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Gifted Girls and Gender Issues

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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....Continued on pg 3

President's Message

Welcome back! ABC Ontario was very active over the summer months and we are looking forward to the advocacy journey ahead. In July, we submitted a thorough input document to the Ministry of Education regarding program standards for the gifted exceptionality. As you recall, the Ministry had promised program standards in their initial announcement on January 27, 2000. Since then, ABC Ontario has been involved in the lengthy consultation process. The Ministry announced this summer that they will be piloting the proposed program standards for the autism exceptionality, with a targeted rollout date for all exceptionalities for the 2004-05 school year. It was very important that we were able to provide input for the gifted exceptionality and make sure the program standards were relevant, measurable, attainable and effective for gifted students. ABC's response was compiled by Ginny Dunlop, Vice President of ABC Ontario and also the MACSE Representative for gifted (Minister's Advisory Council for Special Education). Several members of the executive team helped edit the submission which can be viewed on the ABC web site together with the government document.

In August we held our Annual General Meeting at the Mountsberg Wildlife Centre in Campbellville. There were interesting birds of prey demonstrations and games for the kids while we held our meeting at the Cameron House. As presented at the meeting, members will find complete financial statements enclosed with this issue of the Newsmagazine. Of interest, our membership is strong at over 800 members across the province.

In this issue we feature the topic of gender issues as experienced by gifted girls, offering some constructive parenting advice for raising our gifted daughters to maximize their potential in spite of barriers along the way.

Carol Ann Sloat
President, ABC Ontario

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Gifted Girls and Gender Issues (...continued from page 1)

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 conclude 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

Gifted Girls and Gender Issues continued...

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 while helping them achieve their potential:

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

- Kerr, Barbara A., (1994) *Smart Girls (Revised Edition): A New Psychology of Girls, Women, and Giftedness*, Gifted Psychology Press, Scottsdale, Arizona.
- Rimm, Sylvia, (1999) *See Jane Win: The Rimm Report on How 1000 Girls Became Successful Women*, Crown Publishers, New York.
- Reiss, Sally M (August 2002) [Social and Emotional Issues Faced by Gifted Girls in Elementary and Secondary School](http://www.sengifted.org/reis/htm), SENG article archive (Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted), www.sengifted.org/reis/htm, Scottsdale, Arizona.

Chapter News

ABC Halton Chapter held an information session about the topic of identification on October 1, 2003. Guest speaker Dr. Rosemary Young spoke about “The Gifted Underachiever”. More information and location information for upcoming events can be found on the chapter web site at www.hwcn.org/Information/education/abchaltan/index.html.

ABC Ottawa Chapter is continuing with their successful “Take-Off” series of exciting Saturday workshops for children. The workshops provide challenging extracurricular educational opportunities for bright students ranging in age from 6-15 years. The Fall program begins on October 18 and runs until November 22. There are many workshops across a diverse list of interest areas including: geology; chess; chemistry, poetry, robotics, physics, conflict resolution, model rocketry, debate, watercolours, drama and stress management to name several. A Parent Coffee Club runs concurrently and offers parents the opportunity to network and hear guest speakers while the children are busy in the Take-Off workshops. Full details including course descriptions, fees and registration information can be found at www.abcottawa.cyberus.ca.

ABC Hamilton Chapter was active over the summer with a huge BBQ/pool party in August (over 70 people!) where they met to make plans for the 2003/04 school year. In September, this chapter organized two free educational fun fairs for kids of all ages, including a live reptile presentation, children’s music, storytelling, dance, crafts, and clown. Plans for the school year include math workshops for kids, parent meetings, guest speaker nights, a chess tournament and a Harry Potter discussion group. On an advocacy basis, the ABC Hamilton Chapter executive received a written response in July to their concerns from the Superintendent of School Services and have been given an opportunity to participate in the review of the long-term strategy for gifted education in the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board. For more information, email abchamilton@sympatico.ca.

ABC Waterloo Chapter is pleased to announce that Suzanne Carter-Jackson accepted the position of Chapter President, effective July 2003. Eva Schueler will be the SEAC Representative for the Separate School Board. On September 24, the chapter hosted a free social evening for families at the University of Waterloo Observatory. Parent meetings are held six times over the school year starting in October. Find out about plans for this year’s events and meetings at www.abcwaterloo.ca.

ABC Peel Chapter has launched this year’s Parents’ Evenings program. Starting September 25, 2003 and running on the last Thursday of the month, guest speakers will talk about topics related to parenting and educating gifted children. This year’s theme is “Focussing on the Forest—Not the Trees”, or the long-term goal of raising healthy, fully developed children who make a meaningful contribution to the world. At the first meeting, parents will have the opportunity to meet SEAC Representatives (Special Education Advisory Committee) for both the Peel District and Dufferin Peel Separate Boards of Education. At the second meeting in October, John Eta, Director of King’s College School in Caledon will present “Reality, Choices and Courage: The Act of Rightfully Parenting and Educating the Gifted Child in the 21st Century”. Find out more details about this year’s activities at www.abcpeel.org.

Don’t see your chapter news here? Go to the ABC web site at www.abcontario.ca and follow the chapter link to contact your chapter. Take the step to volunteer with your local chapter !

Annual General Meeting News

Web Site Suggestions

The Davidson Institute for Talent Development is a U.S. organization whose mission is to recognize, nurture and support profoundly gifted young people and to provide opportunities for them to develop their talents in positive ways. The site is very user-friendly with many articles for parents, professionals, and students. Check it out at www.ditd.org.

The Roeper School in Michigan publishes the Roeper Review, a journal on gifted education which claims to apply the highest standards of peer review journalism to cover a broad range of issues for professionals who work with teachers and psychologists, and for professionals who work directly with gifted and talented children and their families. Find out more about subscribing or download some of their articles from the main page at www.roeperreview.org.

ERIC is the acronym for the Educational Resources Information Centre. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education is part of the Institute of Educational Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. At this site, you will find a database of articles you can search for a particular topic or access the section about Gifted Education/Dual Exceptionalities from the main page menu. Find the site and enjoy surfing at www.ericec.org.

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