



Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

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Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force

Back to School

Often, girls involved with the juvenile justice system have not experienced academic success. Their experiences in school settings may have been fraught with educational bias, disciplinary measures, and sexual harassment. However, in a supportive, unbiased learning environment that incorporates a variety of learning styles, many girls can achieve a level of academic success not otherwise attainable. To be sure, girls involved with the juvenile justice system must receive educational opportunities that lead to a shared standard of achievement with girls and boys who are not involved in the juvenile justice system.

Education in gender-specific programs must address the academic, social and life-skill needs of adolescent girls. Academically, girls may need alternatives to traditional classroom instruction to deal with learning deficits, or change negative attitudes about their ability to learn and the value of education. Academic experiences may include preparation for higher education, career development, vocational training (particularly in nontraditional and/or higher paying occupations), high school completion or GED diploma, or English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. Girls also need opportunities to make connections between classroom study and necessary life skills. Guest speakers and visits to a variety of workplaces can help girls see successful women in the workplace and provide that connection.

Although many girls in the juvenile justice system may not have experienced academic success, the research about girls and academics may still be relevant in shaping the educational planning of gender-specific programs. Much of this research addresses girls' abilities in the areas of math and science. Relatedly, girls are far less likely to take advanced computer science courses using computers for word processing, the modern version of typing.

Girls who report enjoying math and science are more likely to have higher self-esteem, to feel better about their schoolwork, to have more faith in their career aspirations, and to have greater confidence about their appearance than girls who do not enjoy math and science. Therefore, it is important that girl-serving programs stress to girls the importance of taking math and science classes as well as advanced computer science classes. While many emphasize the relationship between girls' participation in math and science and their future access to high-paying work, this concern should be secondary to the conviction that girls are fundamentally entitled to develop as competent, intellectual individuals who are encouraged and well-prepared to pursue any areas of study and work they choose. Further, the emphasis on math and science should not diminish the proven verbal skills of girls as these skills are also indispensable to girls' capacities to achieve across subject areas, to think critically, and to make their voices heard.

Gender-specific programs should be especially mindful of curricular materials. Programs should assure that all curricular materials offer girls positive images and balanced information that include the experiences of women and men from all walks of life. Girls should see women from various cultural backgrounds represented in the books, videos, posters, and other resources utilized in classroom settings. Moreover, school curricula should deal with issues of power, gender politics and violence against women. Arts-based curriculum that includes the visual arts, dance, drama, music, and/or creative writing can provide girls alternative ways of expression by encouraging them to find their voices and overcome patterns of silence or passivity. Finally, in addition to using competitive learning models, and because girls tend to value relationships, teachers should incorporate cooperative learning strategies into classroom practice in which problem solving is a group task.

Linkages with teachers, school guidance personnel, nurses, and board members can further strengthen programs' abilities to better serve girls in treatment and as they transition into the community.

What Can You Do?

Administrative - Provide teacher release time for teacher-initiated research on curricula and classroom variables which affect student learning.

Curriculum - Follow your school district's requirements regarding multicultural and nonsexist curriculum.

Professional Development - Educate yourself and encourage the education of others on gender issues, including new research on women, bias in classroom-interaction patterns, and the ways in which schools can develop and implement a gender-fair curriculum.

School & Classroom Practice - Encourage girls to explore a wide range of subjects and potential careers, especially those in which girls and women are traditionally underrepresented.

Sexual Harassment - Establish norms for conduct toward the opposite sex. Model these norms in your interactions with staff, students, parents and community members.

Testing and Assessment - Advocate that tests which relate to real life situations reflect the experiences of girls and boys.

Title IX - Challenge your school administrators to regularly assess and report your district's Title IX compliance measures to the Office for Civil Rights.

From "Providing Gender Specific Services for Adolescent Female Offenders: Guidelines & Resources" found on the Iowa Gender Specific Services Task Force website: www.women.iowa.gov/girls under 'Task Force Publications'

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