



Promote 'girl power' in your congregation

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Girl power!

This is the attitude we celebrate in today's culture. Society is waking up to the idea that we must pay attention to the needs and interests of girls. This wake-up call is sounding in our schools, sports teams, camps, organizations, the job market, and the media in positive and exciting ways. Now, more than ever, we are recognizing girls for their achievements, and their finding success in areas they choose.

Still, one glance at a magazine or sitcom cast reminds us that girls and young women are often told they don't fit society's image of "beautiful." Men continue to dominate the job market, and boys can count on getting sports headlines.

How can we instill a pro-girl attitude for the girls and young women of our congregations and communities? In what we say and do, we can help girls love themselves as part of God's precious creation, and be enthusiastic about who they are. But first, we look at their gender characteristics.

The way they think

A girl's ability to think for herself changes with age.

- From the ages of 8-10, or until about 4th grade, girls often have healthy self-esteem. They are verbal, robust and open about their range of feelings; they take risks and willingly volunteer.
 - From about the 5th through the 7th grade, their emotions tend to fade. They don't tell their feelings, they don't volunteer and hesitate to say what they want. Rather than give their opinions or share their thoughts, they often respond with "Whatever" and "I don't know."
 - From about 13-15 years of age, they develop the trend of saying, "It's like..." and "You know..." They are afraid of becoming disconnected from others, so they tend to think as everyone else does rather than for themselves. Others become quite opinionated; many become obsessed with clothes or boys/young men.
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The tyranny of kind and nice (a training in phoniness)

At least in the White culture, girls often get the message that they're not nice if they're angry or if they disagree with someone. Even at church, we can help them to not let "kind and nice" hinder their ability to express their true feelings.

Girls watch relationships—namely, how other girls and women interact with one another. They know others use "false voices" when communicating with people they don't like or with whom they don't agree. They observe plastic smiles, which only hide feelings behind a mask of pleasantness.

It's as though they need *voice lessons*. We can challenge them to say what they really think, and not let them by with "Whatever" or "I don't care." Offer opportunities to:

1. **Speak:** their thoughts, opinions, ideas, dreams and emotions.
 2. **Problem solve:** to process right from wrong, and work through conflicts and disagreements—all while learning to cope with how they feel.
 3. **Be sustained:** by the care, concern and support of peers and adult leaders. Don't allow teasing emphasize respect.
 4. **Live in their bodies:** church should be safe from the prejudice of body shape and size. Find ways in programs and conversations to help girls feel good about themselves and their bodies.
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10 things your congregation can do

1. **Establish programs for girls.**
Plan activities that boost confidence and build relationships. Consider an annual, ceremonial, multigenerational celebration of women. Invite older women to tell their stories, helping girls see their womanhood as a cause for celebration. In other settings, as women to speak to youth about their faith as well as the challenges and joys they've experienced as females. Create a mentoring program that fosters relationships between girls and women. In all you do, communicate to girls that they don't have to "look the part" to be valued in your congregation.
2. **Declare a "fat free" zone.**
Too often, girls are obsessed with thinking and talking about being "too fat." Discourage fat talk that divides relationships and destroys self-image. Talk about body acceptance and counter the myth of the perfect or ideal body.
3. **Establish a "fat free" staff.**
Encourage adults who work with youth to be good models of avoiding "fat talk" too. Be sure those who work with youth in your congregation come in all shapes and sizes and have relatively healthy self-esteem as adults.
4. **Ban body jokes.**
No joke is funny if it's about someone's body (or another person). Girls internalize sarcasm and teasing even stronger than it is intended. Use caution when commenting on a girl's appearance. Even saying "Wow! You look nice" because of a new outfit or makeup might make her think she didn't look nice before.
5. **Eat healthy.**

Diets are the craze of this country. When you gather, adopt a goal of healthy eating for both youth and adults. Ask a parish nurse or dietitian to help your youth sponsor a healthy eating program for the entire congregation or community.

6. ***Make certain that girls are in leadership roles.***

Recruit, mentor and support girls as leaders, especially in decision-making and upfront activities.

7. ***Talk about sex.***

Encourage girls to respect their bodies and take control. Urge them to say no to unwanted advances or relationships. Help them understand the difference between sexual intimacy and relational intimacy, and that sex is not the only way to establish and communicate love. Help boys and young men understand the same issues of healthy, respectful relationships. Consider using the ELCA resource [*Free in Christ to Care for the Neighbor: Lutheran Youth Talk about Human Sexuality*](#) (developed as part of the ELCA Studies on Sexuality). This resource on sexuality also has a related Web site at www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/youth/verification.

8. ***Acknowledge girls for their achievements.***

Find creative ways to recognize and affirm their accomplishments and for simply being themselves—living gifts and blessings created by God.

9. ***Work to dispel media myths.***

Be in tune with movies, TV shows, music, ads and magazines that today's youth watch, listen to and read. Use them in your lessons and discussions, challenging the images they present.

10. ***Lead a Bible study that celebrates women of faith described in scripture.***

Teach both males and females about the impact women have had throughout history.

In congregations, girls have the chance to say what they feel, profess their faith, defend their own thoughts and ideals, and be proud of who they are. As adults, we have the responsibility to model responsible choices and positive behavior. Use this *Help Sheet* to establish a "girl power" attitude in your congregation!

Girl power resources

- [Women of the ELCA](#)
 - [Real Questions Girls are Asking](#) (Augsburg Fortress)
 - [Beyond Nice: The Spiritual Wisdom of Adolescent Girls](#) (Augsburg Fortress)
 - [National Eating Disorders Association](#)
 - [Asset-building in congregations](#) (Search Institute)
 - "Gender Differences in Body Image" (Feingold, A., and Mazzella, R. (1998). [*Psychological Science*](#), 9, 190-195.)
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