



# Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

April 2008

Written by: Kathy Nesteby

Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force

## Self Defense: Missing Pieces

Over 61% of female victims of assault are under age 18.

What follows are suggestions for preparing young women for the possibility that they may be faced with a situation that requires self defense.

- 1) Debunk the common misperception that perpetrators of violence are the dirty, scary stranger lurking in a dark alley. 84% of all sexual assaults are committed by someone known to the victim. It could be a friend, boyfriend, acquaintance, date, or family member.
- 2) Educate young women about the emotional and psychological issues that accompany such assaults. Learning physical techniques is simply not enough. Coercive tactics used by perpetrators can include but are not limited to intimidation, compliments, guilt or put-downs followed by reassurances. These tactics are more difficult to recognize and defend against, particularly when female gender role expectations emphasize passivity, putting others first and refraining from loud or forceful behaviors.
- 3) Encourage young women to set firm boundaries. The simple act of yelling “stop” in no uncertain terms can be a challenge for women both young and old who tend to fear a negative reaction and the potential loss of a relationship. As a result, it is crucial to foster the belief in young women that they are worth defending and deserve to be treated with respect.
- 4) Share stories of women who have successfully fought back. In movies and on television, rarely are women shown fighting back against an attacker. If they do fight back it is generally ineffective and they end up being rescued by a male character. This is one of the ways our culture shows young women that they are “supposed to be” the victim. The book, “Her Wits About Her: Self-defense success stories by women” edited by D. Caignon and G. Groves is a good source for success stories.
- 5) Model and teach assertive communication skills. For example, non-verbally, this might include walking with a purpose, looking up and making eye contact with those you pass rather than staring at the ground. Verbally this might include speaking up in conversations even if your opinions differ from others. These, plus other assertive communication skills allow young women to demonstrate to others that they are not an easy target.
- 6) Teach young women to recognize their own intuition or gut feelings about others. This can be especially difficult if their intuition runs contrary to the expectations of others, but they need to see their intuition for what it is - an early warning system.
- 7) Help them clarify their personal boundaries and more importantly give them tools to identify when someone is violating them. One such tool is to have them do a “gender switch” and ask themselves how they would react in any given situation if they were male instead of female. This can also prompt some excellent discussion about gender role expectations and how they contribute to female victimization.
- 8) Challenge the myth that fighting back will only make matters worse. In reality, being passive or compliant with an assailant increases your chance of being harmed. Women who successfully defend themselves use a combination of verbal and physical tools. They are neither passive nor compliant.

9) Encourage an awareness of their environment. Simply making note of what and who is around them is a means to avoid potential problems. You are not looking for hyper-vigilance, as this will only prompt unnecessary anxiety. You simply want them to be cognizant of their surroundings.

10) Explore and challenge attitudes about assaults. Women who have been assaulted often find that others believe they somehow brought it on themselves. This attitude among women is partially attributable to denial. Women don't want to believe they could be the victim of assault. By characterizing the victims behavior as a causal factor in the assault, they are able to assure themselves it would never happen to them because they would never behave that way.

11) Teach simple physical techniques. There is no need to become a martial arts expert, young women need simple, easy to execute techniques that draw from their personal strengths. Developing physical skills has the additional benefit of increasing self-confidence. It allows young women to see their bodies as useful and powerful rather than merely something to be looked at.

---

#### Resources

Kamienski, L. "Women's Self Defense"

McCaughey, M. 1997. Real Knockouts: The physical feminism of women's self-defense.

Snortland, E. 1998. Beauty Bites Beast: Awakening the warrior within women and girls.

---

April 2008 ~ Self Defense: Missing Pieces

## The Girl Connection

newsletter is provided as a service of the Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force.

For back issues of *The Girl Connection*, more information about the Gender-Specific Services Task Force, or if you are willing to receive future issues via e-mail to save mailing costs, please contact us:

**Kathy Nesteby, Coordinator**  
**Iowa Commission on the Status of Women**  
**1-800-558-4427 or (515) 281-6915**  
**Kathy.Nesteby@iowa.gov**  
**www.women.iowa.gov/girls**

**PLEASE  
COPY  
AND  
DISTRIBUTE  
WIDELY**

Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force  
Iowa Commission on the Status of Women  
Lucas State Office Building  
Des Moines, IA 50319