



The Girl Connection

FOR THOSE WHO SERVE ADOLESCENT FEMALES INVOLVED WITH OR AT RISK FOR INVOLVEMENT WITH THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Since 1995, the State of Iowa has committed itself to the improvement of services for adolescent females in its juvenile justice system. First, the Iowa Juvenile Justice Advisory Council along with the Division of Criminal and Juvenile Justice Planning (CJJP) formed a task force to address the issue. Soon thereafter, they applied for and received a federal Challenge Grant to fund the Task Force's efforts. The result has been five years of progressive work towards meaningfully equitable services in Iowa's juvenile justice system, with change happening at various rates at various levels within the greater system.

Gender-specific services for adolescent girls is defined as "comprehensive programming which addresses and supports the psychological development process of female adolescents, while fostering connection within relationships in the context of a safe and nurturing environment" (Lindgren, 1996). Gender-specific programs extend beyond simply targeting girls as an audience; rather, these programs consider the social context of girls' lives and create services in intentional response to the unique challenges—and strengths—of the girls they seek to serve. Successful programs "must relate to the social realities from which . . . girls come and to which they will return," (Bloom, 1998, 5). Further, they must celebrate and honor the female experience; respect and take into account female development; work to change established attitudes that prevent or discourage girls and young women from recognizing their full human potential; and, then empower them towards the fulfillment of that potential (Cheltenham, 1994, p. 11).

Over the past five years, several service providers have created new programs that embrace the gender-specific services philosophy as it applies to adolescent females. Some of these include the Passages Program at Youth & Shelter Services in Ames; the PRIS*M program at Lutheran Social Service of Iowa in Des Moines; the Discoveries Program at Foundation 2 in Cedar Rapids; and, the Circles Program of Johnson County Juvenile Court.

Other service providers have begun programmatic change, informed by the gender-specific services philosophy, to enhance their services for girls. These

providers include Quakerdale in Waterloo, the Iowa Juvenile Home in Toledo, and Forest Ridge Youth Services in Estherville. Moreover, a second task force has begun in Sioux City to address the unique needs of girls in the Siouxland community.

However, the challenge to see and address girls' lives through a new, unfamiliar lens is an uncomfortable experience for many. As with any change, the call for comprehensive systemic change in the way that we serve girls in Iowa has inevitably met with resistance. Across the state (and nation), advocates for girls have heard common concerns from those hesitant to serve girls in this new way. Below, we respond to some of these typical concerns.

What about the boys?

As reported in the *Status of Iowa Women Report* (2000), "since 1994, the number of females served in Iowa's juvenile detention facilities has increased dramatically—a 74.2 percent increase from 1994 to 1999" (p. 48). Regardless of the reason for this increase, the need is evident for effective services that meet the unique needs of girls. Nonetheless, fueled by critics who argue that the crisis for girls is manufactured and whose perspective exemplifies the dualistic thinking that pits one group against another, advocates for girls inevitably are asked, "What about the boys? Don't they have needs too?"

The answer is clearly, yes, boys have unique needs that may or may not be met by the current juvenile justice system. Yet simply addressing the needs of girls does not preclude addressing the needs of boys. In fact, both need to happen if we are to improve services for all young people. This does not mean, however, that individuals and groups should be discouraged from placing their professional focus on girls. In fact, this focus may strengthen the level of expertise and resources available as we work towards solutions. The system needs both girls' and boys' advocates who can clearly, without defense, articulate the unique situation of one sex without pitting their solutions against the needs of the other. Furthermore, if the focus on girls is interpreted as a threat because of the limited monetary resources available to many juvenile justice programs,

the defining question should not be, “What about the boys?” but rather, “What must happen in the larger system to adequately provide for the needs of all?”

Isn't this male bashing?

Both men and women often confuse criticism of patriarchal culture and traditional male gender roles with criticism of all individual men. Although individual men are often responsible for the alarming rates of sexual assault and sexual harassment reported each year, the gender-specific approach does not claim every male has committed such acts. Instead, gender-specific programs seek to address the cultural context in which these abusive behaviors take place and help girls to heal through connection and personal growth. Indeed, individual men and women are responsible for changing the destructive aspects of our culture, but mentioning social conditions in which men tend to perpetrate against women or girls is not an indictment of all men. Rather, it is a comment upon the greater system of values and norms in which these behaviors take place.

For example, identifying girls' experiences of sexual abuse by male relatives or boyfriends is not an indictment of all males. It is recognition of a culture that allows such abuse to take place across lines of race, culture, geographic area and socioeconomic level. Moreover, identifying boys' sexual harassment of girls in school hallways is not an indictment of all boys. It is recognition of a greater system that allows—if not encourages—its members to see the female body as an object of pleasure for others rather than as the site and subject for female movement, sensory perception, health, and human reproduction.

Not another crazy feminist idea!

Undeniably, the gender-specific services philosophy for serving adolescent females is informed by feminist thought. People who call themselves feminists and who use feminist research methods conducted much of the recent research on female development. However, one must be cautious in dismissing a concept simply because of its association with feminism. Not all feminists think alike and, in fact, will often draw very different conclusions based on their theoretical framework. Different feminist theoretical frameworks advocate for social change to varying degrees and in sometimes opposing ways. Examples of these frameworks include liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, ecofeminism, evangelical feminism, and Black “womanism.” The bottom line is, however, the empowerment of females—girls and women. Certainly, any professional genuinely concerned about the well-being of adolescent offenders wants girls to be

empowered—with skills for improved relationships, school-success, employment, and physical health. Those who feel resistant to the gender-specific model because of its feminist association should be strongly encouraged to simply learn about it as a model explicitly designed to empower girls, setting aside any preconceived notions of feminism.

Over-generalize vs. Individualize

Although these are two competing tendencies, they can be equally problematic when learning about gender-specific services. Those who over-generalize tend to believe that all females possess innate, essential female traits—beyond bodily characteristics—across culture, class, and other demographics. Some typical beliefs include the idea that all females are more nurturing, in tune with their emotions, and better communicators than males. At the opposite extreme are those who believe there are no useful similarities among females and, therefore dismiss any attempt to organize around common experiences. The truth, however, lies between these two extremes. While generalizations are useful to understand the cultural context and its typical impact on girls' lives, one must be cautious to not stereotype the gender roles and experiences with which they are most familiar or with which they most identify, either positively or negatively. And while the differences among females are many—especially when one considers socioeconomic class and cultural identification—there are common issues in women's lives across these divisions, including sexual violence, substance abuse, and reproductive health. It is by understanding the social context of a girl's life and her unique experience within that context that we can best provide services that meet her individual needs. The gender-specific approach calls for professionals to keep in mind this greater context while being sensitive to the particular life experiences and personal qualities of the individual girls they serve.

Resources

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Lindgren, S.J. (1996). Gender-specific programming for female adolescents. Unpublished masters thesis, Augsburg College, MN.

Iowa Commission on the Status of Women. (2000). The Status of Iowa Women Report. Des Moines, IA: Author.

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