

Parenting Successful Daughters

by Patty Carney-Bradley

*To produce strong and caring adults,
encourage sons to develop their nurturing instincts,
daughters to hold onto their independence.*

Many parents today work hard to bring up their sons and daughters "equally", believing that an identical-as-possible upbringing is the best way to equip both genders for adult life. That aim is to be applauded. The question is, however: *What is the most effective way to achieve it?*

Contrary to what most people assume, researchers are beginning to find that the path to independent, caring adulthood may be different for boys and girls. The message for parents: To get "equal" results you need to pay special attention to different aspects of raising sons and daughters.

DIFFERENT EMOTIONS, DIFFERENT NEEDS!

The emotional worlds in which boys and girls grow up seem to be far more separate than we have recognized. One reason for our ignorance, says psychologist Carol Gilligan and her colleagues at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is that many theories about human development are based on research that completely excluded women. For parents, following child-rearing advice determined by the needs of boys may not help girls reach their full potential. The tasks of growing up are different for girls and boys. Boys initially develop their identity as males by separating themselves from their mothers, the parent who is usually their primary caregiver. Expressing independence is a necessary part of growing up male. Intimacy that challenges that individuality can seem threatening to boys and often to men as well. Reaching maturity means finding ways to feel comfortable with the intimacy and relationships that boys often shun in their quest for separation from all that is female.

Girls, on the other hand, don't have to differentiate themselves from their mothers to develop their own identity. They grow up within a network of relationships, expressing their feminine selfhood through attachment. Within that network, young girls can also be independent. The crisis point for girls is adolescence, when independent behavior crashes up against society's disapproval of overly individualistic, "selfish" women. Much as tomboys are urged to trade baseball mitts for heels, girls who value relationships often begin to stifle their independence as adolescents because individuality suddenly seems to threaten these attachments. Maturity for girls means finding a way to return to that lost preadolescent independence.

Gilligan's sensitive and astute observations make it clear that parents who want to raise children to be both independent individuals and caring human beings may need to emphasize different factors in raising sons and daughters. That is, we may have to focus more on the retention of independence in girls, and on the need for boys to build relationships.

NURTURING IS MASCULINE TOO

I believe that boys have the same instinct for nurturing that girls do. What keeps them from exercising it is lack of support from our society and culture. Mothers who want to make it easier for their sons to grow up comfortable with attachment need to start by welcoming and fostering nurturing behavior in their husbands. Nurturing fathers are good for daughters, too, of course. This requires sensitivity and tact.

It's important that both parents encourage and support the nurturing instincts of sons as well as daughters. Parents obviously shouldn't push their sons to play with dolls, but a boy can express caring just as well with stuffed animals, pets, plants, etc. Also, work to instill empathy by talking about how various kinds of behaviors make others feel. Early training in empathy prepares boys

for the responsibility they need to take on as adolescents when sexuality becomes an issue. And it builds patterns of feelings that help them to be good friends and thoughtful student leaders.

HELPING GIRLS STAY STRONG

While boys may need special attention to retain the caring behavior they show as preschoolers in the face of society's ideas about boys, girls may require the greatest parental support in the teen years. At 15, girls are often less sure of themselves than at 11 or 12. As they try out their newly minted femininity on boys, the pressure to be soft-spoken instead of outspoken can be powerful. Teenage girls may need help in rediscovering (or not losing) their younger selves.

Obviously support for a daughter's independence has to start long before age 12. Many parents tend to play more gently with girls and may be less comfortable with letting them take physical risks such as climbing trees or riding fast on their bicycles (with a helmet, of course). They may also encourage more self-sacrifice in girls - sharing is important for both genders - and girls also need permission to stand up for their own rights.

It's important for parents to expect the same level of achievement from daughters as they do from sons. Girls often attribute their success to hard work or luck, rather than to inherent ability the way boys tend to do. You need to make it clear you feel your daughter is capable. Exaggerated celebration of her achievements, however, can have the effect of making her sense that you didn't expect she'd do as well as she has.

Fathers play a significant role in helping daughters feel that they are valued both for their femininity and for their achievements. A daughter's relationship with her father is often mirrored in her later relationships with the men in her life.

If you sense that your adolescent daughter lacks confidence, including her in decisions that are important to you, such as selecting a piece of furniture or deciding on a family vacation, can help. It's also important to encourage her to keep thinking about her future life - her education, her career, her family.

Since attachment is so crucial to girls, the most valuable gift parents can give a daughter is the sense that her need to test her wings won't shatter ties with family and friends. And that boyfriends (or girlfriends) who put her in that predicament are making unfair demands.

BOY OR GIRL ... EACH CHILD HAS UNIQUE SKILLS, TALENTS, & NEEDS

The important thing to remember in the continuing debate over how large the difference is between boys and girls and whether that difference is the result of culture, biology or a combination of factors, is to relate to each child as an individual, regardless of gender. Recognizing your child's particular needs, fears, skills, talents, and limitations reinforces his or her self-esteem and stimulates curiosity and the desire to learn.