

“Programs must be relationship based...”

A component of gender-specific programming for girls with which few would argue. However, when asked to put it into practice, the questions begin to surface. Does this mean we have to throw out our current system? What about goals? What about boundaries?

What follows are programmatic and individual suggestions for increasing the relational nature of your work with girls.

Programmatic Things To Do

Intake/initial meetings are a time for first impressions and relationship building. Rather than sit behind a desk and launch into a barrage of extremely personal questions, find a comfortable spot and begin instead by asking how she's feeling and validating it. Then forewarn her about tough questions when you do have to start asking them. Empathy and listening can be built in to the structure of your program.

Celebrate birthdays and other individual milestones in ways that are meaningful to individual girls.

Don't send girls home or to another placement with their belongings in a garbage bag. The message is unequivocally negative. Find a local business to donate an alternate form of luggage.

Assign staff to the girls with whom they have the best relationship.

Make sure that the staff are sitting at the table eating meals with the girls and encourage staff to play games and do other fun activities with them as well.

Some questions to ask about your program

In what ways do we, as a staff, stifle or encourage one another's true selves? How do our relationships impact our relationships with the girls we serve?

Are there program rules that prevent girls from building appropriate, nurturing relationships with staff? Are girls encouraged to build supportive relationships with one another?

How are behavior expectations communicated to girls in the program? Is the purpose of the expectation clear and meaningful to staff and the girls? How do we

THE GIRL CONNECTION

FOR THOSE WHO SERVE ADOLESCENT FEMALES
IOWA GENDER-SPECIFIC SERVICES TASK FORCE / DECEMBER 2003

respond when those expectations are not met? How could we respond in a way that would communicate to girls that we are disappointed, but that we believe they can meet the expectations?

Individual Things To Do

Put yourself in their shoes - increase your empathy.

Share things about yourself and show an interest in things about them (e.g likes, dislikes, hobbies).

Do what you say you are going to do.

Express to them that they are important and that you care about what happens to them.

Recognize that the girls you work with may have a hard time trusting you. Be patient. If you expect girls to prove they are trustworthy you should do the same.

Be genuine, candid, use humor and LISTEN.

Some questions to ask yourself

Do I hide my true self from the girls with whom I work? How does this affect my ability to form honest relationships with them? How can I be a more supportive, caring, candid adult and still maintain my role?

In what specific ways do I nurture non-exploitive relationships with girls and all other staff?

Does my relationship with girls provide a balance of encouragement, safety and challenge for them?

With what attitude do I communicate with girls when they fail to fulfill expectations? Does my demeanor shame, embarrass, demoralize, support, encourage, trust?

The biggest mistake is believing there is one right way to listen, to talk, to have a conversation — or a relationship.

Deborah Tannen

Component #3: "Programs must be relationship based."

from the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women publication *Providing Gender-Specific Services for Adolescent Female Offenders: Guidelines & Resources* available on line at www.state.ia.us/dhr/sw/girls (publications).

"An important goal of gender-specific programs with girls is that of improved relationships. This does not necessarily mean that girls simply learn to get along better with others. For most girls, this approach reinforces the traditional female role expectations of passivity, subordination, and self-sacrificing. Instead, girls must learn skills of assertiveness, appropriate expression of anger, and selection of healthy relationships. Furthermore, programs must shift the primary discussion of relationships off of girls' relationships with males. While those relationship issues are important, girls often lose themselves in those relationships and/or create false selves that focus on the needs of others. Instead, girls need guidance to develop identities that extend beyond their connection to males...It is important that staff possess the skills to share, without belittling the girls, their observations regarding girls' relationship behaviors...This approach requires that the process be led by adult women who model genuine respect, trust and caring for other women and girls. It requires women who, in ongoing relationships with the girls, can create an emotionally safe space for comforting, challenging, nurturing conversations. To be sure, the girls must see this component piece mirrored in the lives of female staff and in the relationships among those female staff." (p. 12)

See the November 2001 issue of the *Girl Connection* for more information about men's roles in providing Gender-Specific Services to girls: www.state.ia.us/dhr/sw/girls (publications)

The Girl Connection

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

December 2003 ~ "Relationship Formation"

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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