

# The Girl Connection



For those who serve adolescent females  
Iowa Gender Specific Services Task Force

April 2003

“True peace is not merely the absence of tension, it is the presence of justice.”

~Martin Luther King Jr.

Most people agree, girls are raised to take on traditionally feminine roles. But what happens to girls' peace of mind when they experience this grooming in a culture that routinely mocks, marginalizes and devalues the feminine?

Consider Jessica and Heather, who are preparing for careers after high school:

~Jessica wants to be an electrician. She is steered away from the necessary preparatory classes by her guidance counselor and parents. Her friends and teachers make jokes at her expense. She notices that the math and science classes only talk about the contributions of men. She decides girls are not supposed to be electricians.

~Heather wants to be a child-care provider. Her guidance counselor and parents support her. Her friends and teachers praise her for her choice. She notices that “mother and child” is a concept she sees much more often than “father and child”. She decides that girls are supposed to be child-care providers.

Jessica missed the opportunity to pursue a career she was interested in because of the effort to win approval by meeting gender role expectations she had learned. Heather was affirmed for meeting gender role expectations but will learn later that this career field, dominated by women, is not valued by society (male electricians average \$19.29/hour and female child-care providers average \$7.43/hour).

Jessica and Heather were both shortchanged.

They and millions of girls just like them see and understand that boys are given preferential treatment and standing in society well before it is time to make career choices. Ask girls who have better locker rooms and equipment to use at school. Ask girls who are the adult decision-makers in their places of worship or in the government. The messages they get about who comes first and who comes second are pervasive.

How can girls be at peace with themselves when they clearly get the message that girls and women are inherently less important than men? What can we do?

We can begin by understanding that peace does not mean passivity. Although it is often equated with the absence of conflict, striving for peace entails struggle.

## Some things you can do

~Know that what you model to girls has enormous consequences. If you only talk about women and girls being devalued and never do anything to challenge it, they will learn to be passive. Adults must take action.

~Use existing resources. For example, Title IX, which requires any school receiving federal money to maintain academic and athletic gender equality.

~When you are asked “what about the boys?” remember that valuing people is not a zero sum game. Respect is not finite with only so much to go around. Valuing girls more doesn't mean you have to value boys less.

~Get comfortable with girls' emotional responses. Adults must understand that young girls don't always have the skills to express their anger in a way that is palatable to adults. This doesn't make their anger or other feelings any less valid.

Peace for girls has often been more about the adults around girls having peace and quiet. It's been about adults having “peace” from the discomfort of dealing with an angry or depressed girl. It has also been about adults having “peace” from confronting the injustices they see and the guilt they feel about doing little to change them.

Girls having peace in their lives isn't about keeping girls passive and quiet. It's about taking action ourselves and empowering girls to fight with courage and honor for what they deserve.

**The right to be  
seen, heard and genuinely  
valued as an equal.**

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Learn more about *Peace for Girls* at the 2003 **Whispers & Screams** conference.  
May 1st and 2nd at the Gateway Center in Ames, Iowa.  
**Registration begins at 8am both days and programming is from 9am-4pm both days.**  
Contact Kathy Nesteby for more information.  
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**“Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace with yourself.” ~Amelia Earhart**

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Upcoming issues of the Girl Connection

June 2003 Critical Thinking  
August 2003 Juvenile Female Offenders with Moms in Prison

*The Girl Connection* is provided as a service of the Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force, coordinated by the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women, Department of Human Rights.

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For back issues of *The Girl Connection*, more information about the Gender-Specific Services Task Force, or if you are willing to receive future issues via e-mail to save mailing costs, please contact us:

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