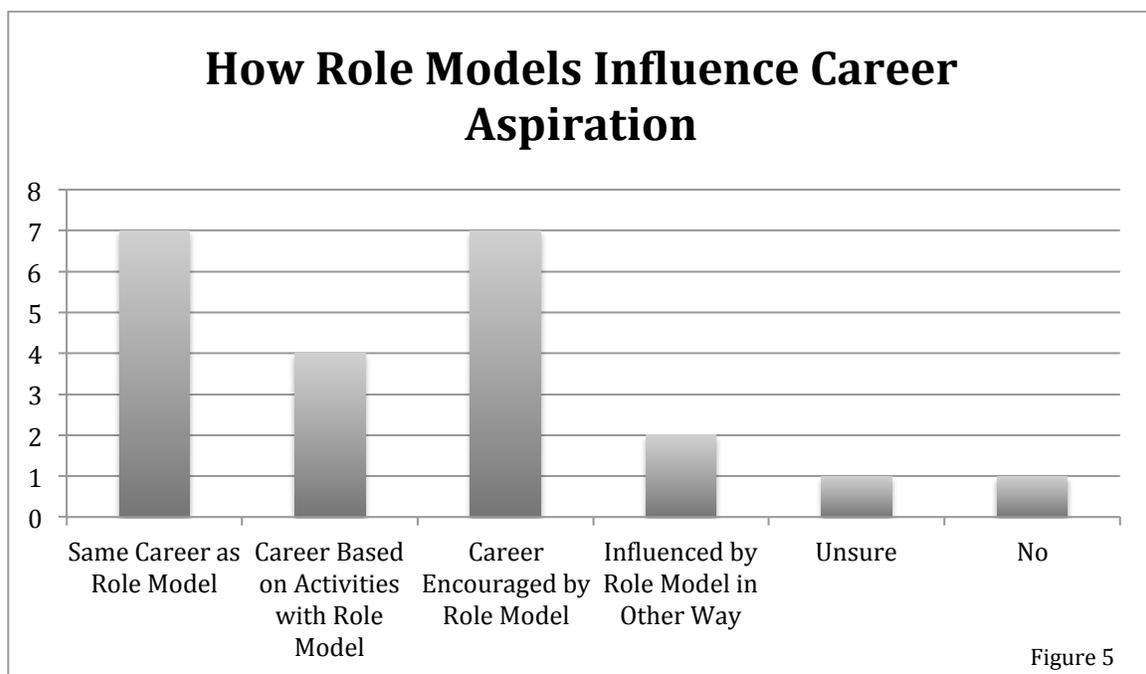


Figure 5. How Role Models Influence Career Aspiration

#### Limitations

There are several limitations to this study, all of which will be discussed in this section. The first major limitation of *When I Grow Up: A Look at Middle School Girls' Patterns in Choosing a Role Model* is the sample size. Twenty-two interviews were

conducted with participants, but this number is not large enough to be necessarily representative of an entire population. With a smaller sample size, one cannot be positive the data reflects more than the individual participants themselves. Had more girls participated in the study, the results could represent middle school girls as a whole more effectively. This sample was also recruited out of convenience, from one school. This recruitment method also serves as a limitation of representation for this study.

As the sample for this study was recruited from one Montessori school in the Midwest, there are several limitations this creates. Mentioned above, it makes it more difficult to conclude the results represent the population of middle school girls as a whole, rather than simply the respondents themselves. Furthermore, a Montessori is a private school, with average tuitions for ages nine to fifteen ranging between \$8,714 – \$10,671 per year in the United States (“How Much Does Montessori Cost?” 2016). It can be assumed, based on the annual tuition, that the participants of the study live in middle to upper-middle class households. By isolating the sample to this location and socioeconomic status, the data are more limited in what populations they represent.

This study also did not control for race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, or if the participants lived in single or two-parent households, which could have been interesting components in the data. If the study had a larger, more diverse sample size and included participants from different locations and socioeconomic statuses, the data collected would be more easily applicable to broader populations of middle school girls. However, *When I Grow Up: A Look at Middle School Girls’ Patterns in Choosing a Role Model* was limited both monetarily and by time, resulting in a smaller sample of convenience.

### Discussion

Despite limitations, the results of this study are applicable in several ways. In one way, the results can be used to help women who know they are in a role model position for a young girl in this age range. When a woman is in a position to be a role model to a young girl, she may not even be aware of it. Based on the results discussed this study, women who are relatives are more likely to be identified as a role model by girls between the ages of ten and thirteen. Middle school girls were also more likely to choose a woman they had high exposure to as their role model. They chose women they knew most of their lives, and interacted with several times a week. Therefore, even if a woman is not related to a middle school age girl, but is in near constant contact to one or more, she should be aware of her potential as a role model. Specifically mentioned in the data from this study, teachers and au pairs or nannies should be cognizant of their positions and guiding relationships with girls of this age. Women who are mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and sisters to girls in this age range should be knowledgeable about their potential to be a role model, and thus should work to exemplify the characteristics of role models highlighted in this study

Based upon the data analyzed in this study, there are several key characteristics middle school age girls admire most about their role models, and, therefore, look for in other potential models. To start, the participants in this study emphasized that their role models were nice, kind, helpful women. While this may seem like an obvious trait to be admired for, it is the most basic, fundamental trait for role models. Young girls seek someone they know will offer support and kindness in any situation. Another very key

characteristic that came from the data is the element of trust between the participants and their role models. Middle school age girls feel more connected to a woman they can turn to with any problems they may face. Knowing this woman will be there for them and actively engage in problem solving with them creates the trusting relationships necessary between a young girl and her female role model.

The middle school girls that participated in this study were also very perceptive of their role models' self-esteem. The data show that girls of this age are more attracted to a woman with a high self-esteem and self-image. This is crucial for women who are role models to understand, because how they view and treat themselves is under constant observation by girls in this age range. Girls between the ages ten and thirteen are more apt to choose a female role model if she is confident in herself and her abilities, and isn't worried about what others may think of her. When these positive behaviors are observed, children at this age begin to learn to think of themselves in the same ways, boosting their own self-esteem. It is also important to note that during the study, physical characteristics of the participants' female role models were never mentioned. None of them were focused on how their role model dressed or looked, they were more in-tune to their role models' sense of self-worth.

Women who are role models to middle school age girls should also be aware of the influence they have on girls' career aspirations. The data in this study show role models have an incredible impact on what girls' ages ten to thirteen want to be when they grow up. Some girls want the same career as their role model, because they saw their role model in her profession and admired her work. Others chose careers based on activities

they did with their role model regularly, and their role models allowed them to follow their interests. The key aspect to role models' career influence on young girls is encouragement. Regardless of her career aspirations, a role model should be actively engaged and encouraging her to be passionate about the things she is interested in.

The most fundamental characteristic of the relationship between a middle school girl and her role model is mutual trust. As was mentioned previously, this bond forms through encouragement, engagement in problem solving, and the modeling of confidence and high self-worth. Women who know they have the potential to be a role model to a middle school age girl should be aware of the necessity of trust, and should use these guidelines to create a strong, positive relationship.

The results of this study are also applicable on a broader scale, with youth and female-centered programs. There are many youth development programs in the United States that provide the environment and opportunity for youth to find impactful role models, but some don't utilize this opportunity effectively. Various organizations can use the evidence found in this study to promote the creation of positive role models within their programs. Similar to how individual role models should utilize the results of this study, girl-centered programs can provide this data to the leaders or counselors of their programs, encouraging them to incorporate these characteristics of kindness, support, active engagement through problem solving, encouragement in career aspirations, and building a trusting relationship with their participants.

Existing youth and female-centered organizations already use evidence similar to the findings in this study in their programming. Techbridge, a California based

organization promoting girls' interest and involvement in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), conducted similar research to this study, and created a toolkit for role models in their programs. The toolkit offers advice to role models on forming strong relationships, providing support and advice, and making a positive impact as a role model to a young girl. Techbridge collaborates their research findings with other girl empowerment programs in STEM, with efforts to continue the promotion of evidence-based role modeling (Role Model Training and Resources, 2016). The increased use of evidence-based programming in youth programs would result in more opportunities for young girls to find role models, and would make these relationships more impactful.

#### Implications for Future Research

It is important to study the relationships between role models and adolescent girls for many different reasons, and several studies give a preliminary outline for this. However, little exploration has been done regarding the specific characteristics that female role models possess, as perceived by the adolescent girls. More research could be done to examine recurring traits young girls look for and identify in their role models, or seek out during their role model selection process. By using a larger sample representative of a broader population of young girls, trends in the selection process may become more apparent, and more common characteristics could be found.

Additional research might be done to distinguish different identified characteristics between different female role models, i.e. mothers, sisters, coaches, teachers, friends, etc. By researching the differences in each of these relationships,

programs and individuals could have a better understanding of their specific impact as a role model to a young girl. Collecting more specific and detailed evidence will contribute to the creation of more positive and strong relationships between young girls and their female role models. This information is important to measure because it can help form a sort of 'rubric' for what a strong, positive, and influential female role model should look like for a middle school age girl.

## References

- Adriaanse, J., & Crosswhite, J. (2008). David or mia? The influence of gender on adolescent girls' choice of sport role models. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 31(5), 383-389. Retrieved February 16, 2015, from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277539508000903#>
- Bagès, C., & Martinot, D. (2011). What is the best model for girls and boys faced with a standardized mathematics evaluation situation: A hardworking role model or a gifted role model? *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 50(3), 536-543. doi:10.1111/j.2044-8309.2010.02017.x
- Baird, C. L., & Hardy, M. (2004). The Gendered Structure of Career Goals: Influences of Role Models, Gender Ideology, and Agency. *Conference Papers -- American Sociological Association*, 1. doi:asa\_proceeding\_36068.PDF
- Bowers, E., Johnson, S., Buckingham, M., Gasca, S., Warren, D., Lerner, J., & Lerner, R. (2014). Important Non-parental Adults and Positive Youth Development Across Mid- to Late-Adolescence: The Moderating Effect of Parenting Profiles. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 43(6), 897-918. doi:10.1007/s10964-014-0095-x
- Erikson, E. H. (1980). *Identity and the life cycle*. New York: Norton.
- Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (3rd ed.). Pearson Education.

- Guest, G., MacQueen, K. M., & Namey, E. E. (2012). Applied thematic analysis.
- Henwood, K., & Pidgeon, N. (February 01, 1995). Remaking the Link: Qualitative Research and Feminist Standpoint Theory. *Feminism & Psychology*, 5, 1, 7-30.
- Hernandez, A. E. (1995). Do Role Models Influence Self Efficacy and Aspirations in Mexican American At-Risk Females? *Hispanic journal of behavioral sciences*, 17(2), 256-63.
- How much does Montessori cost? (2016). Retrieved April 12, 2016, from <http://www.montessori-namta.org/>
- Hurd, N. M., Zimmerman, M. A., & Yange, X. (2009). Negative Adult Influences and the Protective Effects of Role Models: A Study with Urban Adolescents. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 38(6), 777-789. doi:10.1007/s10964-008-9296-5
- Neuman, W. L. (1997). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (3rd ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Padgett, D. (Ed.). (2004). *The qualitative research experience*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Role model training and resources. (2016). Retrieved April 14, 2016, from [techbridgegirls.org](http://techbridgegirls.org)
- Silverman, D. (1993). *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analysing talk, text, and interaction*. London: Sage Publications.

Yancey AK, Siegel JM, McDaniel KL. Role Models, Ethnic Identity, and Health-Risk Behaviors in Urban Adolescents. *Arch Pediatric Adolescent Medicine* 2002; 156(1):55-61. doi:10.1001/archpedi.156.1.55.

Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter


**Behavioral and Social Sciences Institutional Review Board**

Office of Responsible Research Practices  
 300 Research Administration Building  
 1960 Kenny Road  
 Columbus, OH 43210-1063

Phone (614) 688-8457  
 Fax (614) 688-0366  
[www.orrp.osu.edu](http://www.orrp.osu.edu)

August 14, 2015

Protocol Number: **2015B0246**  
 Protocol Title: **When I Grow Up: A Look At Middle School Girls' Patterns in Choosing a Role Model, Linda Helm, Audrey Amann, Annalisa Perez, Social Work**  
 Type of Review: Initial Review—Expedited – expedited  
 IRB Staff Contact: Jenna Mowls-Hutkowski Phone: 614-688-2208 Email: [mowls-hutkowski.1@osu.edu](mailto:mowls-hutkowski.1@osu.edu)

**Dear Dr. Helm,**

The Behavioral and Social Sciences IRB **APPROVED BY EXPEDITED REVIEW** the above referenced research. The Board was able to provide expedited approval under 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1) because the research meets the applicability criteria and one or more categories of research eligible for expedited review, as indicated below.

**Date of IRB Approval:** August 14, 2015  
**Date of IRB Approval Expiration:** August 14, 2016  
**Expedited Review Category:** 6,7

**In addition;** the research has been approved for the inclusion of children (one parent sufficient).

If applicable, informed consent (and HIPAA research authorization) must be obtained from subjects or their legally authorized representatives and documented prior to research involvement. The IRB-approved consent form and process must be used. Changes in the research (e.g., recruitment procedures, advertisements, enrollment numbers, etc.) or informed consent process must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented (except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to subjects).

This approval is valid for **one year** from the date of IRB review when approval is granted or modifications are required. The approval will no longer be in effect on the date listed above as the IRB expiration date. A Continuing Review application must be approved within this interval to avoid expiration of IRB approval and cessation of all research activities. A final report must be provided to the IRB and all records relating to the research (including signed consent forms) must be retained and available for audit for at least 3 years after the research has ended.

It is the responsibility of all investigators and research staff to promptly report to the IRB any serious, unexpected and related adverse events and potential unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

This approval is issued under The Ohio State University's OHRP Federalwide Assurance #00006378. All forms and procedures can be found on the ORRP website – [www.orrp.osu.edu](http://www.orrp.osu.edu). Please feel free to contact the IRB staff contact listed above with any questions or concerns.

Michael Edwards, PhD, Chair  
 Behavioral and Social Sciences Institutional Review Board

