Leaning Out
Teen Girls and Leadership Biases

RICHARD WEISSBOURD AND THE MAKING CARING COMMON TEAM

PARENT TOOLKIT
Congratulations on taking an important step in confronting gender discrimination and bias. Discussing gender can be challenging. For some youth, this is an immensely personal or even heated topic that brings up questions of equality and privilege. Others may question whether gender biases even exist. Finally, the idea that biases can be implicit—and discrimination unconscious—may itself be a novel, challenging concept to some teenagers. Fortunately, the payoff in broaching these topics is huge. By allowing children to explore this topic, share ideas for improvement, and participate in community-building and empathy-promoting activities, you are taking steps towards ensuring that your home is a place where everyone is respected, supported, and empowered.
Discussion Questions

THE FOLLOWING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS MAY BE USEFUL FOR TEENAGERS WHO HAVE READ THE “LEANING OUT” FULL REPORT OR EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

1. What in the report most surprised you? Least surprised you? Why?

2. This report reveals that many boys and girls tend to prefer male political leaders over female political leaders. Why do you think this is? Why is it problematic? How are female political leaders frequently portrayed? Is this the same or different than male political leaders? If it is different, how is it different?

3. This report notes that many boy and girl students prefer men as leaders in fields like business, while they prefer women as leaders in roles like child care directors and art program directors. What do you think of this finding? Is there any truth to the idea that men and women are better suited for particular fields?

4. Students in the report were most likely to support giving more power to the student council when it was led by white boys and least likely when it was led by white girls. The difference in support was small. Does this surprise you? Why or why not?

5. Why might girls and women prefer boys as student council leaders? Why wouldn’t they want to pick themselves as leaders?

6. Do you think most people in your school would prefer boy leaders over girl leaders? Why or why not?

7. What types of bias or discrimination—if any—do you see in your school? Home? In the community? In the news?

8. What can you do when you see gender-based discrimination? What should you not do?

9. What can be done at home to better promote gender equity? What can teenagers do? Adults?

10. What can be done outside of home to better promote gender equity—in places such as the community and greater society?

Activities:
Try the following activities with your children to expand their discussion and learning around gender bias and to move out of their comfort zones.

1. Ask youth to participate in a series of quiet reflective writing exercises about what is it like (or, for boys, what they think it must be like) to be a girl. Have they ever felt discriminated against? Felt different than men? Allow youth to share their writing, if they feel comfortable doing so. Try the same activity asking to reflect on what it is like to be a boy.

2. Challenge youth to think about how gender roles have continued to evolve over time. Invite youth to interview a person of a different generation. How were women treated when they were growing up? Has society changed its expectations of women? What challenges or discrimination do women still face today?
1. Check Your Own Biases

**Why:** We all carry biases that are based on gender; throughout our lives we receive daily messages about what is expected of males and females. These biases become ingrained and it’s often impossible to completely get rid of them. But, if we can be more aware of our biases, we have a better chance of counteracting them.

**How:** Take a hard look at how biases might be affecting your attitudes or actions. Be mindful that the relationships, language, and behaviors that come naturally to you may express bias. Think about what conclusions you jump to about what boys or girls should dress like, act like, think and feel.

**TRY THIS:**

- **Practice counteracting stereotypes.**
  Exposing our brains to images that contradict stereotypes can actually decrease our implicit, unconscious biases. Find images that do not fit traditional gender stereotypes—women doing construction work or men in caretaking roles—and post them in places you view often at home or at work, e.g., save them to your phone or use them as your screensaver.

- **Watch your language.**
  Our language sends messages about our expectations based on gender. When we comment on how pretty girls look or how strong boys are, for example, we send messages about our expectations for kids based on their gender. Use gender-neutral words like “they” or say “she or he” when talking about people in the abstract. Say “firefighter” instead of “fireman” and “police officer” instead of “policeman.” Be on the look-out for statements that start with “all girls” or “all boys.”

- **Check in with a friend or family member.**
  Because we all are blind to some of our biases, we need feedback. Talk to close friends and family members about your own gender biases and ask them whether you are expressing gender biases that you might be unaware of. Ask kids to hold you accountable, to give you feedback if you are modeling stereotypes or expressing bias. Modeling this openness and being willing to admit bias sends a powerful message to kids about the nature of biases and how they are counteracted. It can be, of course, very hard to receive this kind of feedback from our kids or other loved ones, but it’s a key part of responsible, moral parenting.
2. Engage Your Kids in Making Your Home a Bias-Free Zone

Why: Beginning at a very young age, kids notice differences between girls and boys that can develop into narrow understandings of gender. Parents and caregivers can shape healthier understandings about gender by cultivating family practices that widen kids’ sense of gender roles and alert them to bias.

How: Develop routines and habits in your family, with input from your kids, that help to counteract and prevent biases and stereotypes. Build strong, trusting relationships with your children so it’s easier for them to ask you uncomfortable questions related to gender. When kids ask questions about differences, let them know that you appreciate the question, and answer with straightforward, honest language.

TRY THIS:

• Mix it up.
  Proactively start conversations with your kids about how responsibilities get divvied up in your family. Talk about what is fair and balanced, rather than make assumptions about who does what based on gender. Create a chore wheel so that everyone gets a chance to participate in all the types of chores. Be willing to model behavior that doesn’t fit gender stereotypes and show kids that you can step outside your own comfort zone.

• Hold each other accountable.
  Periodically ask kids whether they think your family practices are gender-biased in any way. Are there different expectations of females and males in the family? If so, why? When kids do identify biases or inequities at home, brainstorm solutions with them.

• Tell your story.
  Share with your kids examples of times when you’ve experienced bias because of your gender. Talk to them about times you’ve felt you’ve been treated unfairly or times that you’ve taken a stand against gender bias and injustice. Sharing your stories opens the door for them to share theirs.

• Expand their horizons.
  Provide your kids with books, games, TV shows, movies, art, etc. that show people from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds demonstrating non-traditional gender roles, images that they may not see in mainstream media. Expose both boys and girls to a variety of activities. Don’t just assume, for example, that boys will like sports and girls will like ballet. Ask girls to imagine themselves as senators, sports team managers and business leaders and ask boys to imagine themselves as child care directors and dance choreographers. Facilitate children interacting with mixed gender groups and developing cross-gender friendships.
3. Help Kids Kick Stereotypes to the Curb

**Why:** Kids are often unaware of the gender biases and stereotypes they confront every day, biases and stereotypes that can powerfully shape their views of gender. Kids need to learn from the adults in their lives how to recognize bias in themselves and others, how to talk constructively to others about biases, and how to avoid being influenced by stereotypes.

**How:** Be alert to and prepared to explain to kids why bias is harmful in ways that they can understand and appreciate and give kids strategies for responding to biases and stereotypes that are appropriate for their developmental stage.

**TRY THIS:**

- **Ask kids what they think.**
  
  Kids are excellent at finding unfair images of themselves and others, whether at school, in the neighborhood or in the media. Create a list together of gender stereotypes you both see or hear. Spot them when you’re watching television, listening to a song, or shopping for clothes together. Talk to them about how these stereotypes make them feel. If you see a bias or stereotype that your kids don’t see, point it out to them. Make the connection clear: “That commercial shows girls not caring about school as much as about how they look. That doesn’t seem fair.”

- **Help kids be a first responder.**
  
  Brainstorm with kids strategies for responding to stereotypes they encounter in their daily interactions. Talk together about the words they can use to speak up, and how those words might be different when talking to a friend or a stranger or a teacher, for example. Practice different responses and conduct role plays that help children find the right words. Help kids identify who their allies could be when they need more help in a difficult interaction.

- **Question their lingo.**
  
  When you hear kids use terms to describe boys or girls that reflect biases, ask them to consider what the words mean and what messages these words might send.

4. Don’t Just Let “Boys Be Boys”

**Why:** Too often boys’ demeaning stereotypes and remarks about girls go unchecked. Often both adults’ and kids’ peers don’t know how to intervene when boys make demeaning remarks about girls and often they fear being written off or ridiculed. Yet excusing these behaviors as “boys being boys” sends them the message that those behaviors are okay.

**How:** Take time to consider how to intervene when boys are demeaning to girls, and step in immediately if you observe or hear these behaviors.
5. Build Girls’ Leadership Skills and Self-Confidence

**Why:** Too many girls are dealing with biases about their leadership capacity specifically. Perhaps the best way for girls to counteract their negative images about their own and other girls’ leadership capacity is for them to experience themselves as effective leaders.

**How:** Expose girls to various, appealing examples of leadership and help them develop the skills and confidence they need to become leaders in a wide variety of fields. Too often girls avoid leadership because they don’t feel confident in skills such as public speaking or because they fear their peers will disapprove. Many girls fear appearing bossy.

**TRY THIS:**

- **Connect girls to leadership opportunities that are meaningful to them.** Discuss with girls many types of leadership and explore with them how their interests and passions align with these different types. Show them images of girls and women in a range of leadership positions, such as the lead scientist in the recent Pluto mission.
TRY THIS (CONT’):

• **Help girls develop specific leadership skills.**
  Give girls chances to practice public speaking, to participate in decision-making processes, to work in teams, and to give and receive feedback. Invite them to practice these skills in decisions your family makes, for example, or encourage them to take action on problems they’re concerned about in their schools and communities.

• **Talk to girls about their fears.**
  Start conversations with girls about the things they feel hold them back from leadership. Model for them that it’s okay to feel nervous or worried about how they’ll be perceived or the reactions they may get when in leadership roles. Explore with girls various strategies for dealing with disapproval and criticism. Consider with girls how they might engage peers as supporters and allies when they face disapproval.

• **Encourage girls to lead in collaboration with diverse groups of girls.**
  Collaboration and teamwork are essential skills for leadership in today’s workplace, helping to develop social awareness, problem-solving abilities, perspective-taking and other key skills. And working in racial and economically diverse groups can enrich girls’ understandings of different cultures, expose girls to a wide range of leadership styles and abilities, and enable girls to draw on various kinds of cultural wisdom about leadership.

FOR MORE ON HOW PARENTS CAN COUNTERACT GENDER BIAS, SEE ALSO:

• **Welcoming Schools:**

• **PBS:**
  http://www.pbs.org/kcts/preciouschildren/diversity/read_teaching.html

• **Anti-Defamation League:**
  http://www.adl.org/education-outreach/anti-bias-education
Although girls and women have made tremendous gains in school and work over the last few decades, females still continue to face challenges and barriers to leadership, including gender biases. As adults, there is much we can do to prevent and reduce gender biases, including checking our own biases and being aware of the messages we are sending to both boys and girls day-to-day. There is also much we can to do to prepare girls to become leaders.

A wide variety of programs and interventions directly or indirectly foster leadership skills in girls, varying extensively in activities, length, and research base. These programs range from classic girls-only activity based programs such as the Girl Scouts and Girls Inc. to more targeted programs and curricula specifically developed to build leadership. Opportunities span a multitude of interests, many representing increasing efforts to engage girls in fields in which women continue to be underrepresented (e.g. STEM, public office).

Given the wide variety of programs and interventions that foster leadership skills in girls and the limited research on efficacy, it can often be challenging to select a program. Based on our research and the wisdom of practitioners, and based in part on recommendations from the Girl Scout Research Institute, we have created the following easy-to-use guide to help parents and educators identify high quality girls’ leaderships programs.

Programs should include the following key components:

**EXPOSURE**

Leadership programs should expose girls to a wide range of professions. Even when girls are provided leadership opportunities, they commonly lack exposure to leadership in certain fields, such as business and politics. Research also suggests that educational and cultural practices tend to depict men in a larger variety of occupations and as agents of change while women are more frequently portrayed as observers or victims. Look for programs or activities that include the following:

- Career exploration
- Opportunities to hear from and/or meet inspiring female leaders in a wide range of fields
- Resources and support for finding internships and volunteer or shadowing opportunities

**SKILL DEVELOPMENT**

Leadership programs should focus on concrete skill development. Girls’ lack of confidence appears to be one of the strongest factors deterring them from pursuing leadership, and skill development can boost girls’ confidence. Leadership programs should take on common, specific obstacles that deter girls from pursuing leadership, including fears of public speaking, appearing bossy, or being disliked. Look for programs that include instruction and practice on the following:

- Public speaking
- Conflict resolution
- Effective or assertive communication
- Problem solving
- Networking and self-advocacy
- Goal setting
COLLABORATION

Leadership programs and strategies should promote collaboration and a sense of solidarity among girls. Collaboration and teamwork are not only essential skills for today’s workplace, these experiences can help girls develop perspective-taking, social awareness, and respect. Working in diverse groups can be especially valuable—breaking down stereotypes and enabling girls to draw on rich wisdom about leadership in various cultures. Through collaborative experiences and relationship building, girls can also work to override competitive feelings. Look for programs that include the following:

- Team or group-based projects/activities
- Relationship building experiences or skill-building
- Opportunities to work with diverse groups (i.e., ages, cultures, etc.)

MENTORSHIP

Leadership programs should connect girls with older, respected girls and women who can model and inspire them to seek out leadership and guide them in navigating barriers they face to pursuing leadership. Mentors can be formal or informal, including volunteers who interact with girls on a regular basis. Mentors not only act as role models who can inspire and foster leadership, they can also be important models of ethical values. Women of all ages should join girls as allies and mentors in collective efforts. Look for programs that include:

- Counselor in-training, big sisters, or other program elements that connect girls with older girls and women
- Peer leadership programs
- Trained staff and volunteers

HIGH EXPECTATIONS AND MEANINGFUL OPPORTUNITIES

Leadership programs should hold girls to high expectations and provide them with real, meaningful opportunities to take responsibility for others. Girls will develop confidence and the desire to pursue leadership when they take on problems that are meaningful to them. Look for programs that include:

- Youth-led projects or initiatives and programs that give girls opportunities to choose causes that matter to them
- Opportunities for girls to teach and lead others
- Programs that incorporate chores, tasks, and expectations

“Our view is that there’s nothing that reduces stereotypes better than activist work that requires a diversity of girls to rely on one another as allies and demands coalition building for success.”

—LYN MIKEL BROWN, Professor of Education, Colby College and Founder of Hardy Girls Healthy Women
Resources and Programs that Promote Girls’ and Women’s Equity and Empowerment

The websites below offer useful programs, research, resources, and/or activities to promote girls’ and women’s equity and empowerment. Some of the descriptions listed below have been pulled from organizational websites.

Have suggestions of other powerful programs or websites that we should add to our list? Please email us at: mcc@gse.harvard.edu

PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES THAT SUPPORT GIRLS AND WOMEN:

**Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media**
The Geena Davis Institute is a research-based organization working within the media and entertainment industry to improve gender balance, reduce stereotypes, and create diverse female characters in entertainment. Website includes lesson plans for addressing images of gender equality in schools, a video learning series designed to help students challenge gender stereotypes, and research studies on gender in the media.

http://seejane.org

**Girls, Inc.**
Girls Inc. inspires girls to be strong, smart, and bold, providing more than 140,000 girls across the U.S. and Canada with experiences and solutions to the unique challenges girls face. Girls Inc. develops informal education programs, educates the media about critical issues facing girls, and teaches girls how to advocate for themselves and their communities. Website includes tips for parents as well as a section for girls.

http://www.girlsinc.org/

**Girls Leadership**
Girls Leadership teaches girls the skills to know who they are, what they believe, and how to express it, empowering them to create change in their world. Website offers information on Girls Leadership programming across the country, a blog, parent education videos, and research.

http://girlsleadership.org/

**Girls Write Now**
Girls Write Now provides programs designed to provide creative and engaging opportunities for women of all ages in the New York City area. Programs include mentoring that matches girls with professional women writers, assistance helping girls navigate the college admissions process, and a reading series to showcase the city’s best teen writers.

http://www.girlswritenow.org/
**Hardy Girls Healthy Women**
A non-profit organization, primarily serving girls and women in the state of Maine, dedicated to supporting and improving the health and well-being of women. Hardy Girls Healthy Women offers a series of programs and supports to empower women, as well as curricula and resources for girls.

http://hghw.org

**The Representation Project**
The Representation Project inspires individuals and communities to challenge and overcome limiting stereotypes so that everyone, regardless of gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation or circumstance can fulfill their potential. Website includes links to films, campaigns, research, and strategies to promote awareness of and counter negative stereotypes.

http://therepresentationproject.org/

**Girls for Gender Equity (GGE)**
Girls for Gender Equity is committed to the physical, psychological, social, and economic development of girls and women. GGE provides programs, mostly serving young women in New York City, that develop strengths, skills, and self-sufficiency in girls and women. GGE also conducts organizing campaigns to achieve safety and equality in the communities in which girls and women live and work.

http://www.ggenyc.org/

**SPARK Movement**
The Spark Movement is a girl-fueled, intergenerational activist organization working online to ignite an anti-racist gender justice movement. Website features a blog about women’s issues, a downloadable app about women in history, and a curriculum for educators.

http://www.sparksummit.com/

**A Mighty Girl**
A Mighty Girl offers recommendations and lists of books, toys, and movies aimed at raising smart, confident, and courageous girls. Website includes a section on parenting.

http://amightygirl.com

**True Child**
TrueChild helps connects race, class and gender through “gender transformative” approaches that challenge gender norms and inequities. Website features research briefs about gender-related topics and tools for parents and educators.

http://truechild.org

**Girl Scouts**
In Girl Scouts, girls discover the fun, friendship, and power of girls together through field trips, sports programs, community service projects, cultural exchanges, and environmental activities that allow girls to grow courageous and strong. Girl Scouts offers programs for 2.8 million members across the U.S. and world, and conducts research on girls’ development.

https://www.girlscouts.org/

**Girls on the Run**
Girls on the Run is a physical activity based youth development program for girls in 3rd to 8th grade that teaches life skills through interactive lessons and running games. The goal of the program is to unleash confidence through accomplishment while establishing a lifetime appreciation of health and fitness. Website features information about their U.S. and Canadian-based programs.

http://www.girlsontherun.org/
Lean In
LeanIn.org, based on the book Lean In, and founded by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, encourages women to pursue their ambitions and to change the conversation from what they can’t do to what they can do. Lean In supports women by building communities of support, offering library of lectures on topics like leadership and communication, and featuring a special section for men about promoting gender equality.

http://leanin.org/

PBS Parenting
PBS Parenting has many resources for parents raising girls, including tips and strategies for building confidence, resolving relationship conflicts, and challenging stereotypes.

http://www.pbs.org/parents/parenting/raising-girls/

Teach a Girl to Lead
Teach a Girl to Lead, a project of the Center for American Women in Politics at Rutgers University, aims to inspire girls and young women to follow in the footsteps of women leaders. The website features a “teaching toolbox” with lesson plans, activities, and multimedia resources to help young women rethink leadership.

http://tag.rutgers.edu/

New Moon Media
New Moon Media is a girls’ magazine and online community of girls, parents, and allies raising strong girls in an unequal world.

http://newmoon.com/

Amy Poehler’s Smart Girls
Smart Girls is a “home base” where many young men and women are able to express their concerns. Through “Call to Action” campaigns, girls are encouraged to volunteer, be more involved in the world they live in, and expand their worldview beyond their backyards.

http://amysmartgirls.com

Ban Bossy
This site supports people to use social media to pledge to #banbossy. “Bossy” is word that often is used to describe strong women. The site features leadership tips for girls, parents, teachers, and other adults, and real stories of girls in leadership roles.

http://banbossy.com/