



Staying the Course: Helping Girls Thrive Amidst a Cultural Barrage

Presented by Catherine Steiner- Adair, Ed.D.

March 13, 2015 at Teton County Library

Co-hosted by Raising Girls and Teton County Library

Background

Dr. Steiner-Adair is an internationally recognized clinical psychologist and author. In addition to her private practice, she is a Research Associate in the Harvard Medical School Department of Psychiatry. She has consulted to over 350 schools and businesses on work-family-life integration in the age of technology. Dr. Steiner- Adair is a resource to the media, having appeared on The Today Show, Good Morning America, NBC Morning Joe, The Huffington Post Live, WSJ Live, The Discovery Channel, CNN and PBS.

Dr. Steiner-Adair is author of The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age and the education curriculum *Full of Ourselves: A Wellness Program to Advance Girl Power, Health, And Leadership*. She interviewed thousands of kids, parents, educators and health professionals in writing these resources.

Presentation (focused on school-aged girls)

Prior to 1970, all the information on the physiological development of girls was based on the information we knew about boys. There was little research, the pay gap was \$.70 to a man's \$1. Even when the US was one of the top 3 most powerful countries in the world, women's pay equality was ranked 90th. Fast forward to today, and women make \$.78 to a man's \$1. 52% of our country is female, yet representation in Congress is in the low teens. Thirty years ago, we started to look at girls' and women's development to figure out how we could close the gap. What aren't girls getting? Why are they sidetracked? Why is body image such a problem?

Up until age 10, girls are confident, their vocabulary is robust, they say how they feel, they raise their hands in class, they say, "I think this because..." "I fell certain that..." By 5th and 6th grade, that changes to "I don't know." They have a hard time making decisions ("I don't know, what do you want to do?" "I don't care what ever you want is fine"). They won't disagree. Why can't they say "I know" and "Here's what I think"? Their vernacular includes the heavily used phrases "whatever," "you know" and "like." They will change whatever they think so you still like them. They regress, change on a dime, have to wear the same outfits as their friends; anything different causes drama. So how are they going to learn to say, "Don't talk to me that way!" and "No way!"?

Example: Rebecca at age 8, when asked if she would ever get in a car with a teenager who had been drinking said, "No way, that would be stupid!" When she was 15 years old, she was asked the same question. She said "I can't believe you are asking me this because, like, I was out with my best friend the other night and I was scared and, like, I don't know, I just don't know, I was like so scared and I got in the car and prayed that I wouldn't be one of those statistics!" She was smart; she knew statistics! But it was her best friend and she

didn't want to let her friend down. So it ends up looking like this: you will risk your life, risk your friend's life, in order to not make a scene. This is called "the tyranny of kindness and niceness."

Eight year old boys have to learn not to cry. You don't get sad, instead you get mad. Boys are taught to disconnect from sadness. Girls experience the "tyranny of kindness and niceness;" they get smarter and their friendships gets more complicated. They can't get mad if might hurt a friend's feelings. What do they do instead? They tell their next 3 friends what happened, they talk behind backs and it grows into DRAMA. Boys learn how to be assertive; girls learn to be passive aggressive. For women and girls, there is no way to be assertive. If a girl gets an A on a test she will say, "I got lucky." If a boy gets an A he will say, "I am a genius!" Girls aren't claiming their strengths. Self-esteem comes from telling yourself you are good. Teach girls they can say, "I am so good at this!" They can learn this at school, at camp, in clubs, on teams, and from you! Applaud achievements. If a girl gets a D on a test she will be defeated, "I am so dumb." A boy gets a D and he says "I didn't study," or "It was a stupid test," "bad teacher." A girl gets one bad grade (in a subject she loves!), and that D is an all-encompassing statement on her. You cannot grow if you cannot deal with criticism.

Girls magnetize the negative, which becomes passive aggression. There is a backlash of "mean girl" culture. This adds to the culture of misogyny. The label "mean girl" is normal now. The first mean girl was Lucy from *Peanuts*; she was a bully. Then there was Angelica from *Rugrats*. She bullied the babies. And now there are the mean girls of *Gossip Girl* that lends itself to our tech-crazed world. *Gossip Girl* is based on educated, talented girls. They go to an elite all-girls private school in Manhattan; they are wealthy and beautiful. The most powerful aspect of the show is that an anonymous person texts gossip to the others. They focus on who is sleeping with whom, where they shop, and it deals with the best friend as the enemy concept ("frenemy"). This is teaching girls to hate each other, to compete with each other, to thrive on scandal and others' misfortune.

If we want equal pay and have a spot at the table, we need to figure this out. Just as women were gearing up for equal rights and feminism was taking hold, Twiggy came on the scene. This became a culturally mediated disease of "if you are not 5'10", 105 lbs, gorgeous, you are not going to be successful." When you see a gorgeous woman, 6' tall, large breasts, long blonde hair, etc, you assume what? (Audience) "That her life is perfect. She has wealth, men, education, great job, happiness, confidence, etc." And how do you feel about her? (Audience) "We hate her." If you see the opposite type of woman - short, heavy, unattractive, etc... What do you think? (Audience) "She is lonely, has no self-control, uneducated, has a menial job, uneducated, single, ..." This is prejudice. It is cruel and damaging to judge someone by the shape of his or her body, just as it is cruel to be racist, or homophobic, or misogynist.

To raise healthy girls, we need to identify the aggressor. 80% of women start their day with a negative internal check-in.

Identifying with the aggressor: turning against yourself, not a happy way to start your day. Girls will start skipping meals, won't raise their hands in school because they don't want to be looked at.

Lateral Aggression: when a group turns against each other as sub-groups (for instance German Jews vs Russian Jews, or African Caribbean v African Africans). Women criticize hair, outfits, bodies, it is a way of taking away another's power. There is a lot of nasty aggression and criticism with female lateral aggression.

Prejudice: how have we fulfilled the cultural expectation of success. We hear girls and women in their lives use a language of morality and it is very insidious. "Let's be bad, let's be really, really bad" when talking about getting dessert! We pass this down to our kids and it stresses them out. There is a profound connection with what kids hear and how they act. 3rd grade girls start to compare themselves, body comparisons, instead of

celebrating their strengths. There are cultural supports for this behavior. Proana.com (pro-anorexia) is a support system for anorexics. There girls find tips on how to loose weight fast, share their strategies for eating only 200 calories a day, etc. Yik Yak is a social network site where kids are being hurtful and hiding behind anonymity. Our kids are growing up in a “hook-up” culture where they are calling each other “sluts” and having “Friends with Benefits.” You need to talk to girls and boys about this. 8th to 12th grade kids are drinking alcohol. Our cultural norm now refers to a rape as “she was sexually assaulted.” We have taken out the language that includes the boy as the aggressor. 1 out of 5 college girls have had an “unwanted sexual experience,” have been “assaulted.”

Girls and boys spend an equal amount of time online. 60-80% of stuff online is good stuff, there is a ton of really good stuff online. But the bad, is really, really BAD. “Likes,” “dislikes,” “friends,” posting that “you’re not my friend” is part of the “its cool to be cruel” identity process. Today there is a pervading sense that if it is not posted on line with a picture, it didn’t happen. Nothing exists unless you take a picture of it. This creates tension in the lives of adolescents today. There is the culture of humiliation, tagging, screen shots, etc. People are making millions of dollars on this stuff. There is site called “Am I Pretty?” on which girls post pictures of themselves and ask other to say if they think they are pretty or not. There are a ton of these on YouTube as well. Hate and advice and compliments flood in from all over the world, but it is the hate that sticks and causes the most hurt and drama. This is happening to good kids, smart kids from good homes. Filters are lost online. Anonymous responses employ hate, homophobia, and racism. Kids, going to great colleges, are sending tweets and texts that are hateful and cruel. We have to make it safe for kids to be able to talk about this.

We are the most connected generation in history, but we don’t know how to talk face to face. Tinder is now a popular way to find sex partners. Instead of actual conversations, you can go online and “like” each other and then hook up. There has been a huge spike in social anxiety and substance abuse. Kids have this feeling that everyone else is in perfect control. “I’m just going to chill and go on Facebook” instead making a plan for a real interaction. Facebook makes people feel bad about themselves. After just 9 minutes of scrolling through social media sites, people start to feel worse about them selves.

So here we have kids who are just starting to form their first real friendships, and they are texting, not talking. They are not learning how to communicate. This is the time in their lives when it becomes so important for them to hear tone of voice. “Sorry” can be said 10 different ways. Girls’ friendships are getting strained and this leads to girl drama. It then strains families. Teach you girls to claim their strengths so that they can deal directly with others. So that they realize that a 4 am text from a boy is a “booty call.”

Never put your body down in front of your daughters. Dads, tell your wife first thing in the morning how beautiful she is without makeup. Watch movies together as a family, have discussions: “What would you do in this situation?” Don’t use food as a reward or punishment. Be careful how you talk about other people in front of your kids.

Questions

What are the tools girls need to close the gender gap? They are outperforming boys in college, but then 10 years later they are not filling the void.

All-girls school for middle school girls is great (depending on the school), as are all girls’ summer camp, NOLS and Outward Bound offer great experiences. Here they can learn how to not be embarrassed, learn survival skills, they can learn their strengths.

Why is it cool to be cruel?

This is a form of lateral aggression, not trusting one another. Misogyny benefits men, it goes way back. We were not always this way, but recently there is a tension that women have. Women keeping women down.

What is the optimum use/guide line for kids and phone use?

The most important thing is that you have a Family Responsible Use Contract (template at commonsensemedia.org). "Your cell phone is a privilege; if you abuse it you lose it. Your phone is for: not being mean, not taking embarrassing photos of your self or others. Periodically we will go through it with you." Let your kids help come up with the consequences for misuse. Reinforce that texting is not private. A diary is private; keep it under your pillow, I won't read it unless your life is in danger and I am really worried.

There are some great educational sites and TV shows: Disney, Mr. Rogers, National Geographic.

The more gaming a kid does, the more addicted they become. Car transitions should be chatting time or quiet, reflective time.

You have until 8th grade to help kids form good tech habits and to control what they are doing. Have appropriate filters on all devices. By the time they go to high school, they should be competent with their phones.

Children under 2 years old should have no screen time. Other countries are looking at electro magnetic radiation laws; there is weird health stuff happening from radiation. Scary stuff. Balance tech out with a lot of body movement.