

Better Together: Girl Groups



Inside:

Why do youth groups exist?

Female Pioneers

Origins of Scouting

Founders

No Boys Allowed?

Mixing It Up!



A History of Girl Groups

Why do youth groups exist?

Who pioneered girls' scouting groups?

Why do many scouting groups remain single-gender?

What is their purpose today?

How is gender equality changing the scouting movement?

The answers and more in this curatorial essay by Jocelyn Anderson-Wood for our *Better Together: Girl Groups* exhibit.



Why do youth groups exist?

The history of girl groups begins with boy groups, and they have been around for a long time.

The first boy groups were religious. Sunday Schools associated with churches and chapels developed in the last few years of the eighteenth century. Sunday School groups were the prototype for the youth groups that we know today.

In the 1860s Rev Arthur Sweatman founded many boys' clubs, beginning with the Islington Youths' Institute. He described the clubs as involving "evening recreation, companionship, an entertaining but healthy literature, useful instruction, and a strong guiding influence to lead young people onward and upward socially and morally". In 1863 he wrote a paper on the value of youth groups, first read at the Social Science Association in Edinburgh, which stated that young men needed general cultural improvement, and a new type of organisation was needed to help boys to reach it.

In the 1880s and 1890s there was a marked growth in club provision for young people. Of particular note here was the pioneering of lads' clubs by many Catholic and Anglican priests. There was a parallel growth in girls' clubs and groups. From 1880 onwards we see a number of girls clubs being established, some with hostels, some with a range of rooms and facilities. There were also other important developments in Christian work with young women, including the founding of the Anglican, Girls Friendly Society in 1875. Its purpose was to 'unite girls and women in a fellowship of prayer, service and purity of life, for the glory of God'. By 1885 there were 821 branches in England and Wales. The first Girl's Brigade group was founded in 1893 in Dublin.

Most of these initiatives, for all their differences, emerged out of the work of evangelical Christians. However, there began to be a significant shift away from evangelicalism in great swathes of youth work. Workers with very different religious views had begun to come into the work. For some there was a stronger emphasis on fellowship and social justice. We can also see the beginnings of youth work in other faiths. Of greatest significance here is the pioneering of Jewish youth work by Lily Montagu and others through various forms of club and settlement.

There are a number of reasons that youth groups would emerge around this time. Following the Enlightenment age, the late eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century were a time of change and new ideas. For example, the coming of the Industrial Revolution meant that some had more leisure time as labour became more divided. The 1870 Education Act in the UK meant that education was mandatory for children up to the age of ten, with amendments quickly raising the age into the teens. Child labour laws cut down on the hours children could legally work, so they had more free time. For a child who left school at 14, belonging to a youth group and continuing a sense of belonging and an education would have been invaluable.

Perhaps the reason all of this youth work emerged in Britain during the nineteenth century is tied up with the imperialism of the same time period. It could be argued that a desire to dominate the world and subject its peoples is a similar desire to raise the country's own children "properly" through youth work.

Quite a number of the women involved in setting up girls clubs were concerned about the exploitation of young women at work, and the problems they faced in their leisure time. The women involved tended to be upper class and wealthy, and concerned with helping girls in poorer areas to improve themselves – socially, intellectually or through religion.

So the idea of "citizen training" was central to youth groups from the beginning. Through establishing youth groups of all kinds, adults were ensuring that children emerged with the kinds of values that they liked and wanted to encourage. The most extreme and unpleasant example of this can be seen in the Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls, organisations set up to indoctrinate children from a young age into Nazi ideology. Most youth groups do not have a political dimension, however, and are closer to youth clubs than youth movements.

Female Pioneers



Lily Montagu (22 December 1873 – 22 January 1963) – A pioneer of youth work, one of the founders of the National Organization of Girls Clubs (now Youth Clubs UK). Lily was raised a devout Jew by her family in London. Her father was a self-made millionaire and politician. She and her family were philanthropists who were drawn to helping the poor and advancing Jewish institutions. In 1893, aged just 20, Lily founded the West Central Jewish Girl's Club, with an aim to helping working class Jewish girls to develop themselves socially, intellectually and spiritually. She was also a key player in trade unions such as the National Union of Women Workers, wanting to improve the working conditions endured by girls.



Maude Stanley (May 1833 – 14 July 1915) – A youth work pioneer who produced an early comprehensive youth work text, and helped to found the London Union of Girls Club. Maude grew up in a liberal household that was very tolerant towards different religions. She never married, instead devoting all her time to helping the poor of London. She opened night schools and clubs for girls, which cost her most of her income. In 1890, she wrote *Clubs for Working Girls*, the first text about young women's clubs.

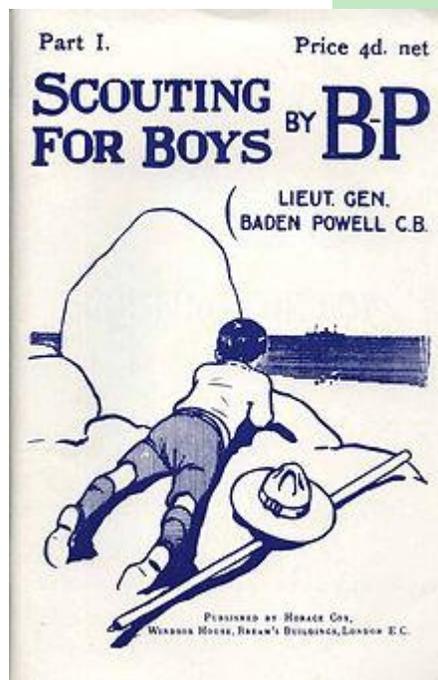


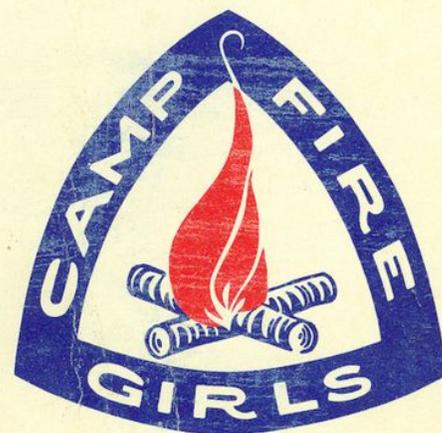
Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence (21 October 1867 – 11 March 1954) – A women's rights activist who founded a girl's club and dressmaking cooperative. Emmeline was the daughter of a businessman. In the late 1880s, she worked with Mary Neal to set up a Girl's Club at the West London Methodist Mission. In 1895, they left the club to set up their own organisation, the *Espérance Club*, which broke away from the constraints of the Mission to experiment with dance and drama. They started the *Maison Espérance* to employ girls in tailoring.

Origins of Scouting

The first nationally popular youth group, the Scout movement, was started in the UK by Robert Baden-Powell in 1907. Baden-Powell was an ex-army general, who had developed the ideas for his boy's movement based upon his military background and sense of patriotism and Christianity. Baden-Powell has been concerned by the emphasis on drill, evangelicalism and regimentation in the Boys' Brigade. While applauding certain aspects of the work, he was deeply suspicious of formal religion and "hymn-singing dissenters" and of the numbing effects on creativity of drill. Baden Powell was concerned about the wellbeing of young people. The poor physical condition of the young men attempting to join the army during the Boer War was a factor in his championing and fashioning of Scouting. However, he was equally worried about people's mental wellbeing. He began to explore different schemes and educational forms and to write up his own vision.

He wrote many military books, including "Scouting for Boys", aimed at children, and toured around the country drumming up support for his ideas of a scouting movement, which he believed would turn boys into model citizens. The ideas behind the Scout Movement then spread all over the world, and Boy Scout programmes were formed in many countries, such as the USA in 1910.





In Britain, Girls were often unofficial members of Scout groups and would join in activities with the boys. It wasn't until 1909, two years later, that official provision was set up for girls, in the form of the Girl Guides.

There is a popular myth that says that Baden-Powell realised the demand for girls' involvement in scouting after the first Scout Rally, held in Hyde Park, London in 1909. There, Baden-Powell was confronted with a number of girls who had dressed up in scout uniform, and were calling themselves "girl scouts". Unfortunately, this legend is not true, but it is a very romantic story! Whatever happened, the outcome was the same; Baden-Powell became aware of the desire of some girls to join Scouting. He wanted to accommodate the "girl scouts", but did not want to dilute the moral message he was putting across with the Boy Scouts, (which was largely reliant on a gender divide). So, Baden-Powell worked with his sister Agnes Baden-Powell to set up the Girl Guide movement.

The Girl Guide movement had equally military origins – they were named for a group of "Guides" who patrolled the North-West Frontier in India (now Pakistan). Like the Scouts, they too wore a uniform, and worked to earn badges. Most girls were satisfied with this change and chose to become Girl Guides, in the absence of being Scouts.

The principles of Girl Guiding spread quickly all over the world. Girl Scouts of the USA were begun in 1912, after their founder, Juliette Gordon Low, met with Robert Baden-Powell and was inspired by his ideas.

From the beginning, Girl Guides and Girl Scouts were separate from Boy Scouts, but not subservient. Nearly twenty years before all women got the vote in the UK, Guides could earn badges as Electricians, Cyclists, Surveyors and Telegraphists. 5,800 Girl Guides from 32 countries attended the Guides' first world gathering in 1939.

Founders

Agnes Baden-Powell

Born in 1858, Agnes Baden-Powell was Robert Baden-Powell's younger sister. She was an accomplished musician, and had a keen interest in natural history. She kept bees, birds and butterflies in her home. Agnes became the first Chief Guide, and in 1909, having been asked by Robert to create the Girl Guides, she wrote "The Handbook for the Girl Guides, or How Girls Can Help to Build Up the Empire". The Girl Guide movement was given official recognition in 1915. In 1916 the new county commissioners voted Olave Baden-Powell, Robert's wife, into the new post of Chief Guide, and Agnes was offered the honorary post of President, which she accepted. In 1917, following pressure, Agnes resigned from the presidency in favour of Princess Mary, who was also a keen supporter of the Girl Guides. Agnes continued in her role as vice-president until her death in 1945.

Olave Baden-Powell

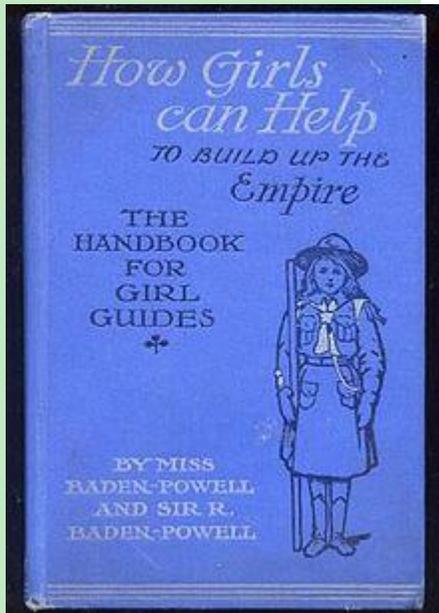
Born in 1889, Olave Baden-Powell was 32 years younger than her husband Robert. After overtaking Agnes as Chief Guide in 1916, Olave became the World Chief Guide in 1930. Olave and Robert Baden-Powell shared the same birthday, 22nd February, which is now designated as "Thinking Day" for both Guides and Scouts – a time to remember and celebrate Guides and Scouts worldwide.

Juliette Gordon Low

Born in Savannah, Georgia in 1860, Juliette Gordon Low was raised to have traditional Southern values, like duty, obedience, loyalty and respect. After marrying in 1886, she and her husband moved to Britain, where they had houses in London and Scotland, but her marriage was unhappy and he died in 1903. After her husband's death, Gordon Low travelled, learnt new skills (such as sculpting) and undertook charity work. In 1911 she met Robert Baden-Powell, and was inspired by the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides. She began to organize Girl Guide groups in Scotland and London. In 1912, Gordon Low returned to Savannah, Georgia, and used her extensive social connections to spread the word and establish Girl Guiding in the USA. In 1913, she wrote the American Girl Guides manual, "How Girls Can Help Their Country", based upon the Baden-Powells' writings. She suggested a name change to 'Girl Scouts' to recall the American pioneers, and the Girl Scouts really expanded in 1916, after the US entered the First World War.



No Boys Allowed?



As we have seen, the first youth groups were usually single-gender. From Rev. Arthur Sweatman's boys' clubs to the Girl Guides, the first groups were separated by sex. Largely this was to do with concerns of morality in a Britain that was becoming more secular; the groups were separate in order to stop boys and girls from mixing romantically with one another. And of course, it was considered that boys and girls should learn different skills and undertake different activities, to ensure boys did not lose their virility, and girls did not lose their virtuousness.

So when those first girls wanted to join the Scout movement, although wanting to accommodate them, Baden-Powell was keen that the girls would be kept separate. Popular opinion of the time was against mixed activities, and the boys and girls groups learnt different skills, with a different focus.

For example, before successfully setting up the Girl Scouts of America, there were many groups in the US that claimed to offer the closest model of Scouting to Scouting in the UK. One was Girl Guiding, run by Juliette Gordon Low, but another was the Camp Fire Girls, one of whose founders was James E. West, the Chief Executive of the Boy Scouts of America and a strong proponent of strict gender roles. West considered many of the activities that the Girl Guides participated in to be gender-inappropriate, and he was concerned that the public would question the masculinity of the Boy Scouts if they participated in similar activities.

The book "How Girls Can Help to Build Up the Empire" by Agnes Baden-Powell was a reworking of "Scouting for Boys". It was adapted for use by girls, although large sections remained unaltered and it included sections on stalking, tracking, signalling and camping. Several chapters on child care, nursing and housewifery were inserted and stories of heroic women and girls were sometimes substituted for the male ones.



Mixing It Up!

We've seen that historically, most youth groups started out as single-gender. But in the mid to late 20th century, many single-gender youth groups became co-ed, such as Scouting UK which became co-ed in 1976.

Camp Fire

Camp Fire is now a secular co-ed youth organisation in the USA. It began as a girl's multifaith group - Camp Fire Girls - but in 1975 began to allow boys to join. The group was established in 1910, and for the first few years, the Camp Fire Girls were more popular than the Girl Scouts. Camp Fire became co-ed so that girls and boys could learn to play and work alongside each other and appreciate their similarities and differences in positive ways.

Woodcraft Folk

Founded in 1924, the Woodcraft Folk (then 'Kindred of the Kibbo Kift') were co-ed from the beginning. Its founder, John Hargrave, had been one of the leading figures in the Scouting movement but broke away due to what he considered their militaristic approach. Woodcraft Folk's values include peace, cooperation and equality.

Girl Museum

We are the first and only online museum dedicated to girls.

We exhibit, educate, and raise awareness about the unique experience of being born and growing up female around the world in the past and present.

As a community of passionate and creative individuals, we acknowledge and advocate for girls as forces for collective responsibility and change in the global context, not as victims and consumers.

We are a registered 501(c)3 non-profit educational organization.

Learn more and get involved at www.GirlMuseum.org



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What is a youth group?

Today, rather than focus on “citizen training”, youth groups tend to focus on giving children an informal, holistic education. A German theory, *sozial pädagogik* (social pedagogy), was developed to describe alternatives to the dominant model of schooling, one which focuses on the broader wellbeing of young people as well as their education.

A recent study found that being part of a youth group such as the Scouts or Guides meant children had better mental health later in life. A report by the BBC said: “youth clubs can be improving when structured activities such as sport, art or drama are laid on. Youth activities that take place regularly, in a group setting, with a clear hierarchy and well defined aims help children to develop better social and emotional skills. They can also offer structure to children who lack it at home.”

Most youth groups tend to be somewhere between a youth movement and a youth club. A youth movement is an organization that has a strong ideology, and focuses its activities and educational content towards that ideology. A club or organization has the participant at its centre, and their needs are first and foremost, even though there may also be an underlying, implicit agenda that runs the club, such as the development of good citizenship, or providing a social context for its participants.

The type of informal education brought by belonging to a youth group - person-centred, experience-oriented, and interactive, works to promote learning and community, a culture of education, and content that engages.