



The Girl Connection

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FOR THOSE WHO SERVE ADOLESCENT FEMALES INVOLVED WITH OR AT RISK FOR INVOLVEMENT WITH THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

No one will argue: While working with girls can be a very rewarding experience, there are times when the work is exasperating. Numerous challenges face the girl-serving professional every day. Among these challenges, girls' anger is increasingly identified as one of the most difficult.

Indeed, many adolescent and pre-adolescent girls are angry. But it is not an anger without just cause. When one considers the daily reality of many girls' lives, girls' anger becomes a predictable, if not comfortable, response. A lifetime of oppressive poverty, abuse, academic failure, familial disruption, gender-bias, racism, heterosexism, harassment, and uncountable unmet needs can build a powder keg. Some girls explode—behaving destructively towards others through assault, vandalism, and other crimes. Other girls implode—harming themselves through self-destructive behaviors such as drug abuse, self-mutilation, unprotected sexual risk taking, and suicide.

As adults, we are often uncomfortable with girls' anger. It may frighten us or trigger our own anger. We may attempt to deny or diminish a girl's anger ("Oh, it can't be all that bad. You'll get over it!"), shame her ("What are you crying about? You think you've got it bad? Look at all we've done for you!"), or punish her (isolation, physical or verbal abuse, removal of privileges). None of these efforts move us towards understanding a girl's anger; in fact, we may further oppress her by ignoring her anger as a signal that something is wrong.

In the fall of 1999, members of the Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force along with other invited professionals gathered for a two-day retreat to explore the issue of girls and anger. Facilitated by two of the group's members, the goal was to move towards creating a new context for girls' anger, one in which girls' anger is allowed, affirmed, and embraced as a tool for girls' empowerment rather than as a tool for destruction. The work was not easy, but ultimately a new context began to emerge.

Central to this new context is the necessity of connecting girls to their communities in an effort to create social change. Not intended as a replacement to the individual and relationship work necessary to address girls' anger, the community connection adds a further dimension to healing by addressing the cultural context that often supports the abuse, bias, racism, and other triggers of girls' anger. By connecting with their communities, girls can learn to act on their feelings constructively as well as plant the seeds of social change.

Ultimately, girls' empowerment becomes the goal rather than the management or suppression of girls' angry feelings.

"Girls' expressions of anger and outrage signify an opening. . . . As a signal that something is wrong in their world, their anger focuses our attention . . . toward the political. . . . Teaching girls how to pinpoint what is causing them anger and how to act on their feelings constructively provides a kind of warrior training for social justice. Out of such clarity, the outlines of creative action and the possibility for human freedom are born."

~Lyn Mikel Brown

Moreover, adults—regardless of their relationship in girls' lives—can model behaviors that reflect anger as a tool of empowerment rather than destruction. Adults are encouraged to share their frustrations with girls, clearly describing their feelings and the situation that led to the anger—without blaming others for their anger. Women are encouraged to admit that they do get angry, bucking cultural pressure that women remain passive lest they be negatively labeled for expressing angry feelings. Men are encouraged to eliminate their discomfort about angry females and to avoid trying to protect angry females from themselves. All adults should avoid cursing at girls when angry as well as hold other adults accountable for their roles in girls' anger. In addition, adults can recognize the contributions of women's anger as catalysts for social change in the United States and internationally and teach girls about these women.

If your organization is interested in learning more about creating a new context for girls' anger, consider scheduling the day-long interactive workshop entitled "Creating a New Context for Girls' Anger." Facilitated by Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force members, the goal of the workshop is to provide each participant with the knowledge and tools to enhance his/her service delivery to girls who are angry. Moreover, it is intended that workshop participants will apply the information by creating a new context for girls' anger within his/her respective organization. An abbreviated version of this workshop will be offered at the upcoming conference, "Whispers & Screams," to be held April 6-7, 2000 at the Des Moines Marriott. For more information on the conference or to schedule a workshop in your community, call Rhonda Chittenden, (800) 558-4427 or (515) 281-6915.

One Angry Woman!

Don't mess with Maxine Waters when it comes to standing up and being counted on behalf of her community and in support of women's rights. As a member of the House of Representatives and former chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, she put her womanist sensibility into political action. Whether admonishing a colleague on the floor of the House to mind his mouth, crashing a presidential meeting about the Los Angeles "riots," marching on the Senate in support of Anita Hill, or charging the CIA with drug trafficking in the inner cities, this sister pulls no punches. She says forthrightly, "I have a right to my anger, and I don't want anybody telling me I shouldn't be, that it's not nice to be, and that something's wrong with me because I get angry." Ms., July/Aug 1998

Activity Ideas for Connecting Girls to Community

- Create a celebration/ritual to honor a girl's resistance.
- Form an action group.
- Organize and/or participate in a rally.
- Create a collage to display in the community.
- Take photos of angry girls: create an exhibit accompanied by a narrative of each girl.
- Organize a letter or postcard campaign.
- Create a 'zine (a do-it-yourself magazine).
- Create a poetry collection.
- Design t-shirts, buttons, backpacks with a message.
- Write a PSA for the school radio station.
- Write an editorial or other article for the school or local newspaper.
- Write and perform a play, song, dance, or street theater piece.
- Talk to political leaders.
- Connect with a journalist to cover the issue.
- Join a community board of directors.
- Join your local Mayor's Youth Commission.
- Create a fact sheet on the issue and distribute as widely as possible.
- Set up information tables in front of city hall, on campus, in a mall or other public place.

Strategies to Affirm & Empower Angry Girls

- Help girls identify about what they are angry.
- Help girls prioritize the triggers of their anger. Is it more serious (like abuse) or less serious (like someone gave her a dirty look)?
- Allow girls to be angry without diminishing, denying, shaming, or punishing them.
- Teach girls healthy skills to soothe themselves when enraged.
- Teach girls that anger is an emotion to which they can choose how to respond.
- Celebrate girls' anger as a sign of healthy resistance, as her inner knowing that she was somehow violated.
- Understand how class and culture shape girls' expressions of anger. Utilize this knowledge in your relationships with girls.
- Move beyond simply teaching girls to "manage" their anger. Provide opportunities for girls to connect with and impact their communities as a tool for their own empowerment and for social change.
- Provide all girls, especially those around age 10, with empowering messages about anger. Teach them healthy expressions of anger to use as they continue to grow.

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