



## Social Action

# Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

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One of my favorite stories to share about girls and social action involves a group of middle school girls infuriated by dress code double standards in their school. It seems the girls were always being monitored in their clothing choices; however, when a group of boys began wearing t-shirts with the slogan "Hooters: More Than a Mouthful", there were no repercussions. These young women were astute enough to realize the double entendre in the boys' t-shirts and they chose to wage a campaign of their own to challenge the double standard. These young women created their own t-shirts with a drawing of a rooster (instead of an owl as shown on the boys' shirts) and their slogan read, "Cocks: Nothing to Crow About". The reaction of the school administration was immediate. Demands were made that the girls change their shirts and never wear them to school again or risk serious consequences. These young women, with the assistance of supportive adults, stood their ground and ultimately the school choose to ban both t-shirts.

There are many lessons to be learned from a story like this, not the least of which is the power of social action. Power not only to make an impact but also to benefit the individuals taking the action. The young women may not have gotten exactly what they wanted in the end and it may have been a difficult battle, but they were able to feel satisfaction about the fact that they took action. They had been ignored when they had made complaints about the double standard by conventional means, so they created a situation that forced a reponse from those who had dismissed them.

Encouraging young people to take social action may seem like a scary proposition. But, the reality is that teenagers are at a stage in life when one of their primary developmental tasks is to rebel and find their own identity. They are going to do it one way or the other. Social action is an opportunity to teach them to do it in ways that can limit negative consequences and develop skills they can use in other areas of their lives.

Through social action young women can learn the skills of working with others toward a common goal, of winning and losing gracefully, being organized, persistent, assertive and taking appropriate risks.

They can also gain perspective.

Young women in the juvenile justice and human service systems frequently develop skewed personal beliefs due to their development being interrupted by any number of things. They may believe they are incapable of making a positive impact or that problems are insurmountable. Social action is a chance for them to look at the big picture. It can put life into perspective. Adults can facilitate this by broadening the scope of any social action. For example, the above situation could grow into a discussion of sexual objectification.

Social action is also the use of constructive anger. Direct expression of anger is something our culture is not comfortable with in young women. As a result, girls tend to internalize or indirectly express anger, frequently at female peers in the form of relational aggression. Social action occurs because a person becomes angry enough about a circumstance to decide to do something about it. Anger can provide the energy for that action. It can be a powerul tool when used toward a constructive rather than destructive end, an excellent lesson for any young person.

So, take the time to have a discussion with young women about the things they would most like to see changed in the world and be prepared to teach them the skills they are going to need to do just that! Whether or not they are successful, they will develop confidence and pride in themselves from having made the effort.

### **Some Tips about Teaching Social Action Skills**

It must be a social action of their own choosing. Give them suggestions, challenge their beliefs and have them research their position, but recognize the fine line between guiding and directing.

As with any decision, have them weigh the potential consequences of their actions. Social action has the potential to make dramatic change but it is not without risk.

Follow their progress every step of the way. Starting them on a path of social action means that you are going to be there to help them through the bumps along the road.

*Help them recognize their social action comfort level. Are they a blogger or a picketer?*

#### **If they have a...**

**LOW comfort level:** Encourage them to extend themselves a little farther. The important thing is to respect where they are and be there to support any attempts they make to go beyond.

**HIGH comfort level:** Talk especially about the risks of social action. It is a non-threatening way to teach a young woman to look at other areas of her life where she might be making risky choices.

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