



Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

April 2006

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Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force

Accountability and the Gender-Specific Approach

When I ran a program for girls, one of the concerns I heard regularly was, “Do they really hold girls accountable?”. I realized an erroneous assumption had been made. Many believed that simply because a program was responsive to the needs of females it was “soft”, “fluffy” or “girly” and therefore couldn’t possibly hold the girls accountable for their actions.

Initially, I was simply defensive. How could educated professionals make such assumptions? Were these people so focused on punishment that they were unable to see other ways to hold young women accountable? Did they fear appearing “soft” themselves? Was it only me or were others who ran programs for girls experiencing the same thing?

I quickly came to find that I was not alone in my experience.

For some the belief that “girly” programs are all fluff and no substance is a fairly transparent indication of sexism. Because our culture equates femininity with weakness, there are those who consequently equate female responsive program design with weakness. For others, it is a lack of understanding about accountability within a gender-specific approach. Whether these beliefs and misunderstandings are inadvertent or deliberate is entirely dependent upon the individual. The reality is that this perspective is not unusual and can make an already difficult road that all programs face even more challenging.

Contributing factors to holding girls accountable within a gender-specific approach

*System involved girls experience extremely high rates of victimization and therefore feelings of powerlessness. It is counterproductive and potentially damaging to demand they behave submissively to prove compliance. Exercising dominance over girls may (or may not) get them to complete their community service in a timely manner, for example, but it will most certainly reinforce feelings of powerlessness.

*Girls tend to process in a circular manner. They like to discuss things and may want to do so repeatedly. Males use about 1,500 words per day and females use about 5,000, so it is safe to assume that girls are not always trying to get out of consequences simply because they want to talk about them. There is a tendency to dispense consequences and expect girls to accept them without discussion. Girls are much more apt to accept consequences if they get an explanation. Giving them a “because I said so” answer will most certainly exacerbate any problem. Staff who regularly give this type of answer should take a look at how invested they are in having power over girls versus truly helping them.

*Girls respond best to being held accountable within *relationships* with non-exploitive adults. If there are even the simple beginnings of a solid relationship, the girl will be concerned about what the adult thinks of her behavior. They will know that the same adult will be checking up on them and avoiding disappointing those they have relationships with is a strong motivator. If professionals do not take the time for relationship building, the best they can hope for is that the young woman will comply minimally. At worst, girls will rebel at the smallest perceived injustice and will resist any attempt to assist them even to the point of appearing irrational and self-defeating.

Restorative Justice is an excellent example of focusing on the relationships that exist between people to reinforce accountability. It addresses the issue of accountability in unique ways that diverge from the traditional shaming, punishment and rote obedience. This makes it a perfect fit for girls in the justice system as their investment in the relationships in their lives is paramount.

Ways to develop a strong base for accountability within a gender-specific approach

Develop relationships by asking about their day, showing an interest in their life, talking about things that have nothing to do with program goals, and sharing about things you enjoy (hobbies, music, etc.).

Discuss accountability expectations before they become an issue. Encourage her to ask questions.

If she needs to be held accountable, discuss consequences, more than once if necessary. Give explanations that involve more than saying, "because those are the rules" and talk about the impact her choices have on those she cares about (don't assume you know who those people are - ASK).

Never use dominance to gain compliance, especially with young women who have been victimized.

Learn more about restorative justice practices.

Check up on her regularly, not just when you think she may have done something wrong. "Catch" her being good. This reinforces those behaviors and strengthens your relationship. At the same time, you will be showing her that you're going to be checking up on her in the future. This will give her pause when she is making behavior choices in the future.

Remember, the nature of the consequence is less important than the *manner* in which it is handled.

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The Girl Connection

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