

Growing Up Whole: Understanding Gender

As parents, teachers, family and friends, we try to help our children grow up with the skills they will need as adults. Both boys and girls need a full repertoire of skills to develop a strong identity, to be able to achieve what God created them to accomplish, and to develop and maintain healthy relationships. In the midst of all this, children receive messages that are often unhelpful about what it means to be male and female today.

Femininity has long been categorized around themes of cultivating beauty and sex appeal, developing a non-threatening personality and giving service. The socialization of girls still supports a focus toward others, emphasizing values of friendship, nurturing, understanding emotions and pleasing others.

On the other hand, boys learn the characteristics associated with being male. Some of these include strength, independence, boldness, autonomy, loyalty, and an appreciation for competition. At the same time we celebrate the positive aspects, we must also challenge the characteristics that are not helpful to the whole development of boys.

We can help girls extend their views of themselves in several ways. We can listen well and respect them. That means focusing on what is really important to them and getting to know who they really are and affirming them. We need to honor girls' choices as much as possible. Valuing a girl's ideas has a great impact on her self-esteem.

Girls need new affirmations that contradict the unhelpful messages they receive. We can teach girls that anxiety doesn't need to immobilize them. We should teach them about healthy risk-taking and how to endure the uncomfortable feelings that overwhelm them when they face situations that make them afraid. We need to challenge the fairy tales and happily-ever-after myths. We need to encourage them to express their opinions, defend them and hold on to their ideas. They need skills in public speaking, from which they develop the courage to go from being in the crowd to being in front.

For boys we can empower them to grow into men who can find satisfaction and success in all aspects of their adult lives. We need to allow boys to feel all their feelings and to appreciate deep connections. They need to be part of groups that create norms of respect and help them develop skills in listening, empathy, and collaborating. Boys need opportunities to work with girls in safe and respectful environments that encourage mutual growth and understanding.

We can help by teaching boys to take responsibility for their feelings, to take care of themselves and to ask for help. We need to connect with them through activity and play. We need to be patient with silences, honoring a boy's need to choose when to talk. We need to make brief statements and wait. Listen. Do not lecture. Be satisfied with short conversations.

This is a much more complex issue than space allows. Learn more (suggested readings on the right, or the Parent Inspiration: Are We Doing Our Best for Girls?) to better understand your child and how to help them develop holistically. I invite you to consider how you are encouraging the boys and girls in your lives to be all that God created them to be!

REFLECT

Girls need to experience themselves as subjects of their own life, not as objects of some else's gaze.

M Pipher

Boys do not ache for their father's masculinity. They ache for their fathers' hearts. T Real

Every child ... should understand the physical habitation that God has given him, and the laws by which it is kept in health. E White, *Ministry of Healing*, p. 402

There is often a great distance between parents and children. If the parents would enter more fully into the feelings of their children and draw out what is in their hearts, it would have a beneficial influence on them. The father and the mother should work together... They should make themselves companions to their children. Parents should study the best and most successful manner of winning the love and confidence of their children, that they may lead them in the right path. They should reflect the sunshine of love upon the household. E White, *Adventist Home*, p. 190.

LEARN MORE

How to Really Love Your Teenager. R Campbell. David C. Cook, 2004.

The Five Love Languages of Teenagers. G Chapman. Northfield Publishing, 2005.

Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood. W Pollack. Henry Holt, 1998.