

The Psychosocial Features of Effective Mentors for Girls and Young Women

How would you define a female mentor? Did you have one during middle school and high school? If so, who was she? I asked these questions during individual face to face interviews last summer of 50 young women who graduated from high school during the month of June. The purpose of the interviews was to seek input from young women on a variety of issues pertaining to the education and development of girls from the middle school years through high school.

The results surprised me. Over half of the young women reported that they did not have a female mentor of any kind from middle through high school. The majority defined a female mentor in either very broad terms or simply gave inaccurate definitions of a mentor (e.g. my best girl friend). Of the girls who indicated that they had a mentor during these years, nearly all cited their mothers or grandmothers – a delightful surprise given the “war stories” shared among mothers about the relationship between mothers and daughters during the journey from girl to young womanhood. When I asked these same young women if they intended to seek a mentor at this stage of their lives, nearly all said yes.

Need and Purpose of Female Mentors for Girls and Young Women

The number of mentoring programs for youth in school settings has grown dramatically in recent years (Bordenkircher, 1991; Flaxman and Ascher, 1992 and Haensly and Parsons, 1993). Much of the literature on mentoring focuses on the needs of at-risk or intellectually gifted youth. Fueled by national best sellers such as *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (Mary Pipher, 1994) and *School Girls* (Peggy Orenstein, 1995), parents, and female advocates are demanding that those needs unique to girls and young women be addressed. Females mentoring females is one way in which these needs can be met.

The challenge middle school age girls face is to move through the journey of physical, psychological, emotional and sexual development with a healthy sense of self intact. The barriers girls face include the cultural obsession with the “god of thinness,” threats to personal safety when girls drink or associate with boys who drink, the pressure for early

sexual involvement, and sexual harassment experienced by a growing number of girls.

Boston (1976), Collins (1979) and Levinson (1978) provide a sound basis for determining the purpose of any mentor. A mentor should provide a protected relationship in which learning and experimentation can occur. Mentoring involves a one-to-one relationship between a more experienced person and an inexperienced person. The mentor's role includes the processes of teaching, modeling, feedback and counseling. The key phrases, which speak to the needs of girls, are protected relationship, experienced mentor and shared experiences.

Purpose of Female Mentors

- Provides a mature, experienced person as mentor
- Provides a protected relationship with someone who “knows” the journey
- Delivers teaching, feedback, counseling
- Recognizes and affirms the girl's needs

Guidelines in Developing Mentor Relationships for Girls and Young Women

Individuals should think seriously about the following four guidelines when initiating a mentor relationship with a minor girl or a young woman. First, consider the family, culture and the age of the girl or young woman who is to be mentored. Mentors need to understand and be respectful of the unique characteristics of the family and culture of which the girl/young woman is a part. For example, if a girl lives on a family farm in a rural area, the positive attributes of her rural experiences should be highlighted. However, that same girl should be challenged to identify her own interests and future needs in order to plan for a range of activities that can broaden her experiences based upon her own dreams and needs. A mentor also needs to keep in mind the needs of a girl given her age. The girls I interviewed recommended that girls between the ages of 10-14 need to focus on key attributes in order to grow strong and healthy. Among the attributes they suggested were: having at least one good friend, staying connected to one's family, building structure in one's life, and focusing on the girl's interests rather than the groups' or boys'

interests. Girls will need an opportunity to discuss with a mentor topics such as feeling unattractive, handling unwanted sexual innuendo, and balancing the over emphasis on girls' clothing and “lookism” as part of self-identity.

A second guideline is that the mentor relationship must provide experiences in settings that will develop the creative and intellectual emergence of assets unique to each girl. All girls should be encouraged to identify those interests and activities they have loved from very early girlhood and to build upon them. In addition, girls should be assisted in exploring new territories and ideas. They should be encouraged to talk, write, draw, and share how they see their lives being similar or different than their mothers' lives when mother was 12, 18, 25, etc.

Finally, it is extremely important to exercise great care in the selection of a mentor for a girl/young woman. The girl being mentored will reflect upon the actions and statements made to her. She will absorb energy, both positive and negative from the individuals in her environment, which will impact upon how she views herself as well as her self-esteem.

Critical Guidelines for Mentors of Girls

- Consider family, culture and age of girl
- Develop creative and intellectual abilities unique to her
- Exercise great care in selecting a mentor for her

Dangers of Cross-gender Mentor Relationships

Should men mentor girls in middle or high school? While this is a decision that must be made on a case-by-case basis, cross-gender mentoring for young girls and for many young women possesses some very real limitations and/or dangers. The first limitation is the possibility for the male mentor and girl/young woman to play out a stereotypical bias and role. Stereotypical bias occurs when a person holds a belief that a girl/woman is more emotional under pressure and less assertive than her male counterpart. This belief may set up the occurrence of stereotypical roles. The most common roles that the mentor relationship can fall prey to are: the parent/child role, the

chivalrous knight/helpless maiden role, the tough warrior/weak warrior role and finally, the macho/seductress role. What is characteristic of all of these roles is that a power relationship is implied with the girl/young woman playing the part of the child, the weaker part of the pair or a role that prohibits her from expressing emotions but encourages game playing, flirtation and gender stereotypes.

Intimacy and sexuality concerns are another serious limitation of cross-gender mentoring with girls and young women. It is the developmental task of girls in the middle school to begin to test out their sexual communication skills through both body and verbal language. This is both normal and healthy but not in connection with a mentor relationship. Male mentors require a deep awareness of the developmental tasks girls face at this age and the ability to draw boundaries with respect to both their own behavior as well as the girl's/young woman's behavior.

If the above concerns are not serious enough, it must be said that if a male mentors a girl or young woman, both parties must be ready for the increased public scrutiny such relationships will endure. Resentments on the part of other girls/young women or on the part of other adults in the school-community environments are common and should be expected. This additional stress may contribute to undermine or at least limit the effectiveness of the mentor relationship.



Dilemma of Cross-gender Mentoring for Girls

- Stereotypical bias & roles
- Mixed messages to the girl
- Negative scrutiny and suspicion from adults

Cross-gender mentoring can be appropriate particularly when used as third or fourth level mentors (discussed later) or when both parties are unusually mature, focused and committed to the mentorship goals as opposed to personal relationships. In most cases, most middle school girls' mentoring needs will be best met by mature, experienced women.

Multiple Levels of Female Mentors

Mentoring needs to occur throughout the developmental journey from girl to womanhood and on multiple levels. A

first level mentor's purpose is to arouse interest in the girl/young woman's world and in her personal life. This initial phase of mentoring involves the sharing of experience, the development of trust and caring between the adult and girl/young woman, and a commitment to two-way, open communication. Mothers and other women in a girl's immediate family are the favorite first level mentors of many girls and young women. For others, friends of their mothers, women involved in church organizations or other community organizations such as Big Sisters, Sister to Sister, and girl centered support groups are excellent sources of first level mentors. The majority of mentorship provided to girls and young woman currently focuses at the first level.

While the first level is characterized by attention to the whole girl/woman, second through fourth level mentoring should pay particular attention to the development of skills, talents and interests in a particular domain. The second level mentor's purpose is to use her expertise to specifically model, teach and guide the girl/young woman in the learning process. Examples of second level mentoring include an interior designer mentoring a girl in her business one day a week or a young woman working side by side with an adult female volunteer on a local political campaign.

Third level mentors are older and possess a greater degree of expertise, experience and longevity in their respective field than do first and second level mentors. The goal of a third level mentor relationship is to provide expanded experiences within a particular field or domain which builds upon those activities the girl/young woman engaged in at earlier mentoring levels.

The fourth level mentor is a person whose expertise and status in the field is so strong that he or she can channel the girl/young woman's abilities into extraordinary accomplishment. Most girls, and indeed most adults, will not experience mentoring at such a specialized stage. This stage is most appropriate for individuals who demonstrate unusual abilities, intellectual accomplishments or athletic capabilities, e.g. Olympic athletic potential, giftedness in a content or specialty field.

From Their Voice

Why advocate multiple level female mentors for girls and young women? I believe we must recognize the necessity for the accomplishment of the develop-

mental tasks unique to girls as they journey from girl to womanhood. Girls and young women will accomplish the psychological growth necessary and most efficaciously with the guidance from a caring female adult who has experienced and grown physically, psychologically and spiritually from the same journey. However, I am reminded what the most important reason is for providing female mentor relationships from my conversations with 50 young women last summer – they are asking for them.

Related Resources on This Topic

- An Income of Her Own. <http://www.aioho.com/>
- Girls Incorporated. <http://www.girlsinc.org/>
- The Gender Gap in Schools: Girls Losing Out by Trudy J. Hanmer (1996)
- Sexual Harassment: High School Girls Speak Out by June Larkin (1996)
- Minorities and Girls in School: Effects on Achievement and Performance (Leaders in Psychology, Vol 1) by David Johnson (Editor, 1997)

Sources

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- Orenstein, Peggy. (1995). *School Girls*. New York: Anchor Books Doubleday.
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