

Gifted Girls and Gender Issues

- By: Jane Langille

From birth, females grow up in a world of limiting stereotypes and barriers to achievement, experienced more intensely by gifted girls because they have been identified as having significant intellectual potential and so expectations are higher. From pre-school to post-secondary education and beyond, gifted females are faced with different dilemmas and different choices than those experienced by gifted males. While the media is full of good news that the gender gap is disappearing and that girls have caught up with boys in math and science achievement, research among gifted girls has found that this is an exaggeration and that the gender gap is alive and well. This article will outline the many issues confronted by gifted females, discuss the internal and external barriers to achieving potential and provide a summary of important advice for successfully raising your daughters to help them achieve their potential.

Sylvia Rimm, Ph. D. summarizes an extensive research study into the gender issue in her book *See Jane Win: The Rimm Report on How 1000 Girls Became Successful Women*. On her web site, she summarizes the top ten problems that girls and women face as follows:

1. Self-esteem is tied to being pretty and popular
2. The "air-head" mystique: Airheads are "hot" and popular, "Brains" are boring
3. Math stereotype: Girls can't do math; Boys can
4. Parent stereotypes – Dads are smart; Moms aren't – they just work hard
5. Competitiveness is unfeminine, girls and women should hide their desire to win and give up
6. Leadership is unfeminine; female leaders are often called "bossy" or "aggressive"
7. Perfectionism and risk taking are at odds with each other
8. Pressure to not invest too much time in a long education
9. Mothering metamorphosis; can women continue to be "fire eaters" and mothers
10. Glass ceilings and sticky floors

In her book *Smart Girls*, Barbara Kerr, Ph.D. presents findings from a survey of her gifted classmates from the late 1960's and early 1970's. Her research objective was to find out why the superb schooling opportunity combined with the heightened women's movement in the late 1960's did not produce women of greater accomplishment among this group of women who were identified as gifted. She found four major factors contributing to their underachievement. First, there was a denial of giftedness among the women, even though they had been identified as children and did indeed participate in an enriched education opportunity. She calls this the "imposter phenomenon" as discovered by psychotherapists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Immes (1978). Numerous bright females denied that they were intelligent, despite significant successes and measurable accomplishments.

Second, the subjects in the Kerr study reported that there had been a conspiracy of silence among their parents, a socialization effect that higher intelligence among girls was not necessarily something to be proud about. Third, the women had lowered their aspirations significantly during high school and college compared to the goals they had stated prior to high school. Finally, the respondents indicated that there had been a necessary adjustment to reality in order to meet the dilemma of having a family and pursuing their own career objectives.

In the article "Social and Emotional Issues Faced by Gifted Girls in Elementary and Secondary School," Sally M. Reis, Ph.D. outlines that there are several reasons why gifted girls either cannot or

do not realize their potential. She describes both external and internal barriers to success. In terms of external variables, she feels that the importance of environmental factors on the development of gifted and talented females cannot be overstated. Research has established the importance of parents' attitudes and beliefs about the academic self-perceptions and achievement of their children, having an even greater effect on the children than their own previous performance. Particularly with math self-concept among gifted female adolescents, research has found consistently significant correlations between parent expectations and the students' math self-concept. Conversely, memories of negative parental comments haunted gifted and talented women decades later. Another external barrier described by Reis is the overall area of issues relating to teachers. First of all, in the area of identification, teachers are found to be less accurate in predicting girls who will test positive for giftedness than they are for predicting gifted boys. Research also indicates that teachers like smart girls less than other classmates. In a study by Cooley, Chauvin and Karnes (1984) both male and female teachers regarded smart boys as more competent than gifted girls in critical and logical thinking skills and in creative-problem solving abilities, while they thought that smart girls were more competent in creative writing. Reis asserts that teachers have been found to believe and reinforce one of the most prevalent and insidious sex stereotypes – that boys have more innate ability and girls must work harder.

There are many internal barriers to success discovered in research studies among talented females. Some of the key factors include: dilemmas about abilities and talents; personal choices about family; choices about duty and caring and nurturing the talents in themselves versus putting the needs of others first; hiding abilities and differences; perfectionism; attributing success to luck rather than to ability; and confusing messages from home about politeness. The critical conflict for gifted women, which is a recurring theme in the research, is the need for achievement versus the desire for connectedness in relationships. Brown and Gilligan found that women in college are "at the crossroads". While they may have previously been confident and outspoken, they became unsure of their accomplishments. The Horner Effect or the Fear of Success Syndrome occurs when women characteristically underachieve when competing against men. While this was observed throughout the 1960's and 1970's and then found to be lessening significantly in the 1980's, Barbara Kerr asserts that since they are bright, gifted girls become sensitive to the conflicts for women in competitive situations much earlier than girls usually do. Another internal barrier to achievement is the "culture of romance" in post-secondary life, which is found to be a significant distraction. Researchers have found that while college men achieved status in peer groups from their accomplishments, women achieved status via relationships with high-prestige men, not for their own accomplishments. In the *Realization of Potential Study* by Card, Steeles, and Abeles in 1980, the researchers concluded that there were two main factors which account for differences in achievement by gender among their bright group of subjects. First of all, they found that the boys were taught that their accomplishments were due to their abilities but their failures were due to external factors. Conversely, the girls were taught that their accomplishments were possible due to hard work and lucky external factors rather than their abilities, but that their failures were due to their lack of abilities. The second finding was that marriage and parenthood drastically reduced the time and energy available for education and workplace pursuits among the women but not the men. In an effort to understand the disappointing results of her gifted classmates, Kerr reviewed the biographies of eminent women to see what common elements helped them realize their potential. Surprising elements that were not key factors included having a loving set of parents, being identified as gifted at an early age, or having an excellent education. Kerr found that the overriding key factor for success among these eminent women was that they all decided at some point in their lives to ignore the limitations of traditional sex roles and charge ahead to meet their dreams. Kerr concludes that there were fourteen characteristics that set these eminent women apart:

1. time alone
2. voracious reading
3. being different or special
4. individualized instruction, often in the area of their future area of fame
5. same-sex education
6. a difficult adolescence – i.e. embarrassing social awkwardness
7. separateness and an ability to avoid confluence
8. taking responsibility for oneself

9. love through work
10. refusal to acknowledge limitations of gender
11. mentors
12. a need to grow thorns rather than hiding in a shell – i.e. the ability to develop resilience
13. integration of roles – career and parenting shared with spouse
14. ability to fall in love with an idea and pursue it with passion

Dr. Sylvia Rimm outlines 20 guidelines for raising your daughters as follows:

1. Set high educational expectations, discuss career objectives, and teach them that their education is the highest priority. (98% of women in the study had had at least one parent who set high expectations for education).
2. Don't be quick to back off if they have to cope with some pressure as learning resilience is very important. Coach them for success. If pressure becomes too much, help them with time management skills or help them make decisions about which things to eliminate.
3. Being smart is important, good study habits and brains pay off in the long run (being an "airhead" doesn't!)
4. View your daughters as intelligent, good problem solvers and value their work. Be positive about your own work and have family work projects. Build personal confidence with chores and small jobs.
5. Characteristics that are gender stereotyped as female do not necessarily interfere with success. Assertiveness can be learned.
6. Girls can be successful at public schools but consider alternatives, especially during middle and high-school years.
7. Encourage math and science skills. Reading is a priority. The key is to encourage a love of learning.
8. Challenge them to take advanced math courses, even if it means lower marks, as there are more career choices if they can conquer advanced math.
9. If they are not being challenged, consider grade or subject skipping
10. Extracurricular activities are important, (e.g. music, art, dance, Girl Guides, sports etc.) as time management and organization skills are important. Minimize television time and maximize imagination/reading activities.
11. Coping with winning and losing in competition builds resiliency: winning builds confidence and losing builds character.
12. Family travel and independent travel when they are old enough provides fun, learning, family togetherness and ultimately independence.
13. Popularity is not important even if it feels important to them. Avoid pressuring them to have lots of friends. Set limits on negative friends. Loneliness builds resilience.
14. Inform them about those friends you had in high school who lost out due to alcohol/drugs and make it clear you expect them not to.
15. Be a coach, not a judge. Give them enough freedom to explore but don't accept rebellion.
16. Birth order is not the major factor for success; ensure there are leadership opportunities and responsibilities regardless of birth order.
17. As mothers, don't hesitate about fulfilling your own life dreams by returning to school or entering a career, your daughters are watching you! Fathers should be supportive of their wives' goals and achievements.
18. Resilience – expect ups and downs, don't believe setbacks are permanent, believe in survival skills, encourage perseverance; don't overprotect your daughters just because they are girls.
19. Value the 3 C's: Challenge; Contribution; Creativity. Learn to insist on equal treatment to that of men. Encourage creative thinking, especially unusual ideas which permit girls to think beyond compliance.
20. In terms of choices about how to balance or sequence career and family, encourage your daughters to choose husbands who will respect their choices and if they choose to be homemakers, still expect them to attain a high level of education so that they will be self-sufficient later if necessary.

References

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