

# True to Me

A body confidence program  
for youth groups



**Workshop guide  
for leaders**

# True to Me Leader Guide

This version of the True To Me program has been adapted for use by Plan International Canada, with support from Unilever, WAGE, Emilie LaCroix, Kristin von Ranson, and Taylor Newberry Consulting. The Program Guide and worksheets are adapted from documents which were originally designed by EPOCH in the UK.

The original True To Me program is published by Dove Canada and can be found on their website at: [dove.com/ca/en/dove-self-esteem-project/self-esteem-resources-for-youth-groups.html](https://dove.com/ca/en/dove-self-esteem-project/self-esteem-resources-for-youth-groups.html)

The original program was written by Andii Verhoeven with expert input from Associate Professor Phillippa Diedrichs and Dr. Eric Stice.

The program also acknowledges the contributions of members of Oxfordshire Youth, UK; Boys & Girls Club of Pawtucket, USA; Safe in Tees Valley, UK; Boys & Girls Club of Greater Washington, USA; and the experts advising the Dove Self-Esteem Project for helping develop this resource.

"I enjoyed learning about people's feelings. I will make a change by telling my friends that everyone has the same problems and no one is perfect."  
– Savannah, 12

"That was mad fun! When can we do it again?"  
– Anna, 13

It makes you think!  
– Enrique, 14

It helps the participants build up their self-esteem. It helps them understand other people from a different point of view. It is a great opportunity for youth to learn from each other.  
– Monique, staff

# Contents

Welcome to the Dove Self-Esteem Project's True to Me Leader Guide. This resource will help you effectively lead the program so that you and your group will get the most out of it and enjoy its activities. Please share this guide with any adults who will be helping you deliver True to Me.

## **04** Introduction

## **06** How True to Me works

## **08** True to Me at a glance

## **12** Tips for leading True to Me

## **16** Glossary

## **17** About this research





# Introduction



All around the world, many girls and young women struggle with low self-esteem and body confidence. Often they feel pressured to be beautiful and lack body confidence because they are trying to live up to narrow and unrealistic appearance ideals they see in popular culture and hear their friends and family talk about.

Global research shows that **low body confidence holds girls back from reaching their full potential**, with more than 80% of girls avoiding activities they love because they don't feel good about the way they look.<sup>1</sup> This includes not getting involved in classroom debates, not trying out for a sports club and, in some cases, not even showing up to school.

The Dove Self-Esteem Project's True to Me program was designed by experts to help leaders support their young people in becoming more body confident so that they can overcome appearance pressures and get the most out of life.

True to Me is based on world-leading research that shows that **six out of every 10 girls who participate in this type of program experience improved body confidence for three years or more.**<sup>2</sup>

Feedback from thousands of girls around the world has also shown that they are excited to talk and learn about body confidence.

We hope you have fun and make an impact by facilitating True to Me with your group.

## Adaptation for use with youth of all genders

True to Me is a fun program that works best for girls, but it can make a difference for mixed-gender groups as well. See page 11 for tips on how to make True to Me work for your group.



<sup>1</sup> Diedrichs, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Stice, Marti, Spoor, Presnell & Shaw, 2008



## Why body confidence?

When people have body confidence, they are **satisfied with how their bodies look and what they can do**. They are so busy with other activities that make them happy – like being with friends or participating in sports – that they generally don't worry about how their bodies look. Body confidence is also linked to high self-esteem. Girls who are body confident have better relationships with their friends and family, are more comfortable in different environments (like school or work), and are more willing to try new things.

Youth with low body confidence tend to worry a lot about what they look like. They spend a great deal of time, energy and money on their appearance.

Low body confidence can lead to youth shying away from friendships and relationships, holding themselves back from speaking in front of people and quitting things they love doing, such as swimming, dancing or even wearing their favourite clothes. It can discourage them from taking part in essential life activities, like school, a part-time job or even a doctor's appointment. It can stop them from standing up for themselves.

**Low body confidence can stop girls from being active in their communities and may get in the way of them pursuing their dreams.**

## A global issue

Low body confidence and appearance-related anxiety are global issues. Despite an amazing array of physical features, dress and cultures around the world, many girls and other youth feel uncertain about their bodies and lack body confidence. At the same time, technology, social media, and an increasing availability in digital editing and filtering options promote ever more impossible and unattainable appearance ideals.

True to Me empowers youth to recognize and challenge these global beauty pressures and cultivate their body confidence.

The program helps girls gain control of their lives and take advantage of the opportunities available to them. By running True to Me with your group, you are making a real difference in youths' lives.

## About the Dove Self-Esteem Project

Dove is committed to making a positive experience of beauty universally accessible to every woman. The Dove Self-Esteem Project (2004), helps the next generation develop a positive relationship with the way they look so they are not held back by appearance-related concerns and anxiety and can realise their full potential.

The Dove Self-Esteem Project is the largest provider of body confidence education in the world. Working with leading psychologists and body image experts, the Dove Self-Esteem Project provides evidence-based and academically validated educational tools and resources to parents, teachers and youth leaders who continue to spread the word.

# How True to Me works



## Challenge: Appearance ideals

Every day, youth, and particularly girls, are sent the message that if they want to be attractive and successful, they need to look a certain way – the “ideal” way. An ideal is something that’s considered perfect, but it normally exists only in the imagination. And although the specific way society defines appearance ideals varies around the world, globally girls and women, as well as boys and men, feel strong pressure from media, friends and family to try to achieve these unrealistic ideals. Dove’s global research has shown that girls are more likely to experience low body confidence if they buy into appearance ideals.



## Solution: Speaking out!

True to Me uses fun, participatory activities to boost body confidence by applying a well-known psychological principle called cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is something that happens in our brains when we act in a way that doesn’t match our beliefs. When we say and do the opposite of what we believe to be true about ourselves, our brain changes our attitudes to match our actions.

Research shows that by simply speaking out for a healthier perspective in front of others, we persuade ourselves – as well as others – to adopt a healthier perspective. For example, if a girl believes in appearance ideals (even subconsciously because of pressure from the media and through family and peer groups) but argues against them by speaking out to others about why it’s a bad idea – her own beliefs about appearance ideals will change to match what she is advocating for.



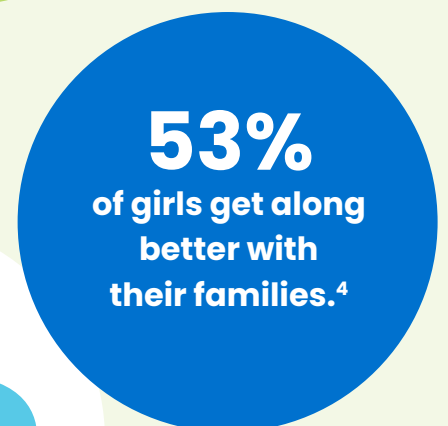
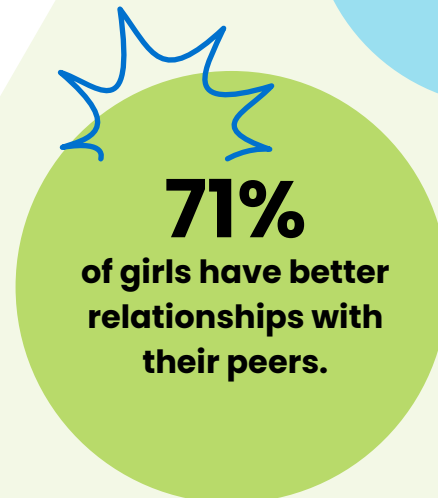
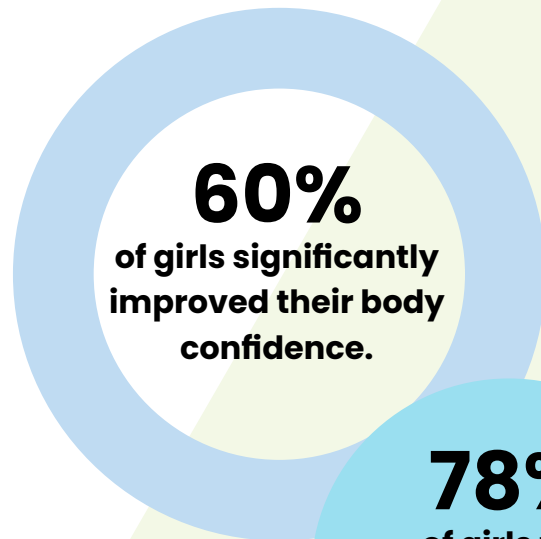


True to Me empowers girls and youth of all genders to recognize appearance ideals and take a stand against them, to create their own solutions that will help them and their friends challenge and resist these ideals. Feeling free of the pressure to conform to appearance ideals helps girls appreciate the bodies they have and value them for what they can do.

The more instances in which girls warn against appearance ideals by speaking out to others –writing down challenges to those ideals and acting to convince others they’re not worth chasing – the more they will reject it and the more their body confidence will grow. And this is a change that lasts. Studies have shown that even just arguing against the ideal alters how young girls’ brains respond to media images that promote an unrealistic appearance ideal.<sup>3</sup>

Body confidence isn’t an isolated issue. Choosing to deliver True to Me to your group can make a big difference to youths’ personal development as a whole. Instead of just learning about the issue, they will experience a change in their perspective and beliefs that will have a hugely positive impact on their lives.

True to Me is based on a world-leading body-acceptance program. Research shows that three years after participating in activities such as the ones in True to Me...



<sup>3</sup> Stice, Becker & Yokum, 2013

<sup>4</sup> Stice, Marti, Spoor, Presnell & Shaw, 2008



# True to Me at a glance

True to Me is a unique program that uses a participatory approach to help empower girls and youth of all genders by encouraging them to take the lead in activities and to challenge what society tells them is attractive and valuable. It's also fun!





## Who is it for?

True to Me works best with **girls ages 11 to 17**. Girls tend to feel more comfortable taking part in girls-only groups, but if your group covers a different age range and/or includes youth of other genders, see page 12 for some tips on how to adapt the program. It's important to know that youth of all genders have body confidence concerns that this program can help them overcome.

## How long does it take?



True to Me is made up of **five sessions of 50 minutes each, plus up to three Personal Challenges** for youth to complete between sessions.

Fifty minutes is the minimum time needed to deliver each session; try to stay on track with activities because running out of time might mean missing an essential learning step. If you have more time for each session, spend longer on the discussions and give girls more chances to reflect and speak out against appearance ideals.

## What do we need?

**Not much!** Pens and paper are needed in most sessions; if available, access to a computer and a wider range of creative materials are useful at certain points, but they are not essential. Some activities offer handouts that can be printed out in advance, but if printing facilities aren't available, the content is simple enough to be copied out onto a blackboard. If you want to adapt the activities to incorporate more technology and creative approaches, please do so.

## How do we set up the group?

True to Me works best when participants work through the activities in small groups. **A ratio of one leader to eight youth is best for the whole program**, but there are some activities where youth will work in even smaller groups. Small groups enable each participant to speak more frequently.

## How do we prepare?

**Take about two hours to familiarize yourself with this Leader Guide and the full program**, and involve all the leaders you'll be working with so they understand how True to Me works. There are some links to further research on page 17, if you want to extend your knowledge. Each activity contains all the information you need to run it, including support prompts that give an example of what you could say to trigger the key learning outcomes (see page 10).

Watch for the support prompts! Sentences in these pink boxes are there as suggestions of what to say at important stages of the activities. Think of them as verbal signposts, and feel free to put them into your own words.

Why not organize a meeting with leaders to talk through the program in advance, and then allot extra time between sessions to discuss how the program is going?



# What outcomes should we look for?

True to Me works by focusing on five experiences:

- 1 Youth **define appearance ideals** for themselves and connect these ideals to their own experiences. They recognize that ideals are narrowly drawn, often contradictory and impossible to achieve naturally.
- 2 Youth **explore the costs of chasing appearance ideals** and the negative impact they have on individuals and society as a whole. They recognize that it's not worth chasing appearance ideals.
- 3 Youth **challenge appearance ideals** by coming up with verbal and written arguments against chasing them and sharing these with their friends. They recognize how changing what they say and do can improve their body confidence.
- 4 Youth **celebrate positive characteristics about themselves**, such as their bodies and what they can do; their personalities, attitudes and character strengths; and the features they like about their appearance. They recognize the importance of reflecting on and sharing what they appreciate about themselves.
- 5 Youth **reflect on how best to respond to future pressures** they might face to achieve appearance ideals. They recognize that they have the tools and ideas they need to face these situations positively and with body confidence.

# Can we adapt the activities?

The activities in this guide have been tested and refined with thousands of girls over the past 20 years. We recommend following the program as it's written wherever possible. However, you know your group best and have the expertise to recognize what will work for them. If you do want to make adaptations, here are a few golden rules:

- Stay true to the context of each activity so the learning outcome is the same. Use the "Why This Matters" box to guide you.
- It's important that discussion does not degenerate into talk about the benefits of chasing appearance ideals, or the most effective ways to achieve them. Doing so would diminish the impact of the program.
- Don't skip opportunities to discuss and reflect. For girls and youth of all genders to build their body confidence, they need to verbally challenge appearance ideals as much as possible.
- Take a look at the adapted ideas we've included in the "Do It Differently" section.
- Reflect on your group's level of maturity and how their experiences may suggest they might respond to the activities.
- Walk youth through the same activity process to develop ideas, recognize appearance ideals and speak out against them.
- Read each activity carefully, paying close attention to the support prompts to understand the process of the activity before you make any attempt to adapt it.
- Consider the different learning needs in your group and offer youth extra support if they need it to participate fully.



## What about other ages?

Girls as young as six and seven are losing body confidence because of appearance ideals, and this is not an issue that vanishes when they become adults. However, body confidence issues can vary significantly among groups of different ages. If you're working with a wider age range, consider dividing the group, with one leader focused on each age group. You can also adapt the activities accordingly, such as including more storytelling approaches for younger girls (try using images of princesses to help them identify appearance ideals, for example). Challenge older girls to go deeper into discussions about the causes and costs of appearance ideals, and to be more ambitious with their solutions plans to share what they've learned with their families and communities.

## What about youth of other genders?

Because girls taking part in the program define appearance ideals for themselves and then use those definitions in all the activities that follow, True to Me can be adapted to any cultural or social context. The same is true for groups that include boys, non-binary youth and gender-diverse youth. To make True to Me effective, young people need to define appearance ideals that reflect the gender with which they identify.

**If you're using True to Me with a mixed-gender group, consider these points:**

- Research has shown that this program works well for single-gender groups. Young people often say they are more comfortable talking about body confidence in groups with their own gender but find it interesting to understand other genders' points of view about this topic. You will still get good results in a mixed-gender group, but it will likely be less optimal.
- Youth of different genders experience different appearance pressures and may feel more comfortable discussing their experiences with

people of the same gender identity. If possible, create appearance ideal breakout sessions divided by gender. It's important that youth take part in the breakout sessions that reflect their gender identity.

- When appropriate, run the more sensitive individual activities in single-gender groups, such as feedback to the "What I Know Now" and "Mirror Time" Personal Challenges. Always make sure that youth have the opportunity to "pass" if they do not feel comfortable sharing with the group.
- Consider how the dynamic of your own group will affect the program, factoring in the maturity of your group and how well formed they are as a team.
- Use the group guidelines to maintain a safe space, and address any challenging behaviours as they arise.
- Use gender-specific handouts whenever possible. In mixed-gender groups, use the handouts that have been designed to be gender inclusive. When using these handouts, prompt youth to focus on the scenarios and situations most relevant to their gender. You can also encourage youth to mentally adjust the scenarios in their head to make them more relevant to their gender.
- You could also consider using a different Dove Self-Esteem Project program, called **Confident Me**, with a mixed group. This is our school program, and it has been developed for youth of all genders.

The Confident Me program is available to download for free at [plancanada.ca/powerwithin](http://plancanada.ca/powerwithin).





# Tips for leading True to Me

## Who's the lead?

True to Me group leaders must find a balance between taking the lead and putting youth in the lead. They need to juggle two different roles – the program leader, who shapes the activities, and the facilitator, who steps back wherever possible – so youth can fully experience the learning steps needed to improve their body confidence.

## Put youth in the lead when they're...

- Identifying appearance ideals. By defining these ideals for themselves, youth will feel that the True to Me program makes sense and is relevant to their lives, no matter the cultural and social context group leaders work in.
- Speaking out! Each activity uses different mechanisms, but in all cases, the moments when youth generate their own ideas, definitions and challenges are the most important parts for them to steer the conversations.
- Give youth as much space as possible to speak out against appearance ideals in a way that will counteract their subconscious beliefs in them.
- Sharing real experiences around appearance ideal. Try not to give too many examples of your own experience with appearance ideals; as a role model, you may unintentionally reinforce these appearance ideals.
- Taking activities further. When youth spot opportunities to challenge appearance ideals in their homes or communities, try to support them to take the lead in making this happen. They will develop valuable leadership skills and build a stronger community as a result.





## Take the lead when...

- Planning and setting up the sessions. Make sure that you and other leaders or helpers in your group are clear on how to execute the activities and on the experience you want youth to have during each one.
- Managing how appearance ideals are talked about. One of the main ways True to Me works is when youth verbally challenge appearance ideals. Leaders should avoid weakening the program's impact by letting youth verbally agree with or endorse appearance ideals. If an activity needs a statement or scenario to be read aloud that supports an appearance ideal, it's important that the leader does this and not the youth.
- Discussions go off track. At times, youth may start discussing appearance ideals in a way that could lead them to positively reinforce them. Watch out for moments when youth may affirm these ideals, and use questions and the True to Me activities to shift their focus back to the costs of appearance ideals and how to challenge them.

## Create a safe space

- Although youth generally find True to Me a fun and empowering experience, they may encounter upsetting moments because the program touches on issues that are very personal. There is also a chance that group members may not always treat one another person's views with respect.
- Before starting Session 1, take some time to develop your group guidelines (see Five Sessions, page 4). Have these on display, and refer to them throughout the program.
- Ensure that youth are aware of any support systems your group has in place (in case they need extra help) and who they can talk to.
- Make sure other leaders in your group understand your organization's rules for well-being, such as child-protection policies, how to deal with disclosures, and duty to report.



## What about your own body confidence?

We are all exposed to appearance ideals every day, so it's not surprising that a lot of people struggle with appearance-related anxiety. Because this program is focused on tackling this issue in girls and youth of all genders, leaders need to put aside their own concerns when delivering the program. It's important that youth can see you as a positive role model for the ideas they are exploring in True to Me.

Try not to share your own opinions or examples from your own life. Youth need space to discover True to Me from their own perspective. Pay attention to the language you use when facilitating the program to avoid any statements that could reinforce appearance ideals. Reading through the sessions in advance will help you understand what this could look like. You can still support your group without sharing personal examples. Use questions and supportive responses such as "It can be hard to feel that way," or "I would guess that you're not the only one who's had that experience."

If you know other youth leaders, why not try some True to Me activities with them before starting the program with your youth group? You could also meet with your leadership team after the program ends to discuss your experiences and support one another.





# Dealing with difficult moments

Most of the time, the True to Me program runs smoothly and youth have little trouble engaging with the concepts. However, there are moments when some youth might struggle with critically thinking about body image and appearance pressures and ideals. This is not surprising, given our society's demand that girls, in particular, focus on their appearance. If someone is defending appearance ideals, try to minimize any discussion that reinforces constructed appearance ideals. This program is about creating a safe space in which girls and youth of all genders can challenge the ideal. Below are some of the challenges that may come up, along with examples of how to respond:

**"I disagree – it's good to look like the appearance ideal because beautiful people have better lives."**

1. "Is that really true? Do celebrities have perfect lives? Can you think of examples from the news when people who are perceived to have features that match appearance ideals still struggle with their lives?"
2. "Try to keep an open mind and let's see how you feel after the next activity. This is an opportunity to consider different perspectives. Give it a try and if it doesn't work for you, that's fine."
3. "What does the rest of the group think? Do you believe coming close to the appearance ideal equals having a better life?"

**"I don't like this. It feels like you're criticizing women and girls who are thin."**

1. "There's nothing wrong with any one appearance. People of every shape or size should be able to feel confident and happy with themselves. What we're criticizing is the idea that there's just one ideal way to look and we should all sacrifice our health, well-being, relationships, success and money to achieve it."
2. "Actually, we want to celebrate the beauty in diversity and recognize that girls are so much more than simply the way they look."

**"I can't think of anything I like about my body."**

1. "We're so used to putting ourselves down that it can be really hard to start seeing things differently. What small things could you start with?"
2. "Start by thinking about things you like about what's inside you or what your body enables you to do."
3. "Think about others you care about, like your mom, siblings or friends. What do you like about them? Isn't it true that things you like most about them have nothing to do with the way they look?"
4. "Most people don't feel 100% confident 100% of the time—that's normal! When we accept our bodies as they are, we can focus on other more important parts of our selves and our lives."

**"Are you saying it's not good to look after our bodies?"**

1. "No. Promoting body confidence is about accepting and taking good care of your body."
2. "When you have body confidence, you are more likely to respect and look after your body, including having a balanced relationship with food."
3. "It is not a bad thing to want to change the way you look, but it is important to make sure that these changes are something you want, not things you feel forced to make to fit in."



# Glossary

## Appearance ideals

True to Me talks a lot about appearance ideals, which can change based on a person's culture and background. This is the narrow definition of a society's belief about what is attractive. It is so specific that it's impossible to achieve naturally – even models and celebrities have to be digitally altered to match ideals. Appearance ideals are spread through media and by people talking positively about certain appearance-related features.

## Body confidence

A person with body confidence is satisfied with the way their body looks and what it can do. Having high body confidence is one factor that can increase self-esteem.

## Cognitive dissonance

This is a psychological process that is triggered when people act in a way that doesn't match their beliefs. When they say and do things that contradict their own attitudes, this creates an uncomfortable tension in their brain, so it changes their attitudes to match their actions and relieve the discomfort.

## Self-esteem

A feeling of self-respect. People with high self-esteem believe in themselves and in their worth as a person. Having high self-esteem helps people reach their full potential; these people are not held back by a lack of belief in themselves or their abilities.

## Support prompt

This is a support feature of the Program Guide, in which text is shown within these pink boxes. It helps leaders deliver key messages of the activities. Leaders should read these prompts, then put them in their own words once they understand the message, to make them relevant to their group.

Learn more about the ideas explored in True to Me and discover other body confidence resources by visiting [plancanada.ca/powerwithin](http://plancanada.ca/powerwithin).

# About this research

The strategies used in True to Me have been scientifically developed and evaluated over 16 years. Here is a sample of some of this research:

Becker C.B., Smith L.M. and Ciao A.C. (2006). **“Peer Facilitated Eating Disorder Prevention: A Randomized Effectiveness Trial of Cognitive Dissonance and Media Advocacy,”** *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 53, no. 4, 550–55.

Diedrichs, P. (2017). The 2017 Dove Global Girls Beauty and Confidence Report.

Halliwell E. and Diedrichs P.C. (2014). **“Testing Dissonance Body Image Intervention Among Young Girls,”** *Health Psychology* 33, 201–04.

Rohde P., Auslander, B.A., Shaw H., Raineri K.M., Gau J.M. and Stice E. (2014). **“Dissonance-Based Prevention of Eating Disorder Risk Factors in Middle School Girls: Results From Two Pilot Trials,”** *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 47, 483–94.

Stice E., Becker C.B., Yokum S. (2013). **“Eating Disorder Prevention: Current Evidence-Base and Future Directions,”** *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 46, 478–85.

Stice E., Marti C.N., Spoor S., Presnell K. and Shaw H. (2008). **“Dissonance and Healthy Weight Eating Disorder Prevention Programs: Long-Term Effects From a Randomized Efficacy Trial,”** *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 76, 329–40.

Stice E., Rohde P., Shaw H., and Gau J. (2011). **“An Effectiveness Trial of a Selected Dissonance-Based Eating Disorder Prevention Program for Female High School Students: Long-Term Effects,”** *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 79, 500–08.

Stice E., Shaw H., Becker C.B. and Rohde P. (2008). **“Dissonance-Based Interventions for the Prevention of Eating Disorders: Using Persuasion Principles to Promote Health,”** *Prevention Science* 9, 114–28.



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This Dove Self-Esteem Activity Guide has been adapted, with permission, from an original resource jointly developed by the World Association of Girl Guides & Girl Scouts and the Dove Self-Esteem Project. Further input has come from the DSEP Advisory Board.

This resource would not be possible without the help and energy of a large team, including Andii Verhoeven; Dr. Philippa Diedrichs; Barbara Kraus; Oxfordshire Youth, UK; Safe in Tees Valley, UK; the Boys & Girls Clubs of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, and Greater Washington, USA; Martin Staniforth and all the girls and their youth leaders who helped test the original activities in this resource.





Learn more and get involved at [plancanada.ca](https://plancanada.ca)



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