



Experiential Learning in IT'S A GIRL THING! Groups

It's almost a law of nature: give people permission to play, and they'll seize it. It is the act of creating, not what it ends up looking like, that is distinctively gratifying. —Lauren Pokras

The *Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl Thing!* program includes an experiential activity in almost every monthly gathering—crafts or cooking, role plays or movement, guided visualizations or writing. Used in the right spirit, these modalities are among **the most effective teaching tools** available to you—and the “**fun quotient**” keeps the girls coming back month after month, year after year.

The program is designed to call upon and develop all of a girl's **multiple intelligences**—including, but not limited to, the intellectual IQ that dominates in most learning settings. In this program, we are also tapping the **emotional, creative, and interpersonal potential** of each girl. Some girls favor the verbal, some the nonverbal; some prefer using their hands, some their full bodies; therefore, we have varied the modalities from month to month, with an eye to overall **diversity and balance**.

Regardless of the modality, the most important underlying values are

- **process**, not product.
- **creativity**, not repetition.
- **curiosity**, not assumptions.

As a facilitator, you can create a **nonjudgmental atmosphere** that frees the girls to see that learning is accessible and that their own ideas are valuable. These experiences build the girls' confidence in their own ideas, personal expression, and individuality and provide girls a valuable direct experience of **independence**.

Because they are at an age when they strongly resist being controlled, anything that smacks of “I'm teaching you something” will be held at arm's length. In creative expression, adolescent girls **freely manage their own ideas**. Creative activities also give them some control over their time and effort, how the meeting goes, and the character of the group.

At the same time, many adolescents are self-conscious and may not be eager to step out of their comfort zones to try some new modalities. This is a “life lesson moment”—for both you and the girls! For the group leader, it underscores the importance of being a role model who is willing to try new things, even if it risks looking silly. For the participant, it is a reminder that looking silly can be fun and liberating and that what other people think really doesn't matter all that much.

For teens, **the best teaching methods are often indirect**. They do not generally respond to questioning or lecturing. (Really, who does?) In creating something—a craft, an improvisational role, a poem—girls get to discover something about themselves that may surprise them. Most importantly, it’s coming from themselves, not from an external source. **What we discover ourselves is what we remember best—and helps mold who and how we are in the world.**

Adolescents aren’t fully abstract thinkers yet. Creative exercises give them an opportunity for more concrete **self-expression**. They also give girls an age-appropriate path into their **interior lives**. Adults can sit around in a group processing our experiences all night, but for girls it’s often boring. They’re typically not as equipped for interior searching in the way adults are, so they need different avenues to go inside—through crafts, theater, writing, movement, music, and more.

ART & CRAFT PROJECTS

Many groups, particularly in the younger years, report that the art and craft activities are their favorite parts of the gatherings. Once the directions have been given, they are free to chat, work on their own, or help one another as suits them individually and as a group. Generally these segments are very **high-energy**, and the group leader must **budget** time carefully, so that there is ample time for the other segments (including clean-up!).

Art provides an outlet for personal questioning in a lightly structured environment. Working in a group on individual projects gives girls a chance to both **relax** and **focus**. It **relieves the stress of a social situation**. It’s an activity in which they don’t feel on the spot, and they don’t have to answer questions or make eye contact—and it’s fun!

- The “Before the Gather” page usually directs you to **make a sample**, so that you resolve anything you do not understand in the instructions ahead of time, “test drive” your materials to make sure they will work, and generally feel comfortable with the activity.
- When possible, we encourage you to **make more than one sample**, so that the girls understand that different approaches are possible and encouraged.
- With complex projects, you may want to make a **progressive sample** that shows the process step-by-step. For instance, for the rainstick in Shevat-Lev, you might insert the pins for the full length of the tube, tape it up three-fourths of the way (leaving the pin heads visible for the remainder), then cover half the taped area with your decorative paper (leaving half the taped area showing). This way the girls can see what it should look like at **each stage of the process**.
- Emphasize that each girl’s work should be her own creation and interpretation—that there are no right or wrong solutions to the artistic challenge. At the same time, feel free to encourage the girls to **move away from stereotypical reflexes and to experiment**.

Grass is *not only* green; and sky is *much more than* blue. The girls' statements can be *far richer* than rainbows, hearts, stars, and unicorns. When possible, support them to **dig deeper into more personal experiences and expressions**—finding the personal meaning from within.

- Some girls may say that they “don’t do” or “can’t do” art. Remind them that in this setting, there are no “wrong” interpretations. Encourage them to **let their hands (rather than their heads) guide them**.
- Craft projects can provide an opportunity to share one-on-one time with individual girls, especially those who are more withdrawn in the larger group activities. The more intimate environment gives you a chance to express your personal thoughts and affection for the girls and build trust with them. You can be an indirect support and ally for a girl who claims to be a “terrible artist.” However, **resist the temptation** to do or “fix” the project for her—or to let her friends do so. Coaching can be helpful—taking over will just reinforce her “I can’t.” Always emphasize: **process—not product!**

COOKING

A cooking activity closely resembles a craft project in that each involves materials, tools, and a creative process (in this case, a “recipe”). Like a craft activity, cooking tends to be **high-energy, somewhat messy, time-consuming, and an opportunity to “gab.”** The major difference is that most crafts are done individually, while most cooking projects are done **collaboratively**. And, of course, most crafts are taken home, while most food is eaten on the spot.

- For the same reasons that it is important to make samples of the crafts, it is essential to **try the recipe(s)** you will be using.
- **Make notes** regarding required ingredients and utensils, based on your experience with the directions. The middle of the meeting is not the time to figure out that the butter should be cut in half, or that you need a spatula.
- **Make no assumptions!** When cooking, **check in advance** with the host family or institution regarding the availability of the kitchen, and any requirements regarding **kashrut**, use of **utensils**, and **clean-up**.
- Be careful to accommodate the girls' **food allergies, chronic diseases**, such as diabetes or celiac disease, and expectations of **kashrut**, just as you would with any snack. **Adapt** the activity or the recipe as necessary.

THEATER GAMES

Improvisational theater games of many kinds are used throughout the program. They vary from quick warm-ups and ice breakers to full-length role-playing activities. Regardless of length, they are not about “acting,” but about **freeing up the girls’ imagination, creativity, and spontaneity.**

Warm-ups

Warm-ups are used to **break down initial barriers**, to set a **mood**, and to **energize** the girls for the main activities. Some warm-ups also create group bonding and collaboration. In other cases, a warm-up **lightly introduces** a process that will then be used with a more serious intention.

- Don’t underestimate the **power and importance of warm-ups**. If you must trim, then shorten them, but resist the temptation to eliminate the warm-ups altogether.
- If you need **additional warm-ups** for your group, we suggest you refer to the group leaders’ web site or any of the following great resources. At least one should be on the bookshelf of any group leader:

Viola Spolin, *Theater Games for Rehearsal: A Director’s Handbook* (Northwestern University Press, 1985).

Viola Spolin, *Theater Games for the Classroom: A Teacher’s Handbook* (Northwestern University Press, 1986).

Maria C. Novelly, *Theatre Games for Young Performers: Improvisations and Exercises for Developing Acting Skills* (Meriwether Publishing, 1985).

Role Plays

Improvisational role playing activities give the girls a chance to use their imaginations to step into the shoes of someone different from themselves—perhaps a parent or an ancient biblical figure—or someone like themselves in a different situation—such as a girl confronting her parents about trust issues. Taking on a role is like putting on a mask—it permits us more **freedom to experiment**, and, paradoxically, **to be more authentic** than if we just think or talk about what we might do in a given situation.

Recently, improvisational theatre, or “improv,” has largely come to be associated with comedy on television and at comedy clubs, such as “Comedy Sportz™.” However, improv has much broader uses—acting preparation, Playback Theater, and Bibliodrama, to name a few. The improvisational role plays in this program are part of that tradition, while still lending themselves to fun.

- To create a **supportive context** for the role plays, let the girls know that

No one has to participate if she is not comfortable doing so.

You are available for “side-coaching”—advice given from the side on how to play the role.

*Anyone who gets stuck or overwhelmed in a role **can get out of it just by asking.***

*There is no one right interpretation—this is **imaginative play.***

- Key words in introducing role plays are **‘invite’** and **‘imagine,’** as in “Now I invite you to imagine that you are Sarah....” ‘Invite’ is pleasantly nondirective (and who doesn’t want to be invited?). ‘Imagine’ opens people up to this kind of play, while the word ‘pretend’ closes people down. (It suggests duplicity and keeps them trying to operate two selves at the same time.)
- This may seem counterintuitive, but do NOT tell the girls how safe the activity is. It’s an odd paradox. As soon as you assure people that something is safe, they immediately worry about why you are reassuring them—and their sense of safety actually diminishes!
- The key to effective role playing is to **speak AS the character.** If a girl uses language like “I might....” Or “I think I would...”, gently encourage her to speak as the character, “I will...” or “I am feeling...”
- Make sure there is the opportunity for everyone who might want to participate to do so. Don’t allow the activity to be taken over by those girls with the strongest **“act hunger,”** whether because they imagine themselves to be amateur actors or because they have a need to “act out.” Occasionally ask the girls who are always the first to volunteer to give others a chance to go first.
- After role plays, give the participants a way to return to their “everyday selves” by **“de-roling.”** This can be done simply by asking them to change seats or stretch, or by asking them to answer a question that they have to think about, such as “What is your favorite ice cream?”

GUIDED VISUALIZATION

Guided visualizations (sometimes referred to as “guided meditations”) are similar to role plays—but role plays acted on the stage of one’s own mind, with a great deal of side-coaching. Many adolescents appreciate the opportunity to pause and reflect—to close their eyes and focus on something that grounds them. These girls are operating in a whirlwind of early-to-rise, late-to-bed, with lots of social interaction in between. In the midst of texting, IM-ing, talking in the halls and on their cell phones, and doing schoolwork, many adolescents do not feel that they “own” their own thoughts, feelings, or imagination.

At the vortex of this commotion, they are trying to balance their lives—academically and socially—and are trying to figure out who they are. Guided visualizations and meditations are opportunities for them to connect with their inner selves and experience their own truth. They are important tools to cultivate in adolescence because they can provide strong internal anchors as they continue to grow and develop.

When leading a guided visualization, it is important to have a good sense of pacing. Go slowly. Very. Slowly. With lots of time . . . between directions. It is essential that you give each participant **plenty of time** to enter into her imagination.

- If you are not fully comfortable with leading guided meditations, we suggest that you **record yourself, and then try the visualization** while listening to your own voice. (Yes, we know you sound terrible to yourself. Everybody does. Just remember that the girls aren't listening to see whether your voice sounds funny.) Rerecord until you get the pacing right, and make any notes you need in the text.
- **Read** the visualization to the group—do not try to use the tape of your voice.

Many of the principles of role plays (above) also apply to guided visualizations:

- To create a **supportive context** for the visualization, let the girls know that there is no desired outcome—this is just a time to relax and connect with their inner selves. Their lives are filled with pressure and this is a time to let all of that fade away for the moment. Let them know that

Closing one's eyes is NOT necessary; many people prefer to just soft-focus their eyes on a fixed point in the room.

No one has to participate if she is not comfortable doing so.

Anyone who feels stuck or overwhelmed can open or refocus her eyes at any time and sit quietly and listen.

There is no one right interpretation—this is imaginative play.

- Key words in introducing guided visualizations are 'invite' and 'imagine.'
- As above, do NOT tell the girls how safe the activity is, lest they immediately worry about why you are reassuring them—causing their sense of safety to actually diminish!
- Much like de-roling from role playing, after the visualization, give the participants a way to **SLOWLY and GENTLY return to their normal frame of mind**. This can be accomplished simply by asking them to change seats or stretch, or to observe the room around them and make eye contact with other members of the group.

WRITING

Personal Journaling & Writing

Journaling is listening to your inner voice and putting it to paper. Journaling and personal writing provide **quiet, reflective moments** in a gathering and can be an important part of the overall rhythm of the session. Girls are asked to do a great deal of writing for school, but they are rarely asked to write **from the heart, just for themselves**—for no other reader, no judge, no grade.

Writing activities provide an opportunity for the girls to **find their authentic private, personal voice**. The ability to summon that voice will be an invaluable asset throughout their lives.

For this activity to be successful, the girls must feel confident that what they write will remain **private**. Please speak to your group about respecting their friends' **space, property, and personal boundaries**.

- Encourage the girls to **spread** out in the room and to each draw an **imaginary curtain** around herself for privacy. When the time is up, ask them to open their curtains and step out into the common space of the room.
- It sometimes takes a few minutes to **warm up**, especially if they are new to journaling or have had very busy days. If transitioning to writing is difficult, encourage them to check in with all their **senses** and note what they see, hear, feel, smell, and taste as a centering warm-up.
- To **get past writing blocks** (All writers get them!), teach them the trick of **freewriting**: put the pen to paper and write whatever comes into your mind as fast as you can. Do not lift the pen from the paper. Do not judge. Do not edit. If you can't think of anything, write, "I can't think of anything" over and over again until you think of something else, and write that. Keep going until the time is up.

Collective Journaling/Scrapbooking (The Kol Year *Moonbook*)

In the **Kol year**, the creation of the group's *Moonbook* is introduced. This scrapbook is a collective journal of the year, created by the girls themselves. At the end of each meeting, the designated Host Girl for the following meeting takes the *Moonbook* home and creates a page commemorating the meeting that just took place. She may incorporate digital photographs or memorabilia from the gathering, such as game cards or craft supplies. She is encouraged to use her creativity and special talents—computer skills, writing, drawing, etc.—to create a unique page that will be shared with the group toward the end of the next meeting.

- We encourage you to buy or create a sturdy two-pocket **carrying bag** for the *Moonbook*, which also includes **craft supplies**, such as scissors, glue sticks, markers, craft papers, etc. This addition has contributed to the success of the project in many groups.
- Some groups have liked the project so much that they have elected to continue their *Moonbook* into the **Bena and Koach years**.

MOVEMENT

Interpretive movement, dance, yoga, and self-defense instruction provide opportunities for movement and **nonverbal self-expression** with one's whole body. They also help develop a girl's **kinesthetic sense** (knowing where one's body is in space) and may help develop **comfort with and pride in her changing body** as she evolves from girl to young woman.

- Make sure that your meeting place has a **floor surface** suitable for the movement activity, so that no one slips or gets rug burns or impact injuries.
- If you are inviting a guest leader for a movement section, make sure that both she and the girls **know what to expect**. If the guest does not already know the girls, **name tags** will help everyone connect.
- The presence of a guest leader is a small and temporary violation of the normal group boundary that should not be ignored. After she has left, plan to take a few minutes to **reestablish the group boundary**, perhaps with a warm-up exercise that emphasizes group bonding.

MUSIC

Except for each year's closing celebrations, when a dance party is an option, there are no activities devoted entirely to music. However, music can be used effectively in many ways during the gatherings:

- **Singing the "Creative Prayer for the New Month"** is far more moving than simply reciting it (and the tune supports remembering the words as well). The music is found on the *It's a Girl Sing!* CD, which accompanies this *Group Leader's Manual*. And if you or one of the girls plays guitar or keyboard, we encourage you to **accompany** the group.
- Many groups use recorded music in the **background** during craft activities. Beginning in the Ruach year, you may wish to ask the girls to bring in appropriate music for this purpose.
- Some older groups have adopted a custom of beginning with **contemporary music chosen by one of the girls**, who also explains why the piece **pertains to the themes of the group**. This is a great opportunity for the girls to begin to take leadership and to express themselves by sharing important parts of their generation's popular culture.
- The *It's a Girl Sing!* CD includes many **topical songs** by contemporary women. If your group enjoys this kind of music, you may wish to incorporate it into your gathering plan. The written lyrics can be downloaded from the group leaders' web site.

Finally, we encourage you to **experiment** with all these modalities. If you need to "swap" an activity with another month, check out the Themes and Activities **indexes** at the back of this manual. And do take advantage of the **creative alternatives** offered by other group leaders on the Moving Traditions **web site** for leaders.

Most of all—Have Fun!

Portions of this introduction to expressive modalities are adapted from } "Arts and Crafts as Expressive Opportunities for Girls" by Lauren Pokras, in Sourcebook for Leaders (Philadelphia: Moving Traditions, 2001, 2006) 36-37.