

HOW TO DEVELOP POSITIVE STRATEGIES FOR MENTORING GIRLS



Young girls have a challenging time along the road to womanhood including: puberty; a barrage of media stereotypes; the struggle to develop a strong self-esteem and respect and constant peer pressure to fit in.

The role of a mentor in a young girl's life can offer support, build self-esteem, provide affirmation and be an appropriate role model to help shape her into a strong, independent and self-affirmed young woman.

CHALLENGES FACING YOUNG WOMEN

- Girls are beginning puberty at an earlier age. An earlier onset of puberty can increase the risk of low self-esteem and the onset of an eating disorder.
- On beginning puberty, girls usually experience a dip in their self-esteem.
- Media portrayal of women attempts to enforce stereotypes; providing images of women that are almost unobtainable in appearance, airbrushed, sexualised and usually in subordinate roles to men.
- Eating Disorders and dieting are growing problems. A New Zealand study found 52% of females are dissatisfied with their body, 37% of girls have dieted from as young as 7 years old. In another study it was found that 80% of the females were within normal weight limits, but only 18% of them thought their weight was normal (Central Region Eating Disorders Services).
- In general, one in four teenage girls may suffer from the symptoms of an eating disorder, and perhaps as many as 10% of adolescent girls will go through a mild phase of almost anorexia. Anorexia nervosa is the third most common chronic illness for young females (the others being obesity and asthma) with cases of anorexia being diagnosed in girls as young as 11 years of age (CREDS).
- New Zealand has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the developed world, with about 50 teenage girls in every 1,000 falling pregnant. Of these pregnancies, about half of them result in abortion, meaning there are upwards of 3,800 babies born to teenage parents in New Zealand every year (Kiwi Families).
- Girls and women are stereotypically in subordinate roles to males, and mostly struggle with breaking the 'glass ceiling' in the corporate world.

STRATEGIES TO BUILD THE RELATIONSHIP

- Provide emotional support for your mentee; however also focus on skill development and achievement of goals.
- Have fun, the relationship will grow more naturally and develop confidence in your mentee.
- Support your mentee to channel her anger and develop a sense of equality and justice.
- Be critical of the media and help your mentee to develop media literacy; assess media images and content, accept or reject it and expect more.
- Reject the traditional view of females: competitive is not feminine, girls are not naturally good at maths and science, beauty is paramount.
- If asked for advice offer options and guide your mentee through the problem solving process, offer truth about your experiences as a woman.
- Problem Solving: identify the problem, brainstorm solutions, decide on a plan and follow up.
- Affirm your mentee as a complex individual, not a typecast; celebrate her uniqueness.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

- Usually girls begin puberty before boys, from between 9 to 11 years old.
- Girls speak more words a day than boys.
- Girls experience more outwardly visual changes during puberty: development of breasts and hips.
- Girls are more likely to learn better when material is presented in spoken or written format.
- Challenges regarding low attainment in maths and science of girls are more to do with individual confidence levels about the subject rather than the issue of gender.
- Girls use gossiping as a form of stress management.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

TIP

- Build self-esteem through focusing on strengths and celebrating success.
- Help your mentee to develop strategies for learning from failures and moving on.
- Talk and refer to female role models who are intelligent, accomplished and inspiring. Ideally do some research and pick someone in your mentee's area of interest.
- Show your mentee what it is to be a good friend; listen, treat her with respect and affirm her. Encourage her to look for friends with the same qualities.
- Encourage your mentee to keep active; sport or dance is a great way for her to develop an awareness of her body and inner strength.
- If your mentee lacks good role models encourage her to join an all-girl group such as girl guides, a dance troupe or sports team.
- Be sensitive to the range of emotions your mentee might experience; these may be heightened due to menstruation and puberty.
- Encourage your mentee to eat a healthy balanced diet, exercise and get enough sleep.
- Be aware of stereotypes so that you can avoid them: as a mentor show your mentee examples, women working in maths and science, girls/women getting along well reaching goals.
- Focus on your mentee's strengths, build on them and affirm her as a strong young woman.
- Female mentors should be positive about menstruation and look upon it as part of becoming a woman, something to celebrate.
- Treat your mentee as a young adult not a girl.
- Provide specific reinforcement; focus on effort and use descriptive words. "Rosie, the resume you drafted was detailed and provided relevant information about the career pathway you are aiming for".
- Encourage/model self respect: be kind to yourself, share how you live a healthy lifestyle, talk positively about yourself and talk about your strengths.
- Be an advocate for her involvement in maths and science, instil confidence in her abilities.

COMMUNICATING WITH GIRLS

- Genuinely listen, be present to what your mentee is saying: not preparing your reply. Watch out for the non verbal cues and read between the lines.
- Provide feedback in the form of clarifying comments, listen to the story and the feelings that your mentee is experiencing.
- Ensure you don't get stuck rehashing the story, support your mentee to move forward, reflect and focus on what is within her control now: what can she do to make the best of the situation.
- Allow your mentee space to process feelings and thoughts.
- Follow your mentee's lead on the amount of eye contact to use.
- Acknowledge your mentee's feelings: 'I understand that you are angry' or 'you seem sad?'
- Use verbal (oh, yes, mmm) and non verbal (nod head, lean forward) cues to show you are listening.



REFERENCES & FURTHER INFORMATION

- Useful links can be found at www.thegirlsproject.co.nz
- Health concerns www.teenhealth.co.nz
- Family planning helpline **0800 463 654**
- Teenage Pregnancy <http://www.kiwifamilies.co.nz/articles/teen-parent-overview/>
- Eating Disorder Association of NZ www.ed.org.nz
- Raising Girls by Gisela Preuschoff (Finch Publishing Sydney)
- How to Talk so Kids Will Listen and Listen so Kids Will Talk by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (Harper Collins Publishers, New York).