



## **Helping Girls Become Strong and Independent**

There's no denying that times have changed for the better for girls. However, females of all ages continue to confront challenges in the form of cultural expectations. Young girls can benefit greatly from parental assistance and intervention.

**Support her needs and wishes:** Our society encourages all children to care about others. We teach children to consider the effect of their actions on others as they learn to express their needs or wishes. For example, teaching toddlers to share involves helping them balance their needs and wishes with those of their playmates. Lucy Daniels Center's educators and mental health professionals have observed that girls, in comparison with boys, are typically expected to develop a balance that places a greater emphasis upon the needs of others relative to their own.

Adults value appropriate empathy and concern for others, but some girls carry this concern to the excess of self-sacrifice and self-denial. Fulfillment in life may be compromised by patterns of self-denial established in early childhood.

Children develop patterns of self-denial for many different reasons. One reason may be related to girls' tendency to be more genetically inclined than boys toward emotional attunement and responsiveness to others. The depth of girls' emotional sensitivity may sometimes result in their responding excessively to expectations to be considerate.

Parents can help their daughter maintain a strong sense of her self by supporting, in appropriate circumstances, her right to make choices on the basis of her own needs, even if her choices may not please someone else.

We can illustrate this support by describing how teachers in the Lucy Daniels Center classrooms assist very young children with sharing toys and possessions. We have learned that most girls, even when they enter our 2-year-old class, are more willing than are most boys to begin to share. As important as it is to encourage children to share, it is also important to support the child's effort to build a sense of self. Two-year-old children's prized objects are more than mere objects. They have a great deal of emotional meaning to the child, as they are physical extensions of the inside self that the child is constructing. For this reason, we should respect and dignify the possessiveness of 2-year-old children as we help them begin to take into account the feelings of others.

We do not want to praise a child — usually a girl — who shared her toys too easily or too well, because we would be concerned that the child might be beginning a pattern of automatically prioritizing the needs of others over her own. For this reason, if a child regularly shared her prized possessions, we might ask, "Isn't that something very special to you? It is nice that you want to share, but it is also OK to keep your special doll for yourself. We can help you explain that to Sarah. If she gets upset, that's OK, we will help her."

**Encourage her to be assertive:** We often observe an interaction like the following in our classrooms:

*Jill and Jason, both 4-year-olds, arrive simultaneously at the computer center. Their voices rise as each child claims that they were there first. Jill says, with a hint of resentment, "OK, you can go first, but I get a turn the second you are done." Jason smiles, barely acknowledges the concession, and starts using the keyboard. Jill wanders off, searching for something to do.*

Jill averted a potential overt conflict by curtailing her assertive expression of her wishes. Her graciousness and ability to postpone her wishes were admirable. However, if Jill typically behaved this way, we would be concerned that she was acquiescing not from strength but from weakness. We might inquire if she was really OK with letting Jason go first or if she gave in because she was beginning to become uncomfortable.

We encourage parents to question the reason for their daughter's behaviors if, as the years go by, they notice that she frequently relinquishes or avoids

her assertiveness. Modeling assertiveness in their own life may be the most effective way to teach an approach to conflict that is based on appropriate assertion and resolution rather than on submission and avoidance.

**Minimize the effect of media:** Contemporary mass media often portrays girls and women in a manner that constricts or distorts who they are and who they have the potential to be. For example, media may present girls exclusively as nurturers or imply that girls derive their power and value from their physical charms. We recommend that that parents protect their child from exposure to the mass media when possible and that they directly express their disapproval of any problematic media message to which their child has been exposed.

Parents of boys should also take a similar approach about the media's messages about girls, women and male-female relationships. It is generally safest to assume that children have understood the media's message about women. It is better to sound the drumbeat of disapproval than to allow the music to proceed uncorrected, hoping that the children have not paid attention or understood. If unchallenged, girls may absorb these molding messages — and perhaps even erroneously assume their parent's endorsement!

**Model a strong parental relationship:** A girl's relationship with each of her parents and her observations of their relationship will be the strongest influence upon her development. Parents, and particularly mothers, will provide a good model for their daughter by comfortably feeling and assertively expressing their hopes and desires for themselves. A daughter's observation of her mother as an equal partner in an adult, loving relationship will provide another core experience that will support her growing sense of healthy empowerment.

A parent's effort to raise a daughter to be a strong person who can follow her own star will require attention to herself or himself, the family, her school environment, her friends and the broader cultural environment. Parent's willingness to address these issues will be a precious and enduring gift to their daughter.