

### The Problem

Girls face unique challenges as they grow up, including significant mental health challenges and record high levels of depression and anxiety.<sup>1</sup> Studies find that poor body image starts at a young age – the majority of girls ages 6-8 said their ideal body is thinner than their current body.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, late elementary school age to middle school is a time when society begins to tell girls “they can’t.”



Girls participating in Heart & Sole join in the end of season 5 K.

### The Solution

Girls on the Run exists to inspire girls of all abilities to recognize and embrace their inner strength, make connections with others, and increase their physical activity. Girls on the Run focuses on girls in grades 3-5 and is offered in numerous counties in Wisconsin.

Heart & Sole continues the foundation of Girls on the Run for middle school aged girls, grades 6-8. It focuses on the whole person – body, brain, heart, spirit, and social connection and offers an inclusive place of belonging. The research-based curriculum motivates participants to:

- Learn more about themselves.
- Become independent and critical thinkers.
- Develop skills to write their own stories.
- Find inner strength through physical activity.

At the end of each season the girls complete a 5K.

Both Girls on the Run and Heart & Sole are after-school programs. The multi-grade aspect of the program allows girls to connect with participants who are different ages. The focus is mastering skills in a non-competitive environment verses a performance climate.

The program offers 16 lessons spread over 9 weeks in the fall and spring, and each lesson focuses on a different theme (for example, goal setting, emotional management, empathy, conflict, friendships, asking for and giving help). A typical Heart & Sole session introduces the lesson topic, has the girls do a check-in, then an activity, journal, and finishes with physical activity. Girls are congratulated on their work and challenged to take home and practice what they learned.

### Results

The girl-focused positive program is working. Recent findings from a Wisconsin Heart & Sole survey suggest significant improvements in physical activity and confidence levels among the participants. Specifically:

- 92% of participants said they enjoy physical activity.
- The percentage of caregivers describing their children as physically active (at least 60 minutes per day) increased from 69% before participating in Heart & Sole to 91% after.
- 9 in 10 participants felt physically ready for the end-of-season 5K, and 9 in 10 coaches agreed.
- 92% of girls said because of participating in Heart & Sole they felt more confident.
- The percentage of caregivers describing their children as confident increased from 82% before participating in Heart & Sole to 95% after, and 96% of coaches agreed.
- The vast majority of caregivers reported that Heart & Sole helped their child gain skills to handle stress.

A parent whose daughter participated in Heart & Sole said: “With my daughter’s disability, performance-based competitive sports are more difficult, but your program is a perfect fit. Socialization, coaching, and physical activity wrapped into one!”

<sup>1</sup> Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health [Improving Girls Mental Health Fact Sheet](#)

<sup>2</sup> Common Sense Media. [Children, Teens, Media and Body Image](#)