



# Girl Connection

FOR THOSE WHO SERVE ADOLESCENT FEMALES  
IOWA GENDER-SPECIFIC SERVICES TASK FORCE  
APRIL 2005

What occupies the attention of middle and high school age girls more than anything else? Most, if not everyone's first response to that question is inevitably "boys". However, spend a little time thinking about the girls you work with, the girls you see everyday, the girls in your own home, for that matter. Who do they spend their time talking to and about more than anyone else? Their girlfriends. Valerie Hey, in a 1997 study, found that 90% of the notes girls pass in school were about their relationships with each other.

Friendship with other girls is as important to young women as breathing. But, how well equipped are most young women to be and expect truly good friendship behavior? If we take a look at the messages girls receive about how they are supposed to behave in relationships, invariably, we see the following:

1. Be nice. Be friends with everyone.
2. Put others first.
3. Other girls are "the competition" when it comes to boys.
4. Girls will be girls and their behavior is to be expected.

These are only a few of the damaging messages girls receive. Adults have a responsibility to offer alternative messages that reinforce and support healthy relationships between girls and young women.

Consider these alternatives to the above:

1. Girls don't have to be friends with or like everyone they meet. Instead, they need to be respectful, expect the same in return and know that it is OK to be selective about whom they call "friend".
2. It can be appropriate to put others' needs first. Compromise and sacrifice can be beneficial. However, girls need to recognize when they compromise who they are or sacrifice beyond their means. Adolescence is a time when girls struggle to reconcile their desire to assert themselves with societal demands that they be emotionally responsible to and for others first. If putting others first means compromise or sacrifice that feels like it is too much, it is! Adults can help girls learn where this line is and how to keep it firmly drawn.
3. Girls' friendships can sustain them through some of the most difficult times in their lives. Girls need to be encouraged to recognize the importance of these relationships and that they shouldn't and don't need to be sacrificed for a romantic relationship. Viewing other girls as "the competition" only serves to diminish all girls and the importance of relationships between girls.
4. There is no personality trait or behavior that all females automatically possess. When we accept "girls will be girls" we abdicate our responsibility. Girls are not born "catty" or "gossipy". They learn to be when it is modeled and reinforced by others. They also learn that most people aren't comfortable with girls showing their anger or being assertive. The commonly labeled "girls will be girls" behaviors result from attempts to measure up to unattainable gender role standards while still needing someplace to go with anger and frustration.

It is up to adults to examine their own behavior, their acceptance of cliché and gender role stereotypes and whether they are sending the first set of messages or the second. We have to look at whether we are contributing to the problem or attempting to ameliorate it. It is crucial to look at the small things we do everyday that either reinforce or discredit the messages girls receive.

## Whispers & Screams are hard to hear: creating an audience for girls voices

9th Annual Conference: May 12 & 13, 2005, The Hotel at Gateway Center, Ames, Iowa

### Outside In

*"Young women are powerfully impacted by societal and personal influences, often to their detriment. We, who care about young women, need to act as champions on their behalf – contesting complacency and advocating change - while fortifying young women to themselves challenge that which would harm them."*

#### Keynote Speakers

Meda Chesney-Lind, Ph.D., Professor of Women's Studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, is an outspoken advocate for girls and women, particularly those who find their way into the criminal justice system. Her work on the problem of sexism in the treatment of girls in the juvenile justice system was partially responsible for the recent national attention devoted to services to girls in that system.

Jessica Henderson Daniel, Ph.D., ABPP, Associate Director of the LEAH (Leadership Education in Adolescent Health) training program at Boston's Children's Hospital and coeditor of *Complete Guide to Mental Health for Women*, emphasizes the crucial role that race and ethnicity play in adolescent girls' mental health.

For more information visit our website [www.state.ia.us/dhr/sw/girls](http://www.state.ia.us/dhr/sw/girls)  
or contact Kathy Nesteby: [kathy.nesteby@iowa.gov](mailto:kathy.nesteby@iowa.gov) or (800) 558-4427

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## The Girl Connection

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For back issues of *The Girl Connection*, more information about the Gender-Specific Services Task Force,  
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