

Gisela Konopka

Youth Development Pioneer



Gisela Konopka was a world-renowned researcher, teacher, and advocate known as a moving force behind innovative methods of practice and research in social work and youth services. She was internationally known for her work on group social work and landmark work on adolescent development and youth issues. Her research areas included psychiatry, group work, social work, social welfare, delinquency, adolescence, and institutional care—fields in which she developed and chaired many programs.

A prolific writer, Konopka published more than three hundred scholarly articles and eleven books. Her research and book "The Adolescent Girl in Conflict," published in 1966, was one of the first in-depth examinations of the lives of troubled teenage girls.¹ It broke new ground in offering girls a chance to present their own perspectives. Later, she was often referred to as the "grandmother" of healthy youth development based on the "[Fundamental Requirements for Healthy Development of Adolescent Youth](#)" included in her 1973 position paper for the federal Department of Health, Education and Welfare (Konopka, 1973).

In 1998, the University of Minnesota borrowed Konopka's name, inspired by her pioneering work with young people, and established the Konopka Institute for Best Practices in Adolescent Health, a collaborative effort of the Schools of Medicine, Nursing, and Public Health dedicated to bringing the insights of academic research to those who work with or shape policies that affect young people. The Konopka Institute was built on a foundation of research that articulates what has been demonstrated to be effective in healthy youth development. Strategies based on the interrelatedness of youth health problems, a commitment to programs that work ("best practices") or show promise of doing so ("best bets"), and an understanding that adolescents (and what they need for healthy development) must be viewed in the context of their families, neighborhoods and communities. For nearly two decades, the Konopka Institute was home to programs and training opportunities for public health built on a foundation of research that articulates what has been demonstrated to be effective in healthy youth development.

The [State Adolescent Health Resource Center \(SAHRC\)](#) was established in 2000 with HRSA/MCHB funding as a technical assistance and training center focused on supporting public health professionals to improve the health and well-being of adolescents & young adults. SAHRC's original home was within the University's Konopka Institute for Best Practices in Adolescent Health. As the sole legacy project of the Konopka Institute, and with Gisela's research and theories as our foundation, SAHRC is grounded in creating public health approaches to adolescent and young adult health with a positive youth development lens.

"Fear is the base of hate ...Let us be gentle with our young ones instead of constantly criticizing and chiding them ...Let us give our young people joy and beauty and stimulation instead of dreary places to grow up in and no experience of the beauty of the arts, poetry, music dance."

Gisela Konopka, comments when receiving the Martin Luther King Humanitarian Award (1992, Minneapolis)

"Adolescence is often seen as a time of aberration, a mental illness. To me, it is a wonderful time, one of the most exciting periods of life. You are coming out of childhood, when you are dependent. You can start asking questions. You begin to care about what happens in the world."
Gisela Konopka, Pictures of Health (2000)



¹ The [Adolescent Girl in Conflict Project](#) and Project Girl was a national research project, directed by Gisela Konopka, which interviewed nearly 1,000 adolescent girls in the U.S. and Puerto Rico. Related archives at the University of Minnesota Library, Gisela Konopka Papers Collection.

About Gisela Peiper Konopka

Born in 1910 in Berlin, Germany to Mendel and Bronia (Butterman) Peiper, who had left Poland to escape anti-Jewish pogroms. (Lewin, 2009). Gisela grew up during the German youth movement, which started around the turn of the 20th century as a protest against a parent generation which seemed to be too comfortable and bourgeoisie to the younger generation. Youth came together to discover a sense of community through hiking, their own kind of festivals, and many discussions. By selecting their own leaders, and strengthening their own sense of responsibility, a deep sense of bonding, order and purpose was brought to their lives. In adolescence, Gisela joined the youth movement which profoundly affected her life and was an important foundation for her later work. Here she experienced first hand both the positive influences of group dynamics (in her socialist youth group) as well as the negative influences of group dynamics (as a result of the Nazi movement) while a young woman.” Here she also met Paul Konopka, a non-Jewish German, who became the love of her life despite years of separation and times when one did not know if the other was still alive.

Gisela Konopka was just finishing graduate work in philosophy, history, and education when Hitler came to power and found that, despite being an honors student, Gisela was unable to teach because she was Jewish. She and Paul joined the resistance movement leading to life and death involvement in underground work. Both were imprisoned at various times. In 1936, Gisela was arrested and spent some time in the concentration camp Fuhlsbüttel. After her release in 1937, she fled to Vienna, Austria, where she worked with children and studied nursery school and Kindergarten work. Paul, hunted by the Nazis, escaped in 1936 and made his way to France. In 1938, Nazi Germany annexed Austria and Gisela fled again, this time to Marseille, France, where she eventually connected again with Paul where they lived in hiding. In the spring of 1941, they emigrated to the U.S., Gisela three months earlier than Paul. They married three days after his arrival in New York. In 1944, Gisela became a naturalized citizen.

Starting in the 1950s, she repeatedly visited Germany to give lectures and to introduce group work to German social workers, a contribution for which she was honored by the Federal Republic of Germany with its highest merit award in 1979. Gisela traveled extensively for her work, including Fulbright and guest lectureships in Germany, Holland, Turkey, Greece, Israel, Iran, Hong Kong, Korea, India, the Phillipines, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Brazil and Australia, as well as taking her all over Canada and the United States. She served as consultant for state and federal departments for issues such as youth, delinquency, child welfare, and mental health, including setting up work training programs for female prisoners for a U.S. Department of Labor and Bureau of Prisons joint project. Her main research interests focused on institutional settings and the process of group work, philosophy and history of social work, history of social welfare, history of correctional reforms, adolescence (especially girls), and delinquency, specifically with regard to institutions and delinquency of girls.

“There’s a remarkable symmetry to Gisela Konopka’s life. The rebellious teenager who asked difficult questions has become a rebellious old woman who still asks difficult questions.” ~ Pictures of Health, 2000

Through Gisela’s experience with the youth resistance movement and in the concentration camp, and her subsequent escapes, she realized the importance of human connection, and the positive (and negative) impacts of human connection on the healthy development of young people.

After positions in child guidance and social work, Dr. Konopka was appointed Assistant Professor of Social Work at the University of Minnesota in 1947. She was promoted through the academic ranks to become a full Professor in 1956. Her career at the University of Minnesota included positions as Coordinator for the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs and Special Assistant to the Vice President for Student Affairs.

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In 1970, Dr. Konopka was named Director of the University of Minnesota's newly created Center for Youth Development and Research, which sought "to bring together knowledge and skills from various disciplines, professions, and experiences to better understand and work with youth." She appointed director of the University of Minnesota Center for Youth Development and Research in 1970, and continued in her role as Director of the Center and as Professor of Social Work until her retirement from the University in 1978, when she was named Professor Emeritus and Director emeritus. While at the University of Minnesota, Gisela's groundbreaking research on "adolescent girls in conflict" provided the first ever in-depth examination of the lives of troubled teenage girls from their own perspectives. After her retirement in 1978 the annual event sponsored by the Gisela Konopka Lectureship honored her for being "**the moving force behind numerous innovative methods in social work and youth service.**" Gisela Konopka died December 9, 2003, in Minneapolis, Minnesota at the age of 93.

If I have done
something in my life ...
I would like to leave
as a legacy people who can
work with the young
with strength, knowledge,
imagination and deep caring.

Gisela Konopka



A Legacy of Caring Adults

Gisela Konopka received many degrees and honors, nationally and internationally. However, one of the one of the most memorable things about Gisela was her deep and genuine desire to connect with youth. Gisela was not a sit by the sidelines and observe researcher, she was a real, caring adult who could often be seen sitting among the youth she worked with, having real conversations as demonstrated by this reflection from a former resident of the Home School for girls in Sauk Centre Minnesota²: "I met her as a teenager at the Home School for Girls in Sauk Centre Minnesota. I remember her sitting with us at the girls tables and eating from the dishes we had as opposed to staff tables with their china and silver. She talked to us and was so kind and was genuinely interested in the girls she met and talked with. She left a lasting impression on me as I'm now 71." (Lewin, 2011).

"People don't look at adolescents like they are people, they always think it is a strange breed. To me it's not a strange breed, I can talk with them like I talk with you, and you...." From a Conversation with Gisela Konopka, 2014

²Established in 1907 by act of legislature as the State Industrial School for Girls, to provide care, training, and education of girls who had been declared delinquent and committed by the courts. Retrieved February 8, 2021 from <https://libguides.mnhs.org/prison/saukcentre>.

Gisela Konopka Publications, Reflections and Collections

Konopka, G. (1973) Requirements for Healthy Development of Adolescent Youth. *Adolescence* 8(31), 2-25.
[Full text available](#) via the Journal of Child and Youth Care Work.

[A Conversation with Gisela Konopka \(YouTube, 2014\)](#), Extension Center for Youth Development Training and Events, University of Minnesota.

In this 1994 video, School of Social Work Professor Emerita Gisela Konopka, a pioneer in the study of adolescent behavior and work with troubled adolescents is interviewed by professors Joyce Walker and Byron Schneider before an audience of students in youth development leadership in the classroom and also at University of Minnesota Extension sites throughout the state. Retrieved 2/9/2021 from

University of Minnesota Library, Gisela Konopka Papers, 1929-1989: The collection contains both the personal and professional papers of Gisela Konopka. There are extensive speech and correspondence files, as well as writings, teaching materials, biographical materials, and files covering her project on adolescent girls in conflict. Retrieved 2/9/2021 from <https://archives.lib.umn.edu/repositories/14/resources/1734>

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Biographies and Reflections in the Field

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Pictures of Health, Spring/Summer 2000, p.14, *Young at heart*, feature on Gisela Konopka in honor of her 90th birthday, in University of Minnesota, Academic Health Centers. Retrieved 2/9/2021 from https://www.ahc.umn.edu/img/assets/7617/2000_02Spring.pdf

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