

Women Teaching Girls

Interactive Training Modules

Empowering girls

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The Village Teacher

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The female brain
Girl-friendly classrooms
A girl's need for social interaction
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Girls and difficult subjects
Good girls syndrome
Girls' self-esteem and confidence
Empowering girls
Teaching girls who struggle
Girls and exam anxiety
Girls who try too hard
Be an empowering teacher

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Empowering girls

For girls especially, the idea of a safe and supportive environment is critical, given the burdens and limitations placed on them by parents and social institutions that intensify as girls approach adolescence. Safe and supportive environments can provide girls with a place in which they are treated with dignity and through which they can:

- Develop new and valued skills;
- Form friendships, receive and give peer support, and enhance their social networks;
- Enjoy freedom of expression and movement;
- Receive mentoring support from trusted adults, who can serve as girls' advocates; and
- Take advantage of new learning and educational opportunities.

Some scary figures about teenage girls and their lives

"I had sex last night." 53.1% of all high school students have had sexual intercourse at some point; 14.5% have had sex with four or more partners.

"I had unprotected sex." Nearly half of currently sexually active high school students did not report

using condoms during their last sexual intercourse.

"I'm pregnant." 25% of all first births in this country are to teen mothers aged 15-19 years old.

"I've been smoking for awhile." Smoking among teenage girls is rising.

If a girl begins to smoke, the habit usually begins between the ages of 10 and 16.

"I got drunk last night." The percentage of eighth graders reporting daily use of alcohol rose by nearly half between 1995 and 1996. Nearly a third of high school seniors reported having been drunk in the past month.

"I want to kill myself." 29% of adolescent girls reported having thoughts of suicide. From 1980 to 1992, the rate of suicide among young white females increased 233 per cent.

"I throw up after each meal." Eating disorders are a particularly pronounced risk for girls, and they're likely to be connected in complex ways to a girl's relationship to her parents.

"My mom doesn't care about me." Nearly half of girls surveyed did not name their mother as the person to whom they would turn for emotional support.

"I hate myself." Nearly one in every four girls surveyed exhibited depressive symptoms; one in ten showed "severe" depressive symptoms.

Girls scored notably worse in this area than boys did.

"I want the pill." The leading reason adolescents gave for not getting needed medical care or birth control consultation was reluctance to tell parents about a problem or situation.

"He hit me." One study found "disturbingly high incidence of violence," with 18% of girls in grades 5 through 12 reporting some form of physical or sexual abuse.

"An (older male friend or relative) keeps coming on to me/sending me love notes." Most abuse occurs at home, occurs more than once, and occurs as a result of the actions of a family member or friend of the family. Girls may have serious reactions of shame, guilt and self-hatred following these episodes.

"This guy made me do something I didn't want to do." Nearly one in ten older girls answered "yes" when asked whether "a boyfriend or a date has ever forced sex against your will."

Why do we need to empower girls?

Consider these Alarming Statistics

- 74% of girls say they are under pressure to please everyone.
- 31% of girls ages 13-17 admit to starving themselves or refusing to eat as a strategy to lose weight.
- 40% of girls ages 11-17 say they do not play sports because they do not feel skilled or competent.
- Roughly a third of high school girls report being sexually active.
- 60% of teen girls say they compare their bodies to those of fashion models.
- Three-quarters of middle high school principals say that bullying is a serious problem at their school.
- Girls who have significant symptoms of depression as teens are 86% more likely than their peers to become victims of abuse from a boyfriend or husband as young women.

Media messages, cultural stereotypes and peers often tell girls that they have to look and act a certain way.

Do you know a teenage girl who has low self-esteem?

Chances are that you know several. Girls entering high school feel less self-confident than they do in primary school, and they become less assured with each successive year of school. In contrast, boys

become more confident with each passing year.

Six Ways to Boost a Girl's Self-Esteem

Parents, teachers, counselors, mentors, and other concerned adults can have a significant impact on how girls see themselves. Here are six concrete things an adult can do to help a girl:

1. Focus on the person she is instead of her appearance. Many girls are harshly judged by other girls, as well as written off by boys, if they don't fit within the bounds of our society's narrow definition of beauty.

As a result, a girl's body becomes her focal point. This is borne out by two startling statistics: One out of every 5 girls between the ages of 12 and 19 has an eating disorder, and one-fifth of cosmetic surgery performed in the U.S. is on teens. To help a girl develop a healthier self-image, compliment her for her achievements, thoughts, and actions.

Remind her in various ways that she is a smart, valuable person with great ideas and lots of potential.

2. Call her attention to media deception. One reason girls feel so negative about themselves is that they are continuously barraged by picture-perfect images of girls and women in magazines and on television. Teens compare themselves to these images, either consciously or unconsciously, and feel

dissatisfied when they inevitably don't "measure up." One way to help a girl feel better is to expose unrealistic media images for what they are: retouched, computer manipulated photos of models—a group that makes up only five percent of the population. As supermodel Cindy Crawford admits, "Even I don't wake up looking like Cindy Crawford." Once a girl knows that most people look like the ones she sees in her everyday life, she will likely feel more satisfied with her own looks.

3. Give her a journal. Many girls experience many conflicting emotions during their preteen and adolescent years, and expressing their thoughts and feelings by writing in a diary or journal is a proven way for them to cultivate esteem. According to Mary Pipher, (Reviving Ophelia), "In their writing, [girls] can clarify, conceptualize, and evaluate their experiences . . . and strengthen their sense of self." You can simply give a girl a blank book—there are many decorative ones available—or present her with a more structured journal that asks her to answer open-ended questions. These can be found in the teen issues section of local bookstores.

4. Encourage her to share her thoughts and opinions. Studies show that girls are more frequently interrupted than boys. Over the course of many conversations, they get the message that what they have to say is not necessarily as compelling or valued as what boys have to say.

Compounding this conditioning is the fact that boys often feel threatened by smart, outspoken girls.

It's no wonder some girls clam up when they enter their teens. Adults can help them stay verbal by conveying that their thoughts are important and that their unique viewpoints should be shared. If a girl learns to use her voice confidently on a regular basis, and people listen and respect her, she builds self-confidence.

5. Encourage her to take risks. People develop self-reliance when they're given the space to solve problems and make mistakes in the process. What happens with girls? Researchers have found that teachers are more likely to intervene and solve problems for girls than they are for boys. In addition, girls are rewarded for being good and behaving well, as opposed to being adventurous in their thinking, as boys are. Girls need to be given time and permission to creatively complete what they start. We can praise them for considering new problem-solving options, allow them to make mistakes, and refrain from "rescuing" them.

6. Suggest that she get involved in a sport. Research shows that female athletes are more self-reliant, and get better grades and higher test scores, than girls who don't participate in sports. Being on a team or playing an individual sport is also a way for a girl to divert some of the energy focused on appearance to healthy physical activity and personal achievement.

Two Page Plan – Empowering girls

Describe the qualities you have that enable you to empower girls in your school

What tips have you learned in this session that would you would use in empowering girls in your classroom

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

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