



# The Girl Connection

for those who serve adolescent girls  
Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force  
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## Critical Thinking and Female Responsive Services

There are variations in the definition of critical thinking, but conventional standards agree - critical thinking is the evaluation of ideas and experiences. Ask anyone who works with girls if they teach critical thinking skills, they will emphatically tell you “yes”. Such is the importance placed on reason, logic and decision making. However, upon closer examination, one comes to understand that critical thinking is a highly individualized process that involves filtering information through personal belief systems as well as any intellectual process of reason or logic. A girl’s gender and life experience influence her beliefs and as a result, her critical thinking.

Our determination to protect and help girls can turn teaching critical thinking skills into imparting our own or society’s values instead. For example, when we ask them to critically think about lying for a friend, the response we anticipate is a foregone conclusion. We guide them to what we consider the ideal response, rather than educate them about the process itself - the more valuable life-long tool.

When examining critical thinking in the above example, through one of the premises of female responsive services – *girls are relational* - we see that we must consider the importance of the girl’s relationship with her friend because she most certainly will. It is a mitigating factor and her thinking process will lead her to a logical conclusion *for her* – cover for her friend and preserve their relationship.

It is easy to oversimplify and dogmatize the critical thinking process in what is a well-intentioned attempt to be efficient in changing the behaviors of girls in our charge. However, once they are no longer within our influence they need to be able to make effective judgments for themselves and they will do that based on their own experiences, values and intellectual processes. We cannot change past experiences and we may have little impact on values but we can help

them learn more about how they process, and with girls there are ample opportunities to process.

Two Seniors had this to say about their experience with critical thinking in a school setting:

**Emma:** It’s such a bizarre thing to go to school and sit in a chair and listen to somebody spilling off what they know...and just, you know, rote learning big chunks of information but not thinking about it, or saying it in your own way or analyzing it or evaluating it – which is probably the most important. You don’t have a right to say your own perspective.

**Joan:** Because if you take on their perspective then you’re on the right track!” (McGregor, 2000)

Emma and Joan (insert) describe a dynamic that can prevent the girls in our care from developing higher order thinking skills, like critical thinking. If they are expected to simply take in information and return that exact same information on demand, they have not learned critical thinking skills. They have learned memorization and compliance.

The critical thinking process, as a higher order thinking process, is unique to each individual and must be taught with this in mind. We must not judge girls when their critical thinking leads them to a different conclusion than we would come to - what is a “wrong” conclusion to us, may make perfect sense to them. You may not approve of their every decision. You may not refrain from administering consequences for behaviors resulting from their decisions. But, a discussion about the thinking process that led to the decision in the first place is crucial. Done from the girls’ perspective, it will have a greater impact. She is the primary decision maker in her life and teaching her to think critically will help her with that responsibility in the future.

**What else needs to be considered when teaching critical thinking skills to girls?**

- § Remain value neutral. If a girl feels you are judging her, she will resist your instruction. Save sharing your values for a different time.
- § Honor her life experiences. She wants to know that you have an understanding of where she is coming from and arriving at the “right” conclusion isn’t always the same for her as it is for you.
- § Honor her struggles with gender role expectations. Sacrificing relationships to make a “right” decision is difficult for girls and they may determine that it isn’t worth the risk.
- § Be ready for challenges to the order of things in your program. As uncomfortable as this might get, it is a sign that she is successfully developing and using her critical thinking skills.

McGregor, G. (2000). Kids Who ‘Talk Back’ - Critically Literate or Disruptive Youth? *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Vol. 44 Issue 3.

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**Kathy Nesteby, Challenge Grant Coordinator**  
**Iowa Commission on the Status of Women**  
**1-800-558-4427 or (515) 281-6915**  
**Kathy.Nesteby@iowa.gov**  
**[www.state.ia.us/dhr/sw/girls](http://www.state.ia.us/dhr/sw/girls)**

Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force  
Iowa Commission on the Status of Women  
Lucas State Office Building  
Des Moines, IA 50319