



Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

December 2007

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Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force

Strength Based Practice

What if you assumed that every young woman was powerful whether or not she looked powerful?

How would your behavior be different if you assumed that every young woman was brilliant whether or not she appeared brilliant?

What if you assumed that every young woman wanted positive connections with other young women and adults, even though her demeanor was hostile, competitive or withdrawn?

These are the kinds of questions to ask yourself if you want to move toward strength based practice. The questions and their answers represent a significant shift in perspective for many professionals who work with young women involved in the juvenile justice and human service systems. We tend to define the young women with whom we work in terms of "risk," "deficit" or "need." Although it is important to look at those factors, focusing solely on them limits our effectiveness. When we interact with young women as if the entirety of who they are is their diagnosis, delinquent charge or troubled history, we miss an important opportunity to capitalize on their strength.

Imagine that you are a young woman entering a residential program. You are immediately required to answer highly personal and often embarrassing questions about yourself. The questions are asked by a complete stranger. The questions are about all of your deficiencies and failures. Rarely, if ever, is there a question about the things at which you excel. No one asks you what you are good at or what characteristics make you proud of yourself. Within a week, staff have detailed a plan for you to change. If you fail to change during the prescribed time frame, you are chastised or given consequences for your lack of progress. After experiences like these, are you feeling strong, optimistic or motivated to change?

Too often, we fail to put ourselves in the shoes of the young women with whom we work with and as a result we are less effective. We fail to see them as whole people who have strengths and skills in addition to risky behaviors or challenging problems. Imagine how you would react if someone treated you as if you had few strengths but were instead defined entirely by the things in your life that were "wrong."

Strength based practice is about shifting that perspective. It is about finding and emphasizing the positive. Building on strength empowers young women and enables them not only to cope effectively with their problem areas but more importantly to feel like they can.

Programs must be strength based, not deficit based

Component #6

from *Providing Gender-Specific Services for Adolescent Female Offenders: Guidelines & Resources*,
a publication of the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women.*

"When girls' behaviors are removed from the gendered context in which they make choices, those behaviors are often recast as symptoms of pathology in mental health systems, relapse in substance abuse systems,

and antisocial in the juvenile justice system. Furthermore, the lack of viable options for girls to express their true selves may lead them to act in ways that appear self-destructive, but may be 'logical adaptive responses to the world in which they live.' Girls' behaviors become labeled as acting out, manipulative, and attention-seeking. These labels erode girls' preexisting low self-esteem and create feelings of shame. Moreover, they distract from the underlying causes of girls' behaviors and intensify the alienation girls feel from school, peers, family and themselves.

Instead, programs must reframe girls' behaviors as strategies for coping with the problems they face. 'Coping with intense feelings of pain, violation, fear, powerlessness, and despair - in many cases without adequate support or even acknowledgment - some girls turn to alcohol and other drugs, silence, food, belligerence, perfectionism, manipulation and other dangerous activities to survive.' Programs must help girls move from just coping to survive to utilizing their experience, support, intelligence, and inner wisdom to develop strategies that lead to their personal success and growth. This means that programs must employ staff who are able and willing to address girls' behaviors from this position, leaving behind the diminishing and shameful labels that so often limit adults' abilities to see the resiliency and strengths of girls who live in high-risk situations."

*"Providing Gender Specific Services for Adolescent Female Offenders: Guidelines & Resources" can be found on the Iowa Gender Specific Services Task Force website: www.state.ia.us/dhr/sw/girls under 'Task Force Publications'

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The Girl Connection

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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:

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