Competence, confidence, connectedness: how these qualities help girls thrive

By JoAnn Deak, Ph.D.

We’re hearing a lot these days about how more women than men are attending college and graduate school. American medical schools, for example, are reporting a gender imbalance in favor of females for the very first time. Girls are scoring significantly higher than boys on SAT’s and ACT’s.

Girls’ higher academic achievement is one reason the gender pendulum has swung, and a great deal is now being reported in the press about the plight of boys. But this is by no means an either-or issue. According to a large, important study by the American Association of University Women (AAUW), the educational performance of both U.S. boys and girls has improved over the last 35 years. And, significantly, the study found, the success of girls does not come at the expense of boys.

We need to do a better job of raising and teaching all children, keeping in mind that girls and boys are somewhat different and often need somewhat different strategies and approaches.

Self-esteem in girls and boys

Most people would agree that self-esteem is critical to a child’s behavior, performance and ability to make good choices. How do the differences between boys and girls play out in relation to self-esteem? One pattern revealed in the AAUW study showed that girls rated their self-esteem significantly lower than boys rated theirs. And this gap increased as kids moved toward adolescence. And despite all the gains in their test scores, the 2008 national study Real Girls, Real Pressure reported a “self-esteem crisis” permeating every aspect of a girl’s life: her looks, her performance in school and her relationships with friends and family members.

Here are some of the key findings from that study.

», 70 percent of girls did not believe they were “good enough” or they did not measure up in some way.
Help girls thrive...
Continued from page 1...

➤ 75 percent of girls with low self-esteem reported negative behaviors such as bullying, smoking, drinking, eating disorders or cutting themselves.

➤ Transition to teen years was a key period during which many girls lost their trust in adults.

Importantly, this study found that parents’ words and actions are central in fostering positive self-esteem in their daughters.

Defining self-esteem

What are the characteristics or components that, if they were not present, would make it impossible to have self-esteem? I call them the three C’s: Competence, Confidence and Connectedness.

These qualities can’t be taught or tweaked by discussion or self-analysis. They must be experienced. This means that parents and other adults in girls’ lives need to help structure their world so they will have opportunities to experience each C sufficiently to enhance their self-esteem.

About connectedness

Many programs geared to improving self-esteem focus on analyzing one’s self and one’s appreciation of self. But self-focus does not build self-esteem. Indeed, it may encourage egocentrism, selfishness and even a sense of being “overly precious.”

It is by focusing outward rather than inward that the self is enhanced. Connecting with another human being, feeling that you are part of a group, giving, caring and working for a cause are all examples of connectedness.

How this plays out

Balance and synergy between the three C’s are important. For example, girls who have high levels of connectedness but much lower levels of confidence and competence are more susceptible to peer pressure. They’re more likely to be victimized and less likely to face up to a conflict or a challenge.

This can be a special problem for girls who have a strong drive to care about others and to have others care about them. What helps, I have found, is for girls to “spread out” their need for connectedness by belonging to a group outside of school, playing on a team, tutoring others or taking care of animals. This eases the pressure to have all of a girl’s needs met by a single source such as a girlfriend, a social clique or a boyfriend.

Having multiple connections can help keep a girl healthy and balanced when the inevitable peer and friendship issues start to rock her boat.

Crucible events

Girls need to be as sturdy and resilient as possible to handle those “crucible” events and moments in their lives that are not conducive to keeping their self-esteem at a healthy high. These are typically big happenings such as the death of a parent, divorce or moving to a new school. For many girls, crucible events also occur in areas of discipline, risk-taking, separation, loss and friendship.

In terms of discipline, for example, the way parents mete it out can help a girl become stronger—or weaker. Letting a girl know that a particular transgression is a misstep—and that you believe in her and expect that she will learn from this experience—often has a positive effect on self-esteem. On the other hand, continually saying “What’s wrong with you?” can erode a girl’s self-esteem.

I’m not suggesting that parents should refrain from discipline. It’s important to show that mistakes have consequence, but it can be done in a supportive context.

Brain research implications

Using the word “misstep” instead of “being bad” or doing something “wrong” lets kids know that missteps are part of learning and growing and are not held against them in a moral way. One of the new findings of brain research is that a part of the brain is activated when we make a misstep—and that learning and memory are enhanced by this “mistake filter.”

The brain seems to have been designed to learn and remember more when we make a misstep, compared to doing something perfectly the first time.

Knowing this, I’ve begun to emphasize how important it is to encourage girls to try things without having to do them perfectly—of not being undone when we do something “wrong” but adjusting and moving on with life. And, as you can imagine, this is especially helpful to so many girls who lean toward perfectionism.

Parents’ role is key

Here are some factors for parents to think about when they are handling crucible or, for that matter, everyday events:

➤ Acknowledging pain and providing a cuddly lap space is good, but it’s not enough. And if it is our only response, it can weaken rather than strengthen a child.

➤ The nurturing response is critical and needed, but a balanced blend of nurturing and challenging is the healthiest mix for the developing human at any age.

➤ Choices are crucial. It’s up to adults to help children identify some of their choices because kids are not always able to see for themselves that they have viable options and alternatives.

➤ It’s difficult to isolate a single main contributor to emotional resilience and strength, but we know that a key element is time spent with one’s family.

Quality time counts, but quantity seems to be even more critical. When families spend time doing things together, talking—just being a family in all of what that means—we see a strong, protective effect on children’s lives.

➤ Gender inequities still exist, and it’s clear that some of our traditional methods of parenting (and operating schools) have and do contribute to these inequities. As parents, we need to consciously focus on building and maintaining the self-esteem of girls in all of our interactions, knowing that in doing so, we can help them realize their full potential.

‘Can my 11-year-old stay home alone?’

Q  My 11-year-old says she’s old enough to stay home without a sitter, and I’m inclined to agree. With mobile phones, we feel very connected. What are some guidelines for making this decision?
—C.M., Detroit

A  Many 11- and 12-year-olds are able to take care of themselves at home alone, but you need to make this decision individually based on a child’s maturity, responsibility and resourcefulness as well as the community you live in.

A big part of the decision will depend on your child’s comfort level at home alone—and yours. Do you tend to worry a lot? Does your child make smart choices under pressure?

It can help to test the waters. You might leave your child at home for a short period of time and gradually extend it, but probably not for more than three hours for an 11-year-old.

Give some thought to possible emergencies. Kids alone need to know what to do, specifically, in case of a fire, a personal injury or some other crisis. Post emergency and backup phone numbers in a prominent place.

Child psychologist and researcher Michele Goyette-Ewing, Ph.D., of the Yale Child Study Center, also suggests creating clear home rules about what your child can and cannot do. Practice “what if” scenarios as much as possible, and include these questions:

Will visitors be allowed? Who exactly may come over when your child is home alone?

Should your child answer the door? Should she or he ignore mail carriers or delivery people?

Should your child answer the phone? What if a stranger calls? (“Mom’s busy. Can I tell her to call you back?”)

What activities are allowed? Using the computer, watching TV, cooking, microwaving?

We all have our own definition of middle age. “I knew I was there when someone told me to take the dates off my resume,” a friend says. But middle age gets an unfair bad rap. It’s pictured as a period of inevitable loss and decline, but new research suggests quite the opposite.

Says Patricia Cohen, author of In Our Prime: The Invention of Middle Age: “When researchers asked people over 65 to pick the age they would most like to return to, the majority bypassed the wild and people over 65 to pick the age they would most like to return to, the majority bypassed the wild and

Carol Ryff, director of the Institute on Aging at the University of Wisconsin sees the misperception as one of focus. Instead of looking at our gains.

Middle-age Boomers and Gen Xers have something else going for them as well. “More time,” says Cohen. “With longer life spans, those in midlife have decades to recoup losses and change direction.”

So age 50 is still age 50, not the new 30, as some like to say. And that’s a good thing.

Study suggests introverts are not what they seem

Psychologist Susan Cain describes three common misconceptions about introversion in her book “Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking.”

First is the myth that being an introvert is a bad thing. It’s not. In fact, Cain says, there are surprising advantages to being an introvert. Introverts seem to think more carefully, stay on task longer and work more accurately.

Another myth is that introverts can’t be leaders. In reality, the list of introverted leaders is lengthy—from Rosa Parks to Ghandi to Bill Gates, just to name a few. And while it’s true that extraverts can be highly charismatic, introverts’ tendency toward deliberation often yields better results.

The third is that introverts are antisocial. Again, not true. The need for intimacy is present in all of us, says Cain. It’s just that introverts tend to feel more comfortable in small gatherings with close friends.

—Adapted from Psychology Today
What to do with all that stuff when parents move

Most older people decide at some point to downsize. It often happens when they move from a larger home to a smaller place that’s easier to manage or to assisted living. And typically, there’s a whole lot of stuff to unload.

It used to be easier to do this. You could just call Goodwill, the Salvation Army or another local charity, schedule a pickup and earn a tax deduction for your donation. The charity would find a home for the donated goods or sell them in a resale shop to help fund its programs. It was a win-win.

Why charities get so picky

These days, many charitable organizations are inundated with donations—it’s not just older people who have amassed way too much. The average U.S. household has $7,000 worth of stuff the owners don’t want, according to NPD Research (www.npd.com). Some items have never been used and most will never be used again. The feeling that “our stuff ends up owning us” is widespread.

The upshot is that the shelves and racks at resale shops are crammed and their inventories are bloated. In 2010, the Salvation Army spent more than $10 million on landfill for donations that could not be sold or given away, according to the Consumer Reports Money Adviser newsletter.

What’s different now

Most charities these days have specific criteria for what they will accept and what they are willing to do to receive your donations. They know what will and will not sell in their shops, and they don’t want to get stuck with items that have no use or resale value.

For example, a charity might refuse your dad’s old desk with the chrome legs because it looks “too corporate.” Or your parents’ bedroom furniture may have too many scratches. Some organizations no longer accept books, vinyl records or electronic devices. You may be told that truck pickups are unavailable in your neighborhood or that workers do not climb more than one flight of stairs.

Dealing with new restrictions

Although the donation rules may be stricter these days, it’s still worth the effort to observe the eco-friendly 3Rs: Reduce, Recycle and Reuse. Just be willing to spend a bit more time to help your older relatives (or yourself) find a new home for used furniture, clothing and equipment.

But don’t ask your mom to give up her vintage teddy bear collection.

Here are some suggestions:

▶ Talk to family and friends. Before you start helping your relatives scale down, let family members, friends and neighbors know what’s available. Your niece might want your mother’s vintage handbags or a neighbor might happily restore an antique loveseat.

“We heard about a family in our parents’ town that lost everything in a fire,” says Janice. “We were able to give them nice dishes, pots and pans, area rugs, linens, bedding and furniture.”

▶ Do local research. Visit resale stores in your parents’ community. Find out what the stores are selling, and look for a good match with what your relative has.

Be aware that some of the most difficult things to dispose of are obsolete, oversized electronic products such as televisions, computers, printers and fax machines. However, many cities, towns and shopping malls have special days in the spring and fall for electronic equipment drop-off.

Find out what’s available in your relative’s community. Some organizations may also offer to refurbish and resell used electronic equipment. Ask if there’s a fee for pickup.

▶ Give to individuals. Look for community bulletin boards and post “Free Stuff” flyers. “We put dad’s big recliner chair in front of his house in Florida with a ‘Free’ sign on it, and it was gone in less than an hour,” says Nancy.

▶ Try smaller nonprofits. Look beyond the Salvation Army and Goodwill to church bazaars and rescue missions. Schools, after-school programs and senior citizen drop-in centers might recycle unused arts and crafts materials, wrapping paper, stationery, jigsaw puzzles and office supplies, among other items. Many college theater departments have wardrobe collections that could make use of vintage clothing and accessories.

▶ Be clear. If a charity agrees to send someone to pick up furniture or other large items, be clear about the condition, location, dimensions and any obstacles a driver might have to contend with. This will help ensure against last-minute or on-site refusals.

Use the Internet

If you go online and enter the key words “give away stuff,” you will very likely be surprised by the array of opportunities. In most cases, you will need to enter your location to find out if the particular service is available where you are. Here are a few sites and ideas that might be helpful:

www.freecycle.org Log in and say what you have to offer (or what you would like to receive). Craigslist accepts Free Stuff listings too. But if you are giving things away, you may get many responses that don’t materialize. And be careful. Do not put yourself in a situation where you are alone when strangers come to your house.

www.WebThriftStore.com This is not a charity. It’s an online business that supports charitable giving. Donors list their items for sale, with proceeds going to the charity of their choice. The site pays basic transaction fees, and charities pay a small fee for the site’s services.

www.ClassWish.org Enter a zip code to see if there are participating schools in your relative’s community and what the teachers in those schools could use in their classrooms. If you donate items directly, be sure to connect with the school or the teacher first to make drop-off arrangements.
Share the good things that happen at work

Do your children have a good understanding of what you do at work? You might be surprised by what they actually think.

In her landmark study *Ask The Children* (Quill), our colleague Ellen Galinsky found that most moms and dads said that they did, indeed, enjoy their work. But more than half of the children interviewed for her study were under the impression that their parents did not like their jobs.

We need to tell our children more about the kind of work we do, and we need to share with them the good things that happen on our jobs—not just the stresses.

**Talk to kids directly**

Moms talk a little more about their work than dads do, according to Galinsky’s research. But both mothers and fathers tend to do this talking **around** children, not to them directly. The result is that kids get many of their ideas about the work world from observing their parents and overhearing bits and pieces of conversations.

Our kids learn a lot from us, whether we like it or not. But if we do not talk to them directly and intentionally about our work, we run the risk of their forming negative impressions based on misunderstanding or misinformation.

“We need to decide what information to share and not leave it to chance,” says Galinsky, a well-known researcher who is President of the Families and Work Institute and Executive Editor of *Work & Family Life*.

“In this way, we provide an accurate window onto the world of work to help prepare children for the future. We need to emphasize the pleasures of our jobs as well as the problems,” she says. “And when we mention problems, we should talk about what we’re doing to solve them, so kids can learn how to address challenges.”

Here are some suggestions from Galinsky’s *Ask The Children*.

**Let children visit your workplace, if possible.** This will give them a mental picture of where you are during the work day. They will know who you are talking about when you mention your coworkers. If a visit is not possible, take photos of the inside and outside of your workplace, and point out where you do your job.

**Give young kids props so they can play out work scenarios.** Children love to dress up and act out different roles. If you listen to what kids are saying when they’re “riding on the train” or “being the boss,” you will be able to pick up on clues and clarify any areas of misunderstanding.

After taking her daughter to work during exam week, an Indiana high school teacher was surprised to overhear the girl sternly instructing her dolls, whom she had lined up neatly in rows, “Eyes on your papers!”

**Give older children more direct information.** Talk to them about training programs you are attending and any new software that you have learned at work. Talk to them about other interests that you are eager to learn more about.

**When guests visit your home, ask them about their work.** This is a great opportunity for children to get specific information about the many different occupations people can choose from.

**How much to share**

If you’re in a bad mood when you get home from work, tell your kids you need a little time to settle in—so they don’t think that what you’re feeling is their fault. You don’t always have to paint a rosy picture about your job. Just be sure to talk at a level your child can understand.

“Glad you had a chance to meet my boss. He’s nice, isn’t he!”

**Think through the lessons you want to convey.** Share with kids your thoughts about some of the important aspects of your work life such as getting along with other people on the job, following through on a project, or figuring out new ways to solve a problem.

**Ask how you’re doing.** How well do your kids think you are navigating work and family life? As Galinsky’s study shows, children are unlikely to say the things you dread the most—such as “Mom, I want you to stop working.” They are more likely to express concern that your work makes you tired or stressed. Children are aware that the work you do makes it possible for them to do and have the things they want. And they like being asked for their ideas on how to make life easier. They’ll come up with insightful and positive suggestions.

**Just don’t go overboard.** It’s possible to talk too much about your work—and when you do, it turns kids off. Be sensitive to their responses to your comments, and know when it’s time to change the subject.

---

**Pick the right time and place**

The best time to talk to children about your work life is when you can really connect. But, especially with younger kids, it can be in bits and pieces.

Here’s what works for many parents:

**At dinnertime** After you have listened to your children talk about their day, say a few words about yours.

**During drive-time** Tell your kids about something you learned at work that day while you’re heading home after softball practice or running an errand together.

**At bedtime** Did something funny happen at work? Tell your child about it when you’re feeling relaxed and cozy. Talk about the different kinds of work that people are doing in the stories you read to your child.

**By all means, don’t be scary.** You can do a great deal to help your children learn about the world of work. Just make sure that your comments and the information you share are age-appropriate and not too negative.

---

WFL March 2012 ◆ www.workandfamilylife.com
The upside of learning to delegate responsibilities

By Anne Perryman

W

e sometimes rationalize a go-it-alone approach at the workplace and with our families as well. We tell ourselves, “If I want the job done right, I might as well do it myself.” Or “I’m in a hurry. It will take too long to explain.” Or the more subtle, “I didn’t want to ask, but couldn’t you see that I needed some help?”

Learning to delegate is a skill, and the better we do it, the more competent our staff and family members will be. They may even come to appreciate that they were entrusted with a responsibility. They’ll feel good about you and about themselves for being helpful, and they may be motivated to take on even more challenging assignments in the future.

The ideal way to delegate

Delegating is basically the same thing whatever job or level you find yourself in. That is, you are saying to another person: This is something I can’t do myself or I don’t want to. I’m asking you to do it for me, and I trust that you have the skills to do it. If I know of any special way to do the work, I will tell you. If not, do it your way. And if you need help, I’m here. I need the work by no later than... If the project is more open-ended, you might ask, When do you think you can get it done?

In theory, this sounds like a simple, straightforward request. But wherever human beings are involved, there will be complications and pitfalls to avoid.

“To become a more skilled and effective delegator at work and at home, try these steps.”

Look at the big picture first.

What work could be delegated? With your priorities and schedule in mind, what could another person reasonably do (or not do)? Hold on to parts of the job that require your judgment and expertise or other aspects that your supervisor would have to approve.

Make direct requests. When you ask a staff member or coworker to do some piece of work, don’t pussyfoot around. “Some people whine or apologize when they ask you to do something for them,” says Jo. “It’s so annoying.”

Another approach to avoid is: “Would you mind doing this?” Or “Could you do me a favor?” In most situations, it’s better to just make a polite request, “Here’s the work that needs doing.” And don’t forget that delegating should not mean “dumping” a messy project on someone else. It should mean sharing it.

Pick your people carefully. We don’t always get to make choices when it comes to delegating. We may have a small staff—or a five-year-old helping us stuff envelopes at home. But whenever possible, delegate to someone who has the interest, skills and time to get the work done. And always delegating the same task to the same person may be efficient in the short run, but other people need to develop skills too.

Make the assignment clear. Communicate all the information necessary to get the job done. For a routine project, you may not have to say much. For long-term, more complex ones, share as much information as you can.

The more people know about how their role fits into the bigger picture, the better they will be able to do their jobs. Describe your vision of the end product. Define their tasks and be precise about deadlines.

Be proactive. Point out any potential mine fields. Tell people about obstacles they should try to avoid and about people who should be consulted. Point out turf issues or toes that should not be stepped on. ◆

How to let go of the work...but also keep control

Of course, you want the job to be done right, but at the same time you don’t want to constantly be looking over someone’s shoulders. Here are some ways to achieve that balance:

Be clear when and how you will check in along the way. For a major task, set dates to determine progress and a final date for completion. With less experienced people, make sure early on that they understand your instructions. Don’t ask vague questions like, “How’s it going?” And don’t surprise people with the request to “Let me see what you’ve done so far.”

Be available to help if someone seems to be struggling. Be aware that many people do not like to ask for help, for a variety of reasons. For one, they might assume that, if they’ve been assigned a task, they are expected to know how to do it. It can help to ask for informal reports along the way. And make sure everyone knows that it’s perfectly okay to seek you out—and that you expect people to ask questions.

Don’t panic when someone makes a mistake. Try to take it in stride and not over-react. Offer to help solve the problem or correct work that was done incorrectly.

Resist the urge you may feel, perhaps strongly, to snatch a task away from someone and do it yourself. It will put you right back where you started, and you will have lost the opportunity to teach this work to someone else.

Give feedback after the work was completed. Say what was done well and what needs to be worked on for the next project. Be specific in your praise. Go beyond “great job.” Make points such as, “I like the way you followed up with the engineering staff on your own,” for example. ◆
Do ‘energy bars’ really boost energy?

Yes, but only because they contain calories—and calories fuel the body. Energy bars (also called sports bars or nutrition bars) vary in protein, fat and carb content as well as added minerals and vitamins. A few also have extras such as herbs and omega-3 fats.

Energy bars will not make you any more energetic, stronger or faster than other foods, however. Nor will they improve your brain function. For the most part, they are souped-up candy bars, with a lot of sugar, fat and calories.

But not all energy bars are the same, so it helps to read the nutrition information and ingredients on the label.

Look for whole grains (like rolled oats), nuts or fruit at or near the top of the list of ingredients—not sweeteners such as high-fructose corn syrup, brown rice syrup or maltitol.

Choose bars that contain more fiber (a typical range is from 2 to 5 grams).

Calories usually range from 170 to 300. Lower-calorie bars just tend to be smaller. Some bars contain as many calories as a small meal.

Look for low saturated fat. Most bars have 2 to 4 grams.

A high-protein bar or other snack after exercising may help older people build a little more muscle, but most people don’t need the extra protein.

Don’t judge a bar by its added vitamins and minerals. You’re better off getting these from natural food sources or a multivitamin that provides 100 percent of daily values.

Studies suggest acetaminophen-asthma link

The worldwide dramatic increase in childhood asthma has been something of a mystery. Researchers started noticing the rise in the 1980s after doctors stopped prescribing aspirin for kids’ fevers, opting instead for acetaminophen—and they wondered if there might be a connection.

More than 20 studies have been conducted since then, with data on more than 200,000 children. Last November, the journal “Pediatrics” published a paper by Dr. John T. McBride of Akron Children’s Hospital in Ohio arguing that the evidence for a link between acetaminophen and asthma is strong enough for pediatricians to avoid recommending its use with infants and children who have asthma or are at risk for it. “Almost every study that’s looked for it has found a dose-response relationship between acetaminophen use and asthma,” Dr. McBride said. “The association is incredibly consistent across age, geography and culture.”

The British journal “Lancet” reported a study that found the prevalence of asthma increasing in direct proportion to the sales of acetaminophen in 36 countries.

A study at the Boston University School of Medicine randomly assigned more than 1,800 children with asthma to take either acetaminophen or ibuprofen if they developed a fever. The kids given acetaminophen to treat a fever were twice as likely to require a doctor’s care later for asthma symptoms as those who took ibuprofen.

More studies are in the works, but Dr. McBride says he’s not waiting for further results: “I cannot say with 100 percent certainty that acetaminophen makes asthma worse,” he says, “but I can say that if I had a child with asthma, I would give him or her ibuprofen for the time being.”

Be sure to talk to your child’s doctor before you give acetaminophen, especially if asthma is or may be a problem.
New and emerging information about raising girls

If you are raising a daughter, you should know about How Girls Thrive, an important book by JoAnn Deak, Ph.D., with Dory Adams, newly revised and expanded. It’s a blend of key research findings, practical tools and solid advice on how to help girls become the confident, competent individuals we know they can be (see front page article).

Dr. Deak explains some of the extraordinary advances in cognitive science over the past 20 years. Focusing on the gender research issues, she makes the connection between what we’re learning about the “affective component” of the human brain and how this applies to girls.

Dr. Deak takes on the subject of bullying, for example, observing that while all adolescents are at risk, girls are especially vulnerable. She offers helpful advice to parents on the often muddied concept of self-esteem.

The book is full of new information, such as the research by Dr. Carol Dweck at Stanford University on differences in attitude and achievement of someone with a “growth mindset” (intelligence is changeable based on effort) vs. a “fixed mindset” (intelligence is inborn and fixed).

Applying this to learning math, Dr. Deak says a growth mindset can protect girls from the stereotype that they are not as good as boys in math. “One of the most important things that educators and parents can do for girls is to communicate and positively reinforce this idea of a growth mindset,” she says. “Math is a learned skill, not a gift given at birth.”

On the subject of girls’ social lives, Dr. Deak says: “Children and teens tell me they appreciate parents who set limits on their [social] networking, schools that cover topics like bullying in their life skills classes, teachers who will not allow any type of teasing or meanness in their classes and visiting the homes of friends who have parents present and set a climate of social safety.”

How Girls Thrive (Green Blanket Press, softcover $14) is available in bookstores and online.