

The Girl Connection

Iowa Commission on the Status of Women

For those who serve adolescent females involved with or at risk for involvement with the justice system

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"Since most girls spend a great deal of their time in and around schools, educational issues are among the most important to understand, not only for teachers and school administrators, but also for girls' advocates, clinicians, researchers, policy makers, and parents and other caregivers."
~Lynn Phillips

Schools provide a critical context for girls' healthy development, sense of achievement, and optimism about their futures. Safe, supportive school environments that encourage girls' wholeness and academic success can create lasting effects for girls as they move towards adulthood. This list of recommendations can serve as a guide for how you as an educator, administrator, counselor or other professional in the field of education, can support the adolescent and pre-adolescent girls in your community's schools.

Educators: What you can do

Administrative

- Encourage governing bodies to ensure that women of diverse backgrounds are represented on their committees.
- Include the experiences, strengths, and needs of girls from every race and social class to shape educational reform.
- Utilize the expertise of female teachers when restructuring your community's educational efforts.
- Formulate and consistently enforce strong, clear, publicly stated policies against sexual harassment and discriminatory practices. Expand these policies to better reflect the realities of adolescents and girls.
- Encourage the evaluation of teachers, administrators, and counselors on the degree to which they promote and encourage gender-equitable and multicultural education.
- Provide equal programs, facilities, equipment, and publicity for girls and boys in school-based athletic programs.
- Hire female coaches for all-boys, all-girls, and mixed-sex teams.
- Insist that coaches and teachers of both sexes model respectful behavior towards females.

Curriculum

- Offer students positive images and balanced information through innovative curricular materials that include the experiences of women and men from all walks of life.
- Support school curricula which deal with issues of power, gender politics, and violence against women.
- Showcase successful women in scientific and technological fields.
- Incorporate cooperative, as well as competitive, learning models.
- Support school-links with youth-serving organizations who have developed out-of-school programs for girls.
- Encourage federal and state funding to support research and development of gender-fair curricular models.
- Foster girls' confidence in math and science. Encourage them to tolerate frustration in problem-solving without becoming overwhelmed. Teach relaxation skills to deal with the math anxiety girls often experience.
- Provide conflict-resolution training for students.

Professional Development

- Provide learning opportunities for those in teacher education programs to recognize and modify their gender-based assumptions and practices.
- Encourage educators to pursue ongoing professional development activities that help them to better meet the needs of diverse student bodies.
- Educate yourself and encourage the education of others on gender issues, including new research on women, bias in classroom-interaction patterns, and the ways in which schools can develop and implement a gender-fair curriculum.

School & Classroom Practice

- Model respect for girls and people of all cultures.
- Demonstrate respect for students' cultures and native languages.
- Redirect your attention towards acknowledging girls' strengths and successes rather than focusing on misbehaviors and mistakes.

Challenge attitudes and behaviors that stereotype or discriminate against groups or individuals.

- Foster student groupings organized around talents, interests, and needs, rather than cliques.
- Support and respect girls' attempts to negotiate the challenges of school, family, and social life.
- Offer girls more leadership opportunities and means for active exploration of their interests and talents.
- Encourage girls to participate in a variety of extracurricular activities, including athletics.
- Encourage girls to explore a wide range of subjects and potential careers, especially those in which girls and women are traditionally underrepresented.
- Work collaboratively with families and communities to understand and support the needs of all students.

Testing and Assessment

- Advocate that general aptitude and achievement tests balance sex differences in item types and contexts so that new tests and testing techniques accurately reflect the abilities of both girls and boys.
- Advocate that tests which relate to real life situations reflect the experiences of girls and boys.

(This list is an edited selection of suggestions from various sources including The National Council for Research on Women, American Association of University Women, Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, and Dr. Mary Pipher.)

Parents and caregivers: What you can do to help girls in math and science

Much of the recent research about girls and academics addresses girls' abilities in the areas of math and science. While there are not striking differences between girls' and boys' proficiencies in math and science, girls tend to say they like these subjects less than boys and tend to have less confidence in their abilities to do well in these subjects. For girls who report enjoying math and science, they are more likely to have higher self-esteem, to feel better about their schoolwork, to have more faith in their career aspirations, and to have greater confidence about their appearance (AAUW, 1992). Therefore, it is important to stress to girls the importance of taking math and science classes. While many emphasize the relationship between girls' participation in math and science and their future access to high-paying work, this concern should be secondary to the "conviction that girls are fundamentally entitled to develop as competent, intellectual individuals who are encouraged and well-prepared to pursue any areas of study and work they choose." Further, the emphasis on math and science should not diminish the proven verbal skills of girls as these skills are also indispensable to girls' capacities to achieve across subject areas, to think critically, and to make their voices heard (Phillips, 1998, 59). This list of suggestions provides ways for you, as a parent or caregiver, to encourage your daughter's participation in math and science.

- Consider your own feelings about math and science. Even if these subjects were hard for you, do not impose your feelings on your daughter.
- Engage your daughter in projects that develop spatial reasoning and analytical skills. Girls ten and older may enjoy exploring a chemistry set or building a model robot.
- Ask your daughter's teachers about specific math and science projects. Express interest in your daughter's progress in these subjects. Find out what computer programs, materials, and equipment are available for her use and how often she uses them.
- Intervene in seventh and eighth grades. In most schools, students decide then if they will take algebra, an important first step to continued math involvement.
- Intervene again in ninth and tenth grades. While girls and boys are equally apt to take algebra and geometry, girls are more likely than boys to stop there and take no more math.

- Encourage girls to do well in school by discussing their studies with them, exploring potential areas of interest, and supporting their achievements.
- Foster interest in your daughter's participation in school science fairs.
- Praise her intellect.

(This edited list of suggestions was developed by the Women's College Coalition at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts.)

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