



Real As Me

A Curriculum Guide for Empowering Young Women

Jillian Luft, M.Ed. and Elizabeth Johnson, M.Ed.



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to Build Social and Emotional Learning & Literacy Skills

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Middle School
and High School

GIRLS'
EMPOWERMENT



Real As Me

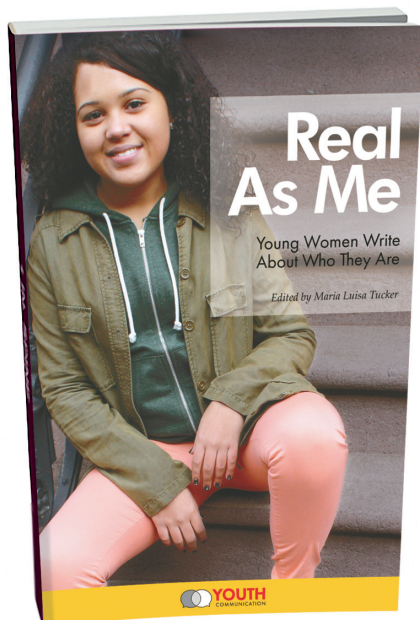
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Using **Real Stories by Real Teens**

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**True
stories by
teens**



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• Our Friends and Our Families

“ I fell in love with the rich chocolate hue of my skin. The idea of embracing all that I was persecuted for electrified me. ”

Imani Dombia, from her story “Free From Tired Old Beauty Standards”



TO ORDER, CONTACT

Elena Autin-Hefner: eautin-hefner@youthcomm.org

Real As Me

A Curriculum Guide for Empowering Young Women

Authors

Jillian Luft, M.Ed. and Elizabeth Johnson, M.Ed.

Editor

Maria Luisa Tucker

Executive Editor

Keith Hefner

Layout, Design, and Cover Photo

Efrain Reyes, Jr.

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Session 3

My Freedom to Mix It Up

SEL FOCUS: SELF-AWARENESS/SOCIAL AWARENESS

Story: “Why Can’t We All Be Ourselves?” by Selena Garcia

Story Summary: Selena explores the gender part of her identity by noticing how other people react to her and how that makes her feel. At first, she enjoys dressing like a boy because of how safe and powerful she feels. When she realizes she also likes dressing like a girly girl, she learns that she can mix it up and still remain true to herself.

Learning Objectives

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Reflecting on their sense of self and identity
- Being able to take the perspective of others from diverse backgrounds
- Believing that their actions can make a difference in their own lives
- Increasing their ability to challenge limiting gender expectations and stereotypes

Youth will increase their literacy by:

- Making meaning of text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Using active reading strategies to support comprehension
- Using their background knowledge to connect to the text
- Writing to express personal connections and insights

Materials

- Journals or notebook paper, pencils
- Chart paper, markers
- Drawing paper, colored pencils
- Timer (optional)

Preparation

- Read the story ahead of time. Reflect on your personal response and how the group may respond.
- Read the session plan and prepare the agenda. Plan for the Explore the Ideas Activity.
- Write and post the Journal Jot prompts (**in bold**) on chart paper.
- For the Explore the Ideas Activity, write and post the Draw It guidelines (**in bold**) on the chart paper.

GETTING STARTED (2 minutes)

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: My Freedom to Mix It Up

- Review group agreements
 - Opening Activity: Journal Jot & Pair Share
 - Read and Discuss: “Why Can’t We All Be Ourselves?” by Selena Garcia
- OPTIONAL ✓
- Explore the Ideas Activity: Draw It
 - Closing Circle

OPENING ACTIVITY — JOURNAL JOT AND PAIR SHARE (8 minutes)

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, explain to the group that they will be doing a Journal Jot. Remind the group that this is a chance to express their thoughts and feelings without worrying about spelling and grammar. Let the group know that the expectation is that everyone writes without stopping for the full time.
2. Read the prompts aloud from the chart paper you’ve prepared:
 - “When I want to feel powerful, I...because...”
 - “When I want to feel attractive, I...because...”
3. Pass out journals or notebook paper and pencils.
4. Give group members three minutes to respond to both prompts. (They can have the option of writing lists and/or drawing with labels. This supports diverse learners.)
5. When three minutes are up, tell group members to finish their last thought and put their pencils down.
6. Explain to the group that they are now going to do a Pair Share. Ask the group members to turn to the person next to them and take turns sharing parts of their responses that they feel comfortable sharing.

7. Each member of the pair should take about a minute to share. Cue partners to switch roles after the first minute. Use a timer or wait until the hum of conversation dies down before closing the activity.
8. Thank group members for sharing.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY (30 minutes)

By practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing as a group, group members build comprehension and make meaning of the story.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that they are going to read a story by a young woman who is trying to figure out a style and “way of being” that works for her.
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it’s their turn.



Tell the group to turn to p. 21 in their anthologies.
(See the leader’s version in this guide for stories with discussion questions included.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As the group leader, pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text (**in bold**). Ask the group this question and facilitate a brief discussion before returning to the text.
4. **After reading and discussing the story:** Continue to either the Explore the Ideas Activity or Closing Circle, based on your choice as the leader.



Why Can't We All Be Ourselves?

By Selena Garcia

I never wanted to be a boy; I just wanted to be able to do what they did. Being a boy seemed more fun. Boys didn't care about the way they looked, and neither did I. No cherry ChapStick and pink clothes for me: I was snapbacks and basketballs, climbing trees and having adventures. My brother and I are only one year apart, and we would ride bikes, play basketball, and play with his Hot Wheels together.

I used to think that girls weren't fun because they didn't like to get their hands dirty. I remember when four guys and I needed one more player for a 3-on-3 basketball game. I asked three girls I thought of as "the pretty princesses" if one of them would play. One said, "I don't want to get sweaty" and the rest agreed with her. The guys and I had to play 3 on 2.

I went to school with the three pretty princesses from 5th grade through 8th grade. They said mean things about my lack of nice clothes and shoes. I tried to ignore them because it didn't matter to me what I wore. I cared about the person I was. Too bad they never got to know me.

READ-ALOUD QUESTION

["Based on what we've read so far, how would you describe the kind of person Selena is?"]

One day in 5th grade, my English teacher told us to write a journal entry about who our role model was and why. I wrote about my friend Tyler Johnson, who I called my older brother from another mother. He was really good at basketball and always told me that I could do whatever my heart desired. I wrote in my notebook that Tyler told me to shoot for my dreams and helped me become a better basketball player. I wanted to be like him when I grew up—nice, strong, passionate, and shooting for greatness.

Then it was time to share out the role model assignment. The other girls had picked famous singers or their mothers and aunts who were nice and pretty. When I said I picked Tyler, the girls laughed and said a girl cannot want to be like a guy.

Of course, I would rather listen to Tyler than to them—he told me I could be whatever I wanted to be!

It seemed like girls were more dramatic, rude, and sensitive. They cried more. Their lives seemed to revolve around being pretty and impressing boys.

Boys also tried to impress girls, but it was not their whole focus. Boys seemed strong, confident, and independent. That looked good to me, because I'd been let down by the adults in my life. Depending on people made no sense.

For the first 10 years of my life, my adoptive parents physically and verbally abused both me and my brother. I felt safer, tougher, and more powerful as a tomboy. I wanted to protect my brother and I wanted to protect myself. Girls seemed like easier prey because they were soft and showed their feelings in front of others. I never thought anyone would care or try to understand my feelings, so I hid everything, like a guy would.

When I was 13, I lived for a couple months with a foster mother who was feminine and thought all girls should be girly.

One day, we were getting ready for a wedding where many of my guy friends would be. I was excited to go. I got dressed in white shorts and a white shirt with some white sneakers and black snapback hat on backwards.

When I got downstairs, she looked at me and shook her head. "You can't go to a wedding like that."

I told her I didn't own anything girly. She said, smiling, "It's OK. I bought you something."

Out of a bag that said "Pretty Girls" she pulled a pink jumpsuit.

"I'm not wearing that."

"If you want to go, you will."

I really wanted to go. I went up to my room and put it on, but I kept on my snapback. She said, "You know I'm not gonna let you wear that hat." Then she

told me to sit down and relax.

She combed my hair and used a curling iron for what felt like hours and put a white flowered headband in my hair. When she was done, I looked in the mirror and thought, "Is this what it feels like to be pretty?"

I felt weird. I liked how I looked, but I thought about the "pretty princesses" and wondered, is this how they feel? Am I going to turn into one of them?

**READ-ALoud
QUESTION**

["Selena says she feels weird about what she sees in the mirror. What else do you think she's feeling when she looks in the mirror?"]

Then I thought "Never. I'm a tomboy and this is just a one-time thing."

When we got to the wedding, I said under my breath, "I am going to get teased by the bros." I went into the house and the guys stared at me. One said, "Wow, you look very pretty." The rest of them started blushing. I was confused.

However, I liked it. I liked the attention. They usually gave me a high five or a pound, but now they hugged me and called me pretty. It made me feel special.

When we got home, my foster mother asked, "Now was that so hard?"

"No, it actually felt better than I thought it would."

"So tomorrow, we're going to a block party...." She paused, suggesting without words that I should wear the pink jumpsuit again.

I looked at her with a straight face. "No, I am going to wear my all-white outfit."

After that day, I still mostly dressed sporty, but I switched it up occasionally. Sometimes, when my foster mother would go to the GAP or Old Navy to get clothes for me, I would ask her to get something from the girls' department too. She always smiled when I requested that.

Sometimes, I'd go to the basketball court in cute shorts and a pink or purple top. The boys paid more attention to me that way. When I felt like getting attention,

I would wear skirts or dresses. However, when I wanted to play around and have fun, I would put on my basketball shorts and my snapback. I felt more like myself that way.

When I was 13, I had my first boyfriend, Jaydin. He was the nicest person I had ever met. He stuck up for me in school when I was bullied and he liked me for me. He liked my boyish style, but when he saw me in a dress, at the court, he reacted like the other guys. He froze and looked at me with confusion. He came up and stuttered, "You look really pretty." He had trouble concentrating on the basketball game.

After that, I stepped up my girly game. When I knew he was going to be at the park I would dress pretty for him.

When the pretty princesses first saw me in girl clothes, they said I was still ugly and that I was trying too hard. Nevertheless, after a while they began to compliment me and say that I looked pretty. Compliments felt better than insults, so I said thanks, and then went back to playing ball. I still didn't trust them or want to be one of them.

When I was a tomboy, I got more respect from the guys. After a game, they would give me a pound and say "good game." When I dressed like a girly girl, those same guys treated me as if I was special. That made me giggle and smile more, which felt a little weird, but I liked the attention.

I liked knowing I was in control of either being treated pretty or like a bro. I wanted to be pretty but with the option to prove myself as more than that.

["Let's pause in our reading of Selena's story and share our thinking in pairs. What do you think she's discovering about being in control?" Pause. "What ways can she be in control? Turn and talk with the person next to you."]

READ-ALoud
QUESTION

In the 6th grade, I went to tryouts for the boys' basketball team in some cute, baby blue basketball shorts and a crop top with white Nikes. When I walked in, some boys said, "Cheerleading tryouts are in the other gym." I ignored them.

The coach called me over and asked if I was ready.

“Always,” I replied.

He told me to walk across the court bouncing the ball left to right between my legs. I said, “Light work.” I grabbed the basketball and started bouncing it from left to right and switching legs quick.

“Good,” said the coach, and next told me to do three lay-ups and then hit a three pointer.

“Light work.” I made two lay-ups and missed the third one, but grabbed the ball and threw it back up. I ran to the 3-point line and made a jump shot with no backboard. All net.

The coach told one of the guys to play defense. The coach passed me the ball and told me to make a shot. I faked left, dribbled under my legs, then sprinted to the hoop and made a lay-up.

The guys laughed at him and said, “You gonna let that happen?” Then the coach put another kid on defense against me. I scored on him too. I made the team. My teammates looked at me as a bro, but off the court, they treated me like a girl.

I began to merge my two looks into something I call “tomgirl.” I would wear skinny jeans, some cute retro Jordans, a tank top, and a snapback. In outfits like that I get both respect and attention from the boys. Girls seem to like my tomgirl look, if it's on the girly end of the spectrum.

I used to be mad at the pretty princesses for the way they acted. Now I think it's because of how they were raised and everything around them—from TV shows to videos to books to stores, and especially advertisements. There are so many messages for girls to be feminine that it is more of a requirement than a choice.

I see all the magazine covers say “Look like this!” or “Tips on how to have a beautiful body,” and I sometimes feel the pressure to measure up. Having a big butt and nice curves is considered beautiful, and I do not have a Kim Kardashian or J. Lo body. The media also tells us, especially boys, that showing

your feelings is annoying and soft.

However, I know I should not believe those messages, and I am happy with my freedom to mix it up like a tomgirl. I wear baggy pants, run around, and get sweaty, but I am also sensitive. When things get tough I cry; I let it out because bottling feelings up only makes it worse. I'm lucky that I'm part of a good family now, and it feels safe to show my emotions.

["What do you think Selena is learning about expressing her feelings? Pause and wait for responses. Then ask: "How does it challenge the thinking she had at the beginning of the story?"]

READ-ALoud
QUESTION

Girls are expected to do a lot, and so are boys. Girls are expected to be weak and kind, successful, but not too successful, because then they will make men look bad. Guys are expected to be dominant and show no emotion.

But can't I be kind and strong? Why do girls have to "act like a lady?" Why are guys who show their feelings called "gay" or "feminine"?

Neither male nor female gender boxes define me. I was always in between. I do not worry about being a tomgirl as an adult.

["Turn to a partner and share your thinking in pairs: Selena feels like she is always 'in between.' Are there ways that you feel your style, personality, or interests are 'in between'? Or not? Why?"]

READ-ALoud
QUESTION

Selena was 16 and in high school when she wrote this story.

 OPTIONAL
EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — DRAW IT

(20 minutes)

During this optional post-reading activity group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors. This activity can be used during the session or to extend the learning afterwards.

1. Introduce the next activity by saying to the group: “Now that we’ve read the story, we are going to do a drawing activity that explores who we feel we’re expected to be versus who we choose to be.”
2. Ask the group to listen to this quote from the story:
 - *“I used to be mad at the pretty princesses for the way they acted. Now I think it’s because of how they were raised and everything around them—from TV shows to videos to books to stores, and especially advertisements. There are so many messages for girls to be feminine that it is more of a requirement than a choice.”*
3. Then explain to the group:
 - “We all pick and choose who we want to be. Sometimes we might look or behave in ways reflected by TV or social media. Other times we might act in ways that aren’t considered feminine by society. We never have to be just one thing.”
4. Read the Draw It guidelines aloud from the chart paper you’ve prepared:
 - **Draw a line down the middle of your paper.**
 - **Label one side “Requirement” and the other side “Choice.”**
 - **On the “Requirement” side, quickly sketch a self-portrait that shows what you would look like if you followed all the messages that TV, books, and advertisements send about what a girl should be.**
 - **On the “Choice” side, quickly sketch a self-portrait that shows you as who you choose to be. Include how you dress, act, etc., and what you do in your free time.**
 - **When doing self-portraits, draw your whole body. Feel free to include words, color, and symbols.**

5. Pass out drawing paper and colored pencils.
6. Give group members about 10 minutes to create their portraits. Move around the room offering encouragement and support. As you support, remind the group that they can include details in the “Choose” section that they’ve drawn in the “Requirement” section of their drawings. They can mix it up however they wish.
7. Time permitting, group members can do a Gallery Walk to share their drawings. Have them lay their drawings out on a table or other flat surface. The group can get up, walk around, and take a closer look at one another’s drawings.
8. Then, invite group members to reflect on what stood out to them in the activity and share with the group.

CLOSING CIRCLE (10 minutes)

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

1. “What stood out to you in Selena’s story, ‘Why Can’t We All Be Ourselves?’, and our activities today?”
2. Finish this sentence: “In my own life, I can mix it up by...”

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- Selena’s story is about how she is treated differently depending on what she wears. What can you do to ensure you are giving each group member meaningful positive feedback, without reinforcing stereotypes?
- In the beginning of the story, Selena sets up two distinct types of girls: “girly-girls” and “tomboys”—eventually settling on “tomgirl” as the way she describes herself. Did you fit into any of these categories as a young person? How might your experience affect the way you facilitate dialogue during this lesson?