



Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

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Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force

Is there a “dark side” to gender equity for young women today?

I recently read a story in the Washington Post¹ that postulated girls are “catching up” with boys in ways both good and bad. The good catching up got one sentence; the bad catching up - 30 paragraphs.

Upon finishing the article, I relegated it to my mental file of articles that sensationalize the behavior of teenage girls and cherry pick information to do so. In case you were wondering, the file is quite full.

But, as time passed, I found myself contemplating the concept beneath the surface. The writer had tapped into something. When young women experience increased gender equity or when they begin to feel empowered there is positive AND negative potential.

Of course this is true...rather obviously so. But, the more I mulled the idea, the more I realized how much it underlies so many of young women’s experiences, especially when those experiences involve girls pushing up against traditional gender role boundaries. This is particularly true for young women in the juvenile justice system. They challenge gender role expectations in sometimes small, sometimes profound and yes, even annoying, ways.

With increasing regularity, adults complain about how “mouthy” girls have gotten, for example. They are perplexed by what seems to be the growing sense of entitlement girls feel about being seen, heard and treated equally. An overblown sense of entitlement is normal during adolescence, but when examined from a perspective that takes gender into account, we begin to see that adults’ discomfort about girls behavior is at least partially driven by the fact that it challenges beliefs about the “proper” way for a young woman to behave. Some of these “proper” behaviors don’t always serve young women well. Being passive, quiet, sexy but not sexual, and expected to put the needs and wants of others first can certainly contribute to a wide array of damaging experiences from unfulfilled potential to ongoing sexual abuse.

More and more young women expect gender equity; they pursue power, demand to be treated fairly and assume there is nothing a boy can do that they can’t. Rightly so. Frequently, as is the case with any skill a person has little experience exercising, they do these things in ways that make adults cringe. If we respond by simply trying to get girls to go back to being passive, quiet and “good” in behavior only, we come up short.

It is incumbent upon adults to assist young women in the mastery of exercising their power rather than attempt to get them to relinquish it. This is uniquely true for girls in the juvenile justice system, so many of whom have experienced a distinct lack of power in their lives, whether it be through victimization, an addiction or a total lack of control over what happens within their own family.

Breaking the law, dressing provocatively or being mouthy may very well be the first time these young women have felt truly powerful, and no one gives up their power easily. If we ask girls to give up the things that help them to feel powerful *without providing an alternative*, any change in behavior will be fleeting.

It is also true that young women have been ill-prepared by adults to handle the backlash they will experience when they do begin to assert their power regardless of the manner in which they do it. From those who want desperately for females to kick off their shoes and get back in the kitchen to those who unknowingly attempt to get girls to quietly accept their lot in life even if it means being powerless, there are adults who will try to push girls back into a more traditional gender role.

Teaching young women to have an appropriate response when someone tells them they aren't acting "ladylike" or that "girls just aren't good at math," helping them navigate the adolescent mine field of fitting in without losing their individuality, and giving them a place to safely talk about the feelings they have when someone questions their femininity are all important pieces of their learning to deal effectively and responsibly with both direct and subtle means others may use to get them to give up their power.

Paramount, however, is the adult responsibility of policing our own behavior. Even the most well-intentioned adults are prone to slipping into reinforcement of the passive behavior of young women if only because it makes our job seem easier for awhile. Ultimately, we must shift our perspective and realize that new found power and equity is a meaningful tool for young women. It can help them overcome their challenges.

It is our job as professionals to help them hone that tool - not to convince them to put it away and forget they ever possessed it in the first place.

¹ www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/09/AR2008020901324.html

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