

Girls Without Limits

Second Edition

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Dedication

Patricia F. R. Cunningham II, PhD, aka “Dr. Patty”

1979–2017

You were a warrior for equity and justice and worked tirelessly on behalf of the forgotten and marginalized. Thank you for supporting me, inspiring me, and continually reminding me that service is indeed the rent we pay for living. I promise to continue your legacy.
I miss you.

Girls Without Limits

Helping Girls Succeed in
Relationships, Academics,
Careers, and Life

Second Edition

Lisa Hinkelman

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-------------|
| Preface | vii |
| Acknowledgments | xiii |
| About the Author | xvii |
| Chapter 1: What's Really Going on for Girls, and How Can We Help Them? | 1 |
| Chapter 2: Streaks, Likes, Followers, and Friends: The Impact of Social Media in Girls' Lives | 19 |
| Chapter 3: Being a Girl Today Is Hard: Gender Roles, Body Image, and Confidence | 37 |
| Chapter 4: Mean Girls: Dealing With Drama and Relationships | 59 |
| Chapter 5: Relationships, Dating, and Coercion: Developing Healthy Relationships in an Age of Sexting, Swiping, and Snapping | 83 |
| Chapter 6: "Lighten Up," "I Was Just Joking," "Boys Will Be Boys," and Other Stuff Girls Hear: Addressing Disrespect and Sexual Harassment | 109 |

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| | |
|--|------------|
| Chapter 7: Looking Out for the Girls: Identifying and Preventing Sexual Violence | 125 |
| Chapter 8: The Pressure to Be Perfect: Stress and Coping in an Age of Perfectionism and Helicopter Parents | 149 |
| Chapter 9: Academic or Instagram Influencer? Why Girls Feel They Have to Choose | 165 |
| Chapter 10: What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up? How Stereotypes Are Holding Girls Back | 181 |
| Chapter 11: CEOs, Politicians, and Superintendents: But Where Are All the Female Leaders? | 203 |
| Chapter 12: What Girls Want | 223 |
| Chapter 13: What Girls Need | 237 |
| References | 251 |
| Index | 259 |

Preface

What's New in the Second Edition

As I reflected on the world of girls since the original publication of *Girls Without Limits* in 2013, I needed to take a step back to consider what is *actually* different and what has remained the same. While there is much that has changed through the years—the #MeToo movement has brought issues of sexual harassment to the forefront, female athletes and women's sports teams have become household names, the first all-female crew of astronauts took to the skies, and women have been elected to political office at the highest rates in history—there are still so many challenges that persist for girls. These challenges aren't simply social or political challenges; they are interpersonal, relationship, and confidence challenges that represent the core of girls' experiences. Girls continue to struggle with self-esteem and body image, and they often have tumultuous relationships with other girls. They still have trouble being assertive, speaking their mind, and demonstrating leadership. Despite the fact that there have been gains in girls' access to new opportunities and an increased awareness of issues of equity and representation, many of the long-standing issues that have historically affected girls and women persist. I know this not simply from being an observer of society but from rigorously researching the experiences of girls.

I have been actively working with and researching girls in several different capacities. I spent 8 years as a professor of counselor education at The Ohio State University, 19 years as a licensed professional counselor, and 9 years as the founder/CEO of Ruling Our Experiences, Inc. (ROXY), a nonprofit organization focused on girls. My

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research team and I have surveyed and interviewed thousands of girls of different backgrounds, ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, and ages. We have talked with girls who are incarcerated, girls who are homeless, those who live in middle-class homes, and those who live in mansions. We learned from girls who are in two-parent families, foster care, single-parent families, or divorced families, and those who live with their grandparents. We spent time listening to girls in high-needs urban schools, middle-class suburban schools, elite independent schools, and low-income rural schools. Girls in public, parochial, private, and charter schools participated in our research and shared their thoughts, feelings, and opinions with us. We provided them with a safe place to talk and share, and we did not pass judgment. We just listened.

Since the first edition of *Girls Without Limits*, I and my research team designed and deployed the country's largest survey of its kind with nearly 11,000 diverse girls. This survey, called The Girls Index™, was designed to help us better understand the lived experiences, opinions, and behaviors of girls in grades 5 through 12. We asked nearly 80 questions that focused on the relevant and timely issues affecting girls, such as relationships, social media, body image, leadership, academics, sports, and careers. We partnered with schools across the country to survey girls through online and paper-pencil assessments and also held dozens of focus group discussions and individual interviews. You will see the findings from these surveys and hear the girls' opinions throughout each chapter. It was important to me that the voices and stories that are represented in this book are based on much more than just my own experiences and interactions with girls and are representative of girls' experiences across the country.

What we learned is that there are vast differences among girls in regard to their experiences, thoughts, and opinions. Girls' knowledge of various topics is based on the environment in which they are raised. Depending on what they have been exposed to, girls' perceptions of the opportunities available to them can vary greatly. But the one thing that continued to amaze me as I learned from more and more girls was that the fundamental issues that are facing girls are *much* more universal than different. While girls can have extremely different experiences based on their socioeconomic status, race and

ethnicity, family composition, or ability, I have found that the experience of girlhood, while unique for every girl, looks amazingly similar for girls across the country. Despite the vast differences among girls, the commonalities and shared experiences strongly outweigh the differences. Negotiating friendships and fitting in, experiencing insecurity about one's body, managing dating relationships and sexual pressure, and dealing with the social, emotional, and cognitive changes of adolescence seem to be universal issues for most American teen girls. Girls are under pressure and are at risk for negative outcomes simply because they are female. Girls are more likely than boys to dislike their body, go on a diet, feel pressure to look sexy, experience sexual violence, have low self-esteem, experience depression, or attempt suicide.

The statistics from The Girls Index™, which are shared throughout this book, are the summary findings from the research. The survey respondents included predominantly public school (88%) students who attend suburban (58%), urban (18%), and rural (24%) schools. Girls from elementary (22%), middle (37%), and high (41%) school participated, and girls from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (high poverty, 29%; medium poverty, 27%; and low poverty, 38%) shared their experiences. The participants were 57.5% Caucasian, 12.1% Black/African American, 9.4% Hispanic/Latina, 4.7% Multiracial, 3.8% Asian, 1.4% Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander, and 0.9% Native American/American Indian (10.2% did not answer). The full research report, as well as additional companion reports and data analyses, can be downloaded at www.rulingourexperiences.org/the-girls-index-report or bit.ly/TheGirlsIndexReport.

In addition to the inclusion of this new data source, this book also addresses one of the biggest changes of the past decade—the rapid proliferation of technology and social media. This innovation has massively changed the landscape of how girls build and sustain relationships, communicate with others, make sense of their environment, and develop their own identity and sense of self. Where technology and social media were previously secondary to in-person communications, these modalities are now the primary modes of connection and as such require different education, approaches, and considerations. Determining how best to help girls navigate

their digital world while simultaneously keeping them safe is one of the consistent questions that I receive from adults who desperately want to know how to implement limitations and protections that insulate girls from the damaging effects of technology; yet they often struggle to know precisely what to do.

In this edition of the book I have expanded the information on technology and social media, as I do believe it is critical for girls' safety and development. However, I caution the reader to ensure that they do not view social media as the cause of all of the challenges that girls are facing. The actual issues that girls are grappling with—friendships, relationships, body image, sexual harassment, and pressure—are not new; rather, they have only been exacerbated by social media. So you will find that in this book I focus on actual ways to relate to girls, to start hard conversations, and to teach girls the *actual* skills that they need to interface better with ever-changing technologies, rather than simply focus on technology as the sole cause of distress.

Despite all of these challenges that are discussed in this book, I know that girls are strong and resilient. They consistently exceed the limited expectations that are placed on them by society and media, and they continue to amaze and inspire me. I also know that girls are better able to fully realize their potential when they have caring adults in their lives who nurture, challenge, encourage, and support them.

My goal in writing this book is to give a voice to girls who often feel that their thoughts and opinions are unheard and devalued. I want girls to know that what they think, feel, and believe matters. I want to know what are the big things going on in their lives that adults don't understand. What do they dream about? What fills them with insecurity? And ultimately, what can we do to help them? I want to provide adults with a glimpse into the lives of girls, as described by the girls themselves, and offer concrete strategies for how adults can better understand, communicate with, and motivate the girls in their lives.

I recognize that this book does not address the unique issues that face every girl. As a researcher who works primarily in public schools, there are legal and ethical limitations to the types of questions I can ask students. The copyright in this book is held by the publisher, and the publisher's permission ensures that this book is not intended for distribution. For promotional review or evaluation purposes only.

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privacy protection for students, and even though our surveys were anonymous, we were still not permitted to question girls on topics such as sexual orientation and gender identity, religion or spirituality, specific developmental or learning issues, country of origin, trauma or abuse history, or mental health status of the student or her family. While this can limit the specificity of the information I share, the sample size of our research population (10,678) ensures, with 99% confidence, that our findings are representative of how we would expect *most* girls in the United States to respond. More than anything this book offers a perspective on the shared experiences of girls and the ways in which, because of their gender, all girls can experience limitations and decreased expectations in life.

Our role as caring adults in the lives of girls is to understand these challenges and equip girls with the skills to effectively navigate their adolescent years and construct a life that is full of purpose, meaning, pride, and fulfillment. We want girls to perceive their options as infinite and their abilities as expandable, and we each have a role in helping girls construct a life without limits.

Acknowledgments

It is not until you sit down to write an acknowledgments section that you fully realize that your accomplishments have very little to do with you and everything to do with the people who surround you. While I love research and writing, the ideas that swirl around in my head would never make it to paper if I did not have a team of amazing humans who help me distill my thoughts, curate my musings, challenge my preconceived ideas, and provide me with opportunities to actually sit at my computer and write.

I am lucky enough to have a husband and partner in this life who gives me the space and freedom to explore my passions, immerse myself in my work, and pursue some pretty crazy ideas, all while ensuring that I never take myself too seriously and that I have a ton of fun along the way. Bob, thanks for making sure that I finished my dissertation instead of playing women's professional football and for having me think twice about joining that roller derby team. More than 20 years into this adventure, and it is only getting started.

My brother, Rev. Richard Hinkelman, has been one of my steadfast champions and supporters. He is the most selfless person I have ever met (sometimes to a fault) and is committed to creating a world that is caring, equitable, and just. His life journey is an inspiring tale of overcoming obstacles and dealing with discrimination and ostracization, all while persevering to achieve his true calling. As a pastor who leads a fully inclusive and affirming church, Richard helps me think hard about issues of social justice, inclusion, equity, and genuine care for others. We have deep and challenging conversations and continually help each other grow. I am proud to be his sister and grateful for

I am lucky to have amazing parents, Hink and Joan, who instilled in me an early sense that girls can do and be anything they want. I was a rough-and-tumble, athletic girl with a tendency to be messy and loud. Never placing undue limits on me, they gave me the chance to explore my passions, interests, and whims, whether or not they were something that “girls should do.” From them I learned the value of *really* hard work, of not spending much time in front of a TV, and of caring for others above myself. Their ongoing prayers and support have sustained me, and it is my sincere hope that little girls everywhere have the opportunity to grow up with parents who give their daughters the gift of confidence and a sense of limitlessness that my parents gave me.

There are three very special women who have passed on from this life who have been some of the most significant influences in my life and my work—my grandma Irene, my professor and mentor Dr. Susan Sears, and my friend and colleague Dr. Patty Cunningham. From them I learned the importance of hard work and tenacity, of standing up for yourself and what you believe in, and of righteous resistance to the status quo. These women taught me to never give up on my dreams, to care deeply and authentically for others, and to ensure that my life is one of service to others. Each inspired me in different ways to focus my life’s work around serving girls and women, while they simultaneously challenged me to become a better version of myself.

I am also lucky enough to have amazing women in my life who sustain and support me and who are the steady and constant forces in my life that I know will stand with me through the highs and lows. Lauren Hancock and Deb Schipper are my friends and colleagues who have helped me make many of my dreams, including this book, a reality. From reading versions of chapters and providing insights and feedback to being on hand for a cocktail and a reality check, to kicking me in the butt to meet my deadlines, these women are honest, loyal, hilarious, and one of a kind.

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blessed by friends and colleagues who help sustain me. A heartfelt and sincere thanks to Jessica Allen, Maureen Casamassimo, Mary Cusick, Tammy Roberts Myers, Dr. Tina Pierce, and Dr. Sibyl West. I have also been blessed to work with a wonderful team of women who are collectively making the world safer for girls, and I am honored to work alongside them. Crystal Hill, Dorothy Martindale, Martinique Ridley, Lauren Morosky, Nancy Willis, and Rachel Zufall are deeply committed to creating generations of confident girls who control their own relationships, experiences, decisions, and future, and I love working with them every day at the ROX World Headquarters.

To all the graduate students, school counselors, educators, and ROX facilitators who I have had the opportunity to work with over the past decade, you have given of your time and tremendous talent to positively affect the lives of girls in your community and throughout the nation. Because of you thousands of girls will have different opportunities, different perspectives, and a chance to live a life that is free from limits and restrictive expectations. You have delivered programming, assisted with data collection, and have been the amazing role models that young girls need in their lives. I am grateful for your ongoing commitment to girls and your willingness to make a substantial and sustainable impact in the life of each girl you work with. You give me hope for the future.

A final thank you to all the parents, teachers, counselors, administrators, and especially girls who have taken the time to talk with me over the past several years about their thoughts, opinions, and experiences. Without you none of this work would have been possible. I have been amazed at the willingness of people to share their personal experiences with me and have been honored to hear your stories and thoughts. It is my hope that by sharing their stories with you, you are able to not only understand the challenges that girls face but also recognize the strength, potential, and promise in today's generation of girls. These girls are our future; let's help them succeed!

About the Author



Dr. Lisa Hinkelman is an educator, counselor, researcher, and author who has spent nearly 15 years researching girls and educating counselors both as a professor at The Ohio State University and as the founder and CEO of ROX (www.rulingourexperiences.org). ROX is a national nonprofit that provides evidence-based empowerment programming for girls, professional development for counselors and educators, and

research on the critical issues affecting girls. ROX is focused on creating generations of confident girls who control their own relationships, experiences, decisions, and future.

Dr. Hinkelman has spent years working with girls, parents, and educators in both educational and counseling settings and has been aggressively researching the experiences of diverse girls as the principal investigator and author of the groundbreaking publication *The Girls' Index: New Insights Into the Complex World of Today's Girls* (2017). The Girls Index™ reveals the findings from a survey conducted with nearly 11,000 girls across the country and includes the girls' thoughts, behaviors, and beliefs in regard to confidence, body image, relationships, school, social media, careers, and leadership. She consults regularly for schools, organizations, and agencies on the critical issues affecting girls, stress and pressure, social media, sexual harassment and violence prevention, and other

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social, emotional, safety, and mental health issues faced by students and schools.

Dr. Hinkelman is a graduate of Chatham College in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she earned her degrees in psychology and education. She additionally earned her MA and PhD in counselor education from The Ohio State University. She can be reached at 614-488-8080 or lisahinkelman@rulingourexperiences.com.

What's Really Going on for Girls, and How Can We Help Them?

1

I don't think that adults have any idea what our lives are really like. They think they know what is going on, but they don't really. When I think about the big things going on for girls my age, I think the first thing is girl drama. It is constant and never ending. Girls just look for ways to create drama and will make stuff up when everything is fine. Girls talk behind each other's backs and try to get certain girls to not like other girls. You just have to make sure that you are in with the "right" girls so you don't get caught up in the middle of it all.

—Laci, seventh grade

The drama of girlhood. Is it a reality made up by girls who have too much time on their hands, or is it a necessary rite of passage that all girls experience? Do the issues that we see in the media greatly influence how girls see themselves, or have we overplayed the importance of social media and popular culture in the lives of girls? What do girls like about being a girl? What frustrates girls about the adults in their lives? What are the big issues that girls are dealing with, and what keeps them awake at night? And perhaps most important, how can we best support these young women?

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These are the questions that I set out to answer more than a decade ago when I began to research girls. I wanted to talk to girls and hear their perspectives and their realities, in their own words. I wanted to give a voice to girls who feel that sometimes their thoughts and opinions are overlooked. More than anything, I wanted to determine how we can best support, encourage, and empower girls to be in control of their own relationships, experiences, decisions, and future so that they are able to achieve their full potential.

Since that time I have continued to immerse myself into the world of girls, both as a researcher and as the leader of a girl-serving nonprofit organization where I work with more than 5,000 girls and 3,000 adults each year. The statistics and stories in this book are current, relevant, and informed by thousands of girls and the adults who educate, parent, mentor, coach, and care for girls.

As I talked to the teachers, counselors, and parents, I learned that most adults are eager to help girls but they often don't know where to begin. They recognize that girls' lives are challenging but realize that they have difficulty relating and connecting to girls. The goal in this book is to give adults who work with and care about girls key insights into the lives of girls and provide strategies for building strong relationships and working more effectively with girls.

In asking girls about the big things going on in their lives, lots of different topics emerged. Even among girls who live in close-knit families, attend high-performing schools, and are involved in multiple extracurricular activities, they still report struggling with friendships, dating relationships, and body image concerns. They talked about pressure, issues in their families and their relationships with their parents, difficulty in friendships and dating relationships, tremendous pressures around weight and body image, and major concerns surrounding self-esteem and how they feel about themselves. They talked about puberty, academics, getting their driver's license, and dealing with depression and suicidal thoughts. Girls talked about politics, sexual harassment, racial equity, and sexual orientation. But overwhelmingly, the issues that girls talked about the most about were clustered around a handful of topic areas, including friendships, relationships, dating, body image, and pressure.

A consistent theme was that adults don't *really* understand what they are going through, so girls have difficulty openly sharing their issues and concerns with the adults in their lives.

In talking with adults many felt at a loss as to how they could develop more effective relationships with girls. Teachers reported frustration with girls “dumbing themselves down” around boys, counselors struggled with how to address the girl drama and bullying plaguing their schools, and parents felt anxiety regarding how they could best help their daughters deal with the increased pressures and challenges of middle school and high school.

What became increasingly obvious was that adults are hungry for information, strategies, and activities that they can use to connect with the girls in their lives. They want to find ways to help girls become the best they can be and experience rich, fulfilling, and productive lives. When asked what girls need to be successful, overwhelmingly, teachers, administrators, counselors, and parents identified “confidence” as most important. Interestingly, when the same question is posed to girls, their response is also “confidence.” It is clear that both girls and adults recognize that confidence is a key variable in girls’ lives; however, both struggle with how to actually cultivate confidence.

Arguably, how a person feels about themselves can affect nearly every decision that they make. Our level of self-confidence and self-concept influences our decisions and can help determine the choices that we make in many facets of our lives, including our relationships, academic pursuits, and careers. For example, if I am in an unhealthy dating relationship and I lack self-confidence, I may stay in the relationship because I am afraid to leave and I don't think that I could do any better. If I lack confidence around my academic abilities, I may opt to take a general math course instead of trigonometry because I fear that I might not succeed. If I lack self-esteem, I may feel that I am not smart enough to be successful in my dream career, so I will compromise and pursue something less risky or less prestigious. How different would our decisions be if we moved through the world with confidence in ourselves and our abilities!

In an attempt to begin to more fully understand girls’ realities, I led a research team

called The Girls' Index™ (Hinkelman, 2017). The Girls' Index™ was designed to develop a deeper understanding of the thoughts, experiences, perceptions, beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes of girls throughout the United States. This national effort sought data from a large representative sample of girls about their thoughts, experiences, and perceptions on key issues, such as confidence, body image, friendships, pressure, leadership, career aspirations, school, academics, technology, and social media.

These data showed that girls' confidence declines sharply between fifth and ninth grade. In fact, the percentage of girls who would describe themselves as confident declines more than 25% throughout the middle school years, from 86% to 60%. By ninth grade confidence is at its lowest point, and then it levels off for the next three years. Girls reported that confidence does not return to pre-middle school levels for the remainder of high school.

The decline in confidence coincides with the onset of puberty changes in girls. Girls often report that they do not feel confident in themselves or comfortable with their changing bodies and can become withdrawn and unsure of themselves. Have you ever seen a rowdy group of fourth- or fifth-grade girls who are loud and laughing without a care in the world and then when they hit seventh grade, they become insecure and consumed with their looks, their social media profile, and their potential dating partners? I recently had a ninth-grade girl tell me that the last time she felt confident and happy with her body was when she was in fourth grade.

During the childhood and adolescent years girls bodies and brains are changing rapidly, and they are simultaneously inundated with negative messages about, and unrealistic images of, females. As girls begin to develop an understanding of themselves and their environment, they are influenced by the messages that they receive from others. They can internalize these often negative and limiting messages, which contribute to poor self-concept, dissatisfaction with their bodies, lowered expectations about their academic and career opportunities, increased acceptance of violence in relationships, and long-term self-esteem issues.

Despite these developmental and psychosocial challenges, we also know that girls

potential to make tough decisions, chart their personal goals, and control their own experiences. Girls can rise above the negative messages and influences that they are exposed to and construct a confident and strong sense of self. Our role is to help instill a sense of confidence and capability in girls, so that they know that they have the right to a happy and fulfilling life and they also have the support and skills to actually construct a life that they love.

How Can We Help Girls?

I don't understand these girls!

I have no idea how to talk to my daughter; she just rolls her eyes every time I say something.

Girls today are way different from how they were when I was a teenager; I just don't even know where to start.

These comments from educators, parents, and other adults illustrate that girls who were once open, communicative, and easy to understand as children or tweens have become confusing strangers, and adults feel paralyzed as to how to forge a new, or repair an existing, relationship with a girl.

While we might not always understand what is going on in girls' lives and we may have difficulty comprehending the way they think and reason, there are many things that we can do to communicate care and concern to the girls in our lives. While the remainder of this book will delineate specific issues and topics that affect girls' lives, there are some general recommendations that can help us effectively make connections with, communicate with, and help the girls in our lives.

Those of us who work with youth know that despite our best efforts, we are unable to control what is happening in girls' lives outside of our interactions with them. Educators know that girls may come to you with histories of abuse, a violent home life, and a lack of supportive and caring adults. They may not have a bed to sleep in, food for breakfast, or clean clothes when they come to school. While we can at times help girls, we cannot always control what is happening in their lives.

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situation, our role in these situations is to determine where we can add positive and prosocial elements to these girls' lives. Research tells us that the more deficits, challenges, or barriers that girls have, the more positive supports we need to add to their lives (Bernard, 1993). We believe that our positive intervention can outweigh the impact of the negative factors in their lives.

We do this by communicating our care, our passion, and our genuine concern for the development and well-being of girls. We want to help girls identify and find their dreams. We want to help girls find their own happiness and be able to articulate what that looks like for them. What excites them? What fuels their passion? What do they care about? And how can we help them construct their lives to be fulfilling, passionate, and purposeful?

There are some simple and concrete things that adults can do to connect with, care for, motivate, and support the girls in their lives.

#1: Be Aware

Be aware of what is going on in the lives of girls by paying attention to the things that they care about. Whether it is popular culture, music, news related to girls, media attention around girls and women, or the pressures that girls face, attempting to be relevant and knowledgeable can be helpful in creating an effective bond with the girls in your life. Start conversations about the issues affecting girls in the media, share news articles about the accomplishments of girls throughout the world, bring up interesting topics, and solicit girls' opinions. Girls report feeling that adults don't get them and don't understand what is happening in their lives. They feel that adults are far removed from the actual challenges that they face and that it's nearly impossible for adults to truly understand what it is like to be a girl today.

Maintaining an awareness of the things girls care about can mean paying attention to the relevant and contemporary issues facing girls—for example, recognizing how the media and culture inform and influence girls: Who are the best new actors, the musicians on the stickers on their computers or water bottles, the latest Netflix series or YouTube star? This does not mean that we overemphasize the importance of these things, but rather, we

demonstrate to girls that we care about what is going on in their lives and, at least in some small way, have an understanding of what is “cool” and relevant. Of course, we don’t have to actually *agree* that anyone or anything is cool, but we need to know what or who the girls think is cool.

You might make a habit of tuning in to popular reality shows while cleaning the house, scrolling through Instagram in your free time, and listening to different types of music while driving your car. Does this mean that you are into reality TV, Instagram models, or hip-hop music? Not necessarily. It just means that you are trying to stay connected to what girls are exposed to on a daily basis.

Assess your own knowledge of contemporary girl culture:

1. Who are the top musicians or bands that your girls are into?
2. What is the current “must see” movie or streaming series for teen girls?
3. What is the social media platform, app, or network of choice for girls?
4. What books are girls reading?
5. What would girls say they like to do in their spare time?
6. What social issues are girls paying attention to?

While it is important to attempt to understand the realities of girls’ lives, it is equally important to maintain an appropriate relationship with the girls in your life. And that brings us to our second strategy.

#2: Be the Adult

A caring adult does not take on the role of a friend or a peer. Often, we see adults who work with girls seeking to be a friend to the girls rather than maintaining an appropriate adult-teen relationship. This is one instance where the attempt to be knowledgeable and relevant can go too far. As adults we are not the contemporaries of the girls in our lives, and we do not want to send confusing messages to them.

A middle school principal shared a story about one of her seventh-grade students who was on being the

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“cool mom.” She wanted to be the mom that all the other girls would come to and with whom they could gossip about other kids. This particular mother was overinvolved in the girls’ lives and took great pride in being the person that the other girls could share their secrets with. She followed all of their social media accounts and worked a little too hard to stay in the know about their lives.

Where the situation went from mildly uncomfortable to slightly more inappropriate was when the mom would get upset if she wasn’t invited to be part of the girls’ conversations when they had sleepovers at her house. She admitted to hiding on the staircase and listening in on the girls’ discussions because she felt left out when the girls retreated to the basement game room for private conversations. When her own daughter turned to the school counselor to share her concerns and talk about her problems, the mother became very distressed and angry with the school counselor. Mom was frustrated and upset that her daughter did not want to tell her the things that were bothering her but would rather seek out the listening ear of another caring adult in her daughter’s life. Instead of getting angry about this situation, the mom should have been thrilled that her daughter had strong and caring relationships with other responsible adults who were willing to listen to and support her daughter.

There is a fine line between being relevant and understanding and trying to relive your teen years through your kids or students. We must ensure that we maintain a healthy balance of relevance coupled with appropriate boundaries. We don’t want to make things confusing for girls by requiring them to discern what the relationship boundaries should be. So while it is important that we stay informed and connected, it is probably less important and would even be embarrassing for the girls if we blurred the boundaries between adult and peer.

#3: Start the Conversation

One of the most important ways that we can help girls is to be the one to start the conversation—any conversation—and then work to maintain open lines of communication. Sometimes, however, starting a conversation can be difficult, particularly if it has been a challenge for us in the past. Communication can ultimately dictate the

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success or failure of any relationship, and often a hallmark of the adolescent years is a decrease in effective communication between adults and teens.

Our goal in communicating with girls is to make them feel that what they have to share with us is valuable and important and that they are the most important person in our lives at any given time. We start the conversation by inviting girls to share with us what is going on in their lives and then really listening to what they have to say. If we only try to have meaningful conversations when there is something serious to discuss—like “the talk”—our communication skills are likely to be a little rusty. Additionally, girls are less likely to be open to a meaningful dialogue. But if we regularly try to engage in open, nonjudgmental conversations about all sorts of things, we are laying the groundwork for a reciprocal, communicative, and lasting relationship.

We demonstrate our interest, care, and concern by genuinely seeking to understand the other person's reality. It always feels good when another person truly wants to understand how we feel, what our experience has been, and how we make sense of a situation, without seeking to impose their own beliefs or advice onto the situation. This type of listening is listening to *understand*, not listening to *respond*. When we are truly seeking to understand someone else's experiences, thoughts, and feelings, we invite the disclosure from their own space, without seeking to impose our beliefs or our judgment on them. When we do this, other people feel safe and comfortable in the relationship. They know that they won't be judged, and they know that their feelings won't be deemed silly or inappropriate.

Here are some ways to start an open conversation that allows the girl to decide what to talk about:

- Tell me about yourself.
- Share with me something you're especially proud of.
- Tell me more about that.
- I don't know a lot about that. . . . It would be great if you could explain it to me.

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- I saw _____ on TV last night. What do you think of him/her/it?
- Wow, that situation seems pretty tough. Tell me how you are dealing with it.
- What do you think about _____?

Great conversation starters are open-ended and can't easily be answered with a "yes" or "no" response. As you can see, different situations call for different types of communication, but creating a safe and open space for dialogue must be an intentional activity on our part. Sometimes this means that we have to monitor our own language, tone of voice, and communication patterns and then intentionally reframe our responses.

#4: Reframe the Response

Our communication style can sometimes unintentionally raise defenses and shut down the dialogue. To open up the lines of conversation requires an effort on our part that I call *reframing the response*. When we reframe our responses, we pay attention to what we might *normally* say to girls in a particular situation, and we catch ourselves and reframe what we *actually* say. Sometimes our initial responses can sound judgmental or patronizing and can serve to stifle the conversation. If our responses are not perceived as judgmental but rather as an attempt to understand, how much more productive would our communication actually be!

When we reframe our response, we must first monitor our own communication style. How often do we say things that others could perceive as snippy, judgmental, or paternalistic? Instead of saying, "Do you seriously think you are going to wear that outfit out of this house?" it is wiser to suggest, "Honey, I am not sure if that outfit is the best choice for this event. Let's think about this together." Despite what we may actually be thinking, when we control our nonverbal messages (i.e., the expressions on our face, what we do with our eyes, if we look angry, surprised, disgusted, etc.) as well as our verbal messages (i.e., the tone and content of what actually comes out of our mouths), our chances of increasing communication

For example, if you say to a teen who may have recently made a poor decision, “Now tell me, did you think that that was a good idea?” you can fairly easily guess what the response will be. Asking a question in this way only serves to suppress the conversation and probably completely shut it down. If we instead say, “Share with me a bit about what you were thinking and what was going on for you when this happened,” we might get a very different response. Obviously our inflection and tone of voice matter when we communicate, but the actual words that we say matter as well. Consider the following examples.

Example #1:

- *Option 1:* “Did you see Billie Eilish on the awards show last night? She is so dark and weird. I don’t get how people think she has any talent at all. What do you think about her?”
- *Option 2:* “What did you think about Billie Eilish’s performance on the awards show last night?”

Example #2:

- *Option 1:* “Your teacher told me that you haven’t been turning in your homework, and I would like an explanation right now.”
- *Option 2:* “I’m wondering if you have been having some trouble with your math homework. Your teacher shared some concerns with me, and I wanted to check in with you.”

Which statements do you think would encourage a girl to open up to you, help her believe that her opinions matter, and make her feel that you are a safe person to talk with about her problems?

#5: Communicate Care and Concern

One of the most important things we can do in the lives of girls is to communicate that we care and that we are concerned. Research tells us that there is perhaps no stronger predictor of success in a child’s

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adult (Bernard, 1993). Care and support are the building blocks of resiliency, but for some girls it may be difficult to identify even one adult who cares deeply for them.

When you think back on your adolescent years, who was the person, or persons, who cared deeply for you? Who held high expectations for you and tried to ensure that you were successful? Who was the person you could rely on who would never let you down?

Some girls can identify a long list of caring adults in their life, but other girls have difficulty coming up with even one name. Obviously, you are reading this book because you care about girls and have young ladies in your life. You know the person you pictured when you were posed the aforementioned questions. I believe that our goal is for girls to picture us when they are asked those very same questions.

How You Can Show That You Care

Pay attention to the things that are important to her, and follow up accordingly. This could mean asking how her softball tournament went over the weekend, how her family is adjusting to having a new baby in the house, or how the visit with her grandparents over the holidays went. This shows that you listen and pay attention—that you care.

Look for opportunities to connect her to positive people and activities. Girls flourish when they have meaningful and positive connections in their lives. Unfortunately, we are observing a generation of teens who are becoming more socially isolated and who see their main sources of socialization and entertainment as connecting with peers online and via social media. Getting girls involved with people and activities that will build them up, challenge them, support them, and encourage them is key in building resilient girls. Some ideas include the following: youth groups, sports teams, volunteer opportunities, neighborhood cleanups, mission or service trips, book clubs, science camps, art classes, hiking and nature camps, martial arts, ice skating, scrapbooking events, and music lessons. National organizations where girls can connect with other girls as well as with caring adults may include Girl Scouts, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Black

Girls Code, Girls Who Code, Boys and Girls Clubs, Girls Inc., Girls on the Run, Ruling Our Experiences, Inc. (ROX), Girls' Leadership, and the YWCA. Research the local organizations or activities in your community that offer programming and opportunities for girls.

Spend time rather than money. I work with a 13-year-old girl, Natalie, who is having trouble getting along with her parents. They are constantly bickering, and both the teen and the parents are frustrated. Taking a solution-focused approach, I asked Natalie to share with me what is happening when she and her mom are getting along. What are the things that she is doing, and what are the things that her mom is doing? Natalie said, "When she buys me stuff, we get along." Later, when I talked to Natalie's mom about the same topic, she agreed that she often bought things for Natalie because she was constantly looking for what would make her daughter happy and encourage her daughter to be nice to her. Unfortunately, this strategy backfired because Natalie has begun to associate her mother's affection with shopping and buying new things, and as Natalie gets older, mom is continually trying to buy bigger and more expensive things to show her daughter her love. Thus, Natalie is getting spoiled, and the mom-daughter relationship is not improving. Building a relationship around shared interests and quality time together creates meaningful and sustainable bonds, whereas basing interactions on more superficial factors can equate to fewer authentic exchanges.

#6: Set Goals, and Expect Success

It is possible to be caring and supportive while also holding high expectations for girls. We want girls to be successful. We want them to have success in their relationships, friendships, academic pursuits, and career decision-making. We want girls to envision a successful life for themselves and hold themselves to high expectations of performance and achievement.

As discussed previously, and will be discussed later in this book, there can be situations where girls perceive the expectations that parents and others place on them as unrealistic and stressful. When this occurs, girls can internalize their desire to please others and become stressed out and perfectionists. Having high expectations

and holding girls to achieving their expectations can be an important goal as well as a delicate balance. We want girls to believe in themselves but also know that we believe in them. Holding high expectations for girls communicates to them that we believe that they are capable of achieving at a high level and that we will support them in getting there.

We can support girls in achieving their dreams by helping them set goals. Goal setting is a very purposeful and concrete activity, and when done correctly, it can make even the largest task feel manageable. For nearly every topic addressed in this book, the activity of setting goals can be incorporated. I have used the following exercise to address academic performance, career development, healthy behavior, and physical activity, and I have even used it with two people to identify ways to make improvements in their relationship.

Too often, we set goals that are vague, unrealistic, and unattainable. For goals to be appropriately motivating, they need to be specific, but they also must be *both* challenging and realistic. A common strategy for goal setting is using the SMART goal framework. While you may see various iterations of the acronym, SMART goals are as follows:

Specific: Identify what it is precisely that you want to accomplish. A goal has a much greater chance of being achieved if it is specific and well articulated rather than vague or general.

Measurable: Determine how you will measure progress on the goal, and use a concrete metric to monitor your progress. This will help you celebrate small successes and will keep you on track.

Attainable: Goals should be appropriately challenging but also attainable. Goals that are too easy to achieve tend to not require much motivation or focus—we can easily get bored. Conversely, goals that are far out of reach can seem unwieldy, and we can become easily frustrated and can give up.

Relevant: Goals must be based on the actual realities of your life and should take into consideration the environment, climate, and the “girl”-oriented material. They should be meaningful and

significant and make a difference in *your* life. If a goal does not feel relevant to the person (but rather is a goal that someone else is setting for them), there is little motivation to achieve. I, personally, have to see the goal as important and relevant to my life if I am going to work hard to achieve it!

Time sensitive: Include a timeline when setting a goal because it can help ensure that the task will get completed. This can mean that a student has nine weeks to improve her grade in science or that she will learn how to play a challenging arrangement on the piano in time for the recital that is two months away. Goals can have relatively short timelines (a few weeks) or long timelines (over the course of years). Working against a deadline can keep us engaged and motivated.

There are many ways to use a goal-setting activity such as this. Having girls think about goals that are important to them and then helping them translate their ideas into SMART goals is an initial step. Next, it is important to help girls identify the activities and supports that will help them achieve their goals. What will they have to do to make progress on their goals? What are the behaviors they will have to engage in, and what are the resources and supports they will need to achieve their goals?

Example:

- *General goal:* I will improve my physical fitness.
- *SMART goal:* I will work out at the gym three days a week for the next six months. I will do cardiovascular exercises two days a week and strength training one day a week.

To set the SMART goal above, I need to have access to a gym that has cardio and weight training equipment. I need to have transportation to the gym, and I need to be able to fit three days a week into my schedule. Considering the realities of the situation can help us set goals that are realistic.

#7: Encourage Risk Taking

Encouraging risk taking does not mean encouraging girls to engage in risky behavior; rather, it means encouraging girls to push themselves beyond their own perceptions of their capabilities. Risk taking allows girls the opportunity to see themselves as being able to achieve more than they thought possible. We want to instill in girls the sense that if they try something new, they may fail or they may develop an entire new set of competencies and skills. Examples include trying out for the school play, running for student government, standing up to a bully, taking an Advanced Placement course, or joining a sports team. Risk taking means putting oneself in a situation where success is not a sure thing. While it can be difficult and painful to watch those we love struggle at certain things, we are helping them prepare for life's ups and downs. We recognize our need to keep our girls protected and well insulated from the dangers of the world; however, when we help instill a strong sense of self in a girl, she is more apt to "stick her neck out" and try something that she may have been less inclined to try if she had lower self-confidence.

We want girls to know that the only regret we don't want them to have is the regret of not having done something because they feared failure. Girls need to know how to experience both success and failure and be prepared to effectively and graciously manage both. Encourage them to get out there and try something new—and be there to support them regardless of the outcome!

#8: Don't Just Set Limits; Teach Skills

We know that girls will have to deal with pressures, negative influences, and difficult situations. They will find themselves in predicaments that will require them to trust their instincts and make good decisions. Our hope is that when girls are in such situations they have the wherewithal to make the right decision. We have an opportunity to help prepare girls by teaching them the actual skills they will need to use in tough situations.

Too often, our desire is to keep girls protected by imposing strict rules and limits for their behavior. No social media until you are 15, no mixed gender swimming, no dating.

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until you are 16, no listening to certain types of music, and no going to concerts. While rules, limits, and consequences are critically important, limiting girls' access to information and experiences can backfire when they have to handle a difficult challenge. Parents often say, "We've talked about right and wrong, and my hope is that when she finds herself in that situation she will know what to do." This can certainly be true. Family values and norms can be deeply embedded in children and can serve as a moral compass that can help influence behavior. However, what can be equally powerful is for girls to actually have the experience of learning *how* to handle a situation and practice actually *doing so*. Taking a situation from hypothetical to reality helps build the necessary skills and competencies to manage the circumstance.

We must balance our need to shelter and protect girls with the realization that they are eventually going to have to function on their own in this world. While our tendency is to protect them and to want to handle challenges for them, we do girls a greater service by helping them develop the skills for themselves. This could mean helping them learn how to approach a teacher who may have scored their exam incorrectly, tell a dating partner that they do not want to go any further sexually, or refuse to ride in a car with someone who has been drinking. Letting girls know that these are dilemmas that they are likely to face and providing them the space to explore and practice their potential responses can increase their ability to do the right thing in the actual situation.

A Future Full of Promise

This book is not designed to illuminate all the things that are wrong in girls' lives. It has not been written to say, "Look how bad everything is for girls." Conversely, the future for girls is bright. They have more opportunities than they've ever had to be successful, take risks, chart new paths, and live vast, varied, and fulfilling lives. They can play competitive and professional sports and go to college, medical school, law school, or graduate school. They can have unique and interesting careers, achieve business and political success, and give birth to and raise children and have a family. Girls are special,

unique, and full of possibility. They have the opportunity to take a stand, set new records, and pave the way for an entire generation of girls to follow.

The approach in this book is to look at the areas of a girl's life where she is likely to be limited by her gender. What are the topics, concepts, and issues that can affect girls in negative or restrictive ways? We want girls to love being girls, but we also want them to have access to the broadest range of opportunities and possibilities. We want to prepare them for the rewards and challenges that they will face, and we want to equip them with the skills that they will need to negotiate their growing up years.

Girls have all the potential in the world, but they need adults in their lives who will guide them, protect them, nurture them, and challenge them. They need people who will have honest conversations with them and prepare them for the often difficult challenges that they will face. They need caring adults who recognize the pressures that they face, understand the realities of their lives, and work to ensure an equitable and just future for all girls. It is my hope that you also believe this and that is why you are reading this book.