

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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Increasingly, professionals in girl-serving programs are seeking to utilize the gender-specific program philosophy of service delivery. This comprehensive approach addresses and supports the psychological development process of female adolescents, while fostering connection within relationships in the context of a safe and nurturing environment (Lindgren, 1996). ***In addition to nurturing girls' educational, vocational, and health needs, this philosophy asserts that programs must also address girls' spiritual lives.***

Spirituality has to do with “the practice of staying consciously connected with what makes us alive, with our own selves, with one another, and with the Great Other,” (Carnes & Craig, 1998, 2). Some describe it as “living in depth” while others relate it to connection with the higher good.

Regardless of its description, for many programs, addressing girls' spiritual development in meaningful ways can be intimidating. Some adults don't feel qualified to talk with girls about spirit. Others confuse the promotion of religious conversion with thoughtful conversation and activities designed to nurture girls' spirits. Still others find it difficult to put spiritual feelings into words.

These suggestions were designed to guide both the process and content of the spirituality component in a gender-specific program for adolescent girls. They are intended to help providers create a space that supports and nurtures all girls' spirits.

1. Look beyond institutionally religious experiences.

Although girls with religious backgrounds should be provided opportunities to participate in worship and religious discussions, the spirituality component should be designed to embrace all girls regardless of experience with formal religion. Moreover, programs should avoid focusing on one person as the source of all spiritual knowledge, reminding girls that “no one can organize your perception of God better than you can.” Using the circle or council sharing model, adapted from various indigenous practices, will facilitate communication in which all voices are heard (Carnes & Craig, 1998, 8).

2. Provide activities that reclaim and value the commonalities in female experience.

Regardless of involvement in a religion, most girls in our culture do not develop positive associations about being female. Cultural messages about females' bodies, intelligences, and personal insights often corrode girls' sense of self-worth and entitlement. These messages should be countered in the spirituality component, as well as in all other components of a gender-specific program. Specifically, programs must encourage girls to appreciate their bodies as sacred and powerful, whatever size, shape, color, or ability. Information should be given that considers women's common life passages— menstruation, childbirth, and menopause— as opportunities to honor and respect the powers and mysteries of the female body.

3. Root all conversations and activities in girls' real-life experiences.

Central to this empowering approach is the belief that each girl determines what Spirit means to her according to her own experiences. Communicate to girls that they are each an expression of the divine and that they can best determine what is meaningful, sacred, moral, and beautiful to them (Carnes & Craig, 1998). Patricia Lynn Reilly reminds us that, by its very nature, spirituality flows from each person's life and stories and is spoken in her/his voice, not those of [others] (1996).

4. Create opportunities that foster reverence for the Earth.

Human life is intricately connected to the health of the natural world. Various spiritual traditions discuss this connection by describing humans as stewards of the earth or as strands in the web of life. The spirituality component provides opportunities to explore this connection with girls. Programs can illuminate the abundance of relationships girls have with things not human. Furthermore, girls can engage in community action based on these relationships. Meaningful activities can be offered that explicitly involve girls with the natural world, including the four elements. These may include opportunities for girls to observe and care for various animals and plants. This moves girls beyond concerns of human relationships and the material world into the greater mystery of creation.

5. Allow girls the opportunity to create their own rituals.

Consider, as a staff, how you might honor girls with ritual. Through what significant life passages are the girls passing? Birthdays are a wonderful opportunity to honor the sacred life of a girl. Even a ceremony that honors girls' relationships with supportive adult women can be very strengthening to both the girls and women. Moreover, programs should support girls in deciding what life events are most significant to them. Allow girls to create their own rituals around these events, deciding which symbols, movements, and words provide meaning for them. Relatedly, it is important that participation in a ritual or other aspect of the spirituality component not be hinged on a girl's behavior (her obedience to rules). Regardless of a girl's actions, every girl deserves to be honored as a sacred being, a part of creation. Participation in this component can be a tool in her growth and empowerment.

As in all other aspects of the gender-specific program model, staff must be willing to serve as models for growth and change. Staff should be actively engaged in their own spiritual growth, willing to admit to not knowing all (or any) of the answers. They must see themselves as participants in life's ongoing process of learning and growth, and they must be willing to acknowledge this to the girls. Taking time to nurture one's own spirit may illuminate one's work with girls around the issue of spirituality.

References

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Lindgren, S.J. (1996). Gender-specific programming for female adolescents. Unpublished masters thesis, Augsburg College, MN.

Reilly, P.L. (1996). A God who looks like me: Discovering a woman-affirming spirituality. New York: Ballantine Books.

Suggestions for Parents & Caregivers

- Introduce your daughter to spiritualities that honor and celebrate the feminine.
- Allow your daughter to experience various religious traditions. Let her develop an awareness and sensitivity to others' belief systems.
- Support your daughter as she actively searches for meaning and order in the universe. Encourage her questions about the gift of life and the reality of death.
- Help your daughter find ways to respect the part of herself that is spiritual.
- Explore your own understanding of your connection to and part in the greater universe. Share this understanding with your daughter, allowing that she may come to a different understanding than you.
- Resist the temptation to provide pat answers to her spiritual questions. Be brave enough to let your daughter search and find her own spiritual truth.

Resources

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Umansky, E.M. & D. Ashton. (1992). Four centuries of Jewish women's spirituality: A sourcebook. Boston: Beacon Press.

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Mankato, MN 56002-8400
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If your girl-serving program is interested in receiving program development on the spirituality component, contact Rhonda Chittenden, Coordinator of Juvenile Gender-Specific Services, Iowa Commission on the Status of Women, (800) 558-4427 or (515) 281-6915.

You can access an electronic copy of Providing Gender-Specific Services for Adolescent Female Offenders: Guidelines & Resources on the worldwide web at www.state.ia.us/dhr/sw/girls.html .