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All girls are at risk. Not just some of them, not just the ones that come from certain homes, or certain populations, not just those on the fringe or with the wrong friends. All of our girls live in a world with different norms and risks than the world in which we grew up.

Risk factors as common as health, economic hardship, internet safety, divorce, and alcohol are everywhere, impacting all of our girls. Every girl today faces thousands of images each day that can make her question her own appearance and worth. Most every girl today faces a lifestyle with more fast food and fewer home-cooked, sit down dinners. They live in a culture where the norm is to hang out with friends from afar - via cell phones and the internet - rather than spending quality time together, sharing and experiencing.

Girls today are more familiar with divorce, terrorism, emotional or physical aggression by a peer, and sexual harassment by an adult (online) than they were just a decade or two ago. And, for the first time in our nation's history, girls born today are not expected to live as long as their parents due to current habits regarding nutrition and physical activity.

So how do we help? How can we prepare girls to lead healthier, safer lives today and for the rest of their lives? We give them as much knowledge and as many skills and first-hand experiences as possible, and then critical thinking tools to help them transfer their knowledge and skills to new challenges and situations that arise.

This is Girl Scouting. With the newest research-based and outcomes-driven program model around, the Girl Scout Leadership Experience gives girls a myriad of tools, tricks, scenarios and the ever-important network of support. The new three-tiered approach whereby girls Discover themselves, Connect with others and then Take Action in the world provides a foundation of confidence, self-reliance, empowerment, and answers their question of 'why' they need to be the leaders of their own lives.

All girls are at risk. And while risk isn't all bad, the kinds listed above wreak havoc on our youth. Girl Scouts experience risk, too, but in doing so intentionally, they discover that if you don't risk anything, you often risk even more. Walt Disney understood this. "I dream, I test my dreams against my beliefs, I dare to take risks, and I execute my vision to make my dreams come true."

Ann Saris is VP of Brand and Marketing for Girl Scouts of the Northwestern Great Lakes, Inc., serving 24,000 girls and 6,600 volunteers in 58 counties across Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

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