

Raising Girls: *What Makes Girls Thrive?*
A community conversation based on How Girls Thrive by JoAnn Deak, PhD
March 11, 2013 at Teton County Public Library

EVENT SYNOPSIS

- Currently, there is a 'trifecta of skyrocketing stress for teens and tweens,' specifically in social media.
- **Every parent should have their children's online account codes [passwords] and check the postings at least once a month to help their children handle what is toxic, to set guidelines and limits, and to keep the conversation going about life in the cyber century.**
- Girls ages 14-17 text more than any other group; they average 100 texts a day!
- Girls are more prone to the costs of social conflict because of their neurobiology.
- Men's and women's brains are wired differently.
- The pre-frontal cortex, which is involved decision making, isn't completely developed in women until they're 30 (development of the PFC in males is typically 2 years behind female development).
- Most females use many areas of the brain to solve problems, while males tend to use far fewer parts of the brain when solving the same problem.
- Women's left part of their amygdala is larger, which is where details of emotions are stored.
- Girls perform better and report more satisfaction and confidence in singer-gender, democratic, cooperative, connected, inclusive, hands-on education settings.
- Self-esteem is a critical element in a child's performance, behavior and the ability to make choices.
- Self-esteem comes through the 3 C's: competence, confidences and connectedness.
- A few activities that are good at helping create and maintain girls self-esteem: outward bound, all-girls summer camp, mentoring, parent role modeling, making a lot of quality family time for play and communication
- Girls need a 'North Star' (something that is always there for them, i.e. pet) and a 'Green Blanket' (a supportive adult, parent and teacher)
- It's important to let girls experience failures early; the brain grows and changes most when it struggles, not when something's easy.
- Ask children why they feel inadequate at school/social; what their friends may have really meant when feelings have been hurt
- There are many things we can do as parents to help maintain and feed our children's self-esteem (such as write our daughters a letter about what we want them to know, ask them questions about their emotions daily)

FULL EVENT NOTES

Carrie Kirkpatrick: Good evening, hi everyone, I want to make sure you can hear me okay. So, if you can't raise your hand, I have a mic I can put on but I have a strong voice so hopefully it will be okay. Thank you for coming. To save parents time we are taking notes and will be posting "Cliff's notes" to our website (raisinggirlswyo.org) in 1-2 weeks. By a show of hands how many of you have read this book [What Makes Girls Thrive]? (1 hand raised) Okay, great, so a recap is worthwhile. This 96-page book is one of the best books I've read on the topic.

CK: I'd like to begin with a quote I pulled from book: "...the critical core of parenting and educating is to think with premeditation and care." Now, why this book? Every generation has their own battle, and this young generation's is media. Dr. Deak refers to the media as "a trifecta of skyrocketing stress for teens and tweens." This theme is repeated throughout the book and this presentation.

The media, specifically social networking, has eliminated "safety and sanctuary" from peer dialogue and bullying. Girls are more prone to influences of the media. Girls between the ages of 14 and 17 text more than any other group, averaging 100 messages a day. The only thing in BOLD in this book, therefore a very important take-away, is that **every parent should have their children's online account codes [passwords] and check the postings at least once a month to help their children handle what is toxic, to set guidelines and limits, and to keep the conversation going about life in the cyber century.**

There has been significant neurobiology research on how girls respond to social conflict; girls are more prone to the costs of social conflict because of their neurobiology, particularly the power of oxytocin, the "tend and befriend" hormone. Women have friendships into later years, and research suggests that women live longer than men because of these friendships -- long-lived, personal connections. However, the downside to these friendships are apparent in how we handle the situation when things go wrong. While teen girls tend to quietly hold on to the emotional hurt, fear and anxiety of failed or weak friendships, teenage boys respond with anger and project outward. For girls, the tight connections that were once healthy become a bad thing. This is when "tend and befriend" gets unhealthy.

The book starts with gender research. Deak mentions the 1991 American Association of University Women (AAUW) study where girls were found to be academically behind in science and math. This study sparked additional research, in particular how girls start by outpacing boys, then girls plateau and boys keep advancing. Research suggests this trend happens because a girl's self-esteem has a more controlling or enhancing effect on her decision making versus, boys who tend to use justice in decision-making.

Deak refers to a study regarding an "honor code" in a school. The honor code requires students to turn in friends who are cheating, plagiarizing, etc. The results showed that girls wouldn't turn their guilty friends into the honor council but, rather, they would go directly to the offender and tell them they needed to turn themselves in. On the other hand, boys skipped talking to the

friend and went straight to the honor council with the name of the guilty party. Girls tend to operate most concerned with the consequences of how they treat other people and how others will treat them; they tend to see through a lens of connectedness in decision-making, whereas boys tend to see through a lens of justice.

The book describes neurological research that explores the physiological differences between female and male brains. The right temporal parietal junction, which has the sole task of understanding others, is bigger in females. Most females use many areas of the brain to solve problems while males tend to use far fewer parts of the brain when solving the same problem.

The pre-frontal cortex, which is involved decision making, isn't completely developed in women until they're 30. This part of the brain is used to decide all kinds of things: when we become sexually active, whether to choose to drink and use drugs, etc. The development of girls' pre-frontal cortex is typically 2 years ahead of boys.

The limbic system is the seat of emotions. Men and women seem to be influenced differently by their emotions. Women's left amygdala is larger; this is where details of emotions are stored. This is why women tend to remember multiple details of emotional events, what they were wearing, where they were, what others were wearing. Men's right amygdala is larger; this controls the overview of emotions.

The brain grows and changes most when it struggles, not when something's easy.

A memory of very high emotions, such as being bullied, gets chemically burned into the hippocampus. Once this chemical reaction happens, it is very hard to erase. Negative emotions are often stored more frequently and for longer periods of time than positive emotions.

Men and women brains are wired differently. Even the part of the brain that is related to nerve endings in the face is larger in females which, is why women prefer gentler kissing. It is important to be aware of this so we can be supportive of the way our girls are wired.

The next topic in the book focuses of ideal learning environments for girls. Single gender settings are hands-down best for girls -- they soar in every way possible: participation in class, grades, SAT scores. Research shows "girls perform better and report more satisfaction and confidence in single-gender, democratic, cooperative, connected, inclusive, hands-on education settings."

In our community we don't have single-gender schooling options, but the good news is that there are opportunities for all-girl work/collaboration in the co-ed setting. Democratic systems, such as the honor system, can be put into place in the classroom. Other opportunities to improve girls' learning environments include frequently changing seating arrangements in classrooms, creating cooperative learning opportunities, as well as increase hands-on experiences. Bring a female speaker into a science class; modeling and mentoring for our

daughters is essential.

A study completed in the 80s suggested that girls were shortchanged. This led to a lot of backlash literature and research during the 90s. Now, people are more concerned about boys. By really focusing on gender differences and how we are wired differently, we can improve education for all.

The next topic covered in the book is self-esteem. I recently heard self-esteem defined as “the reputation you have with yourself.” Deak recognizes that “self-esteem is a critical element in a child's performance, behavior and the ability to make choices.” She suggests self-esteem comes through the 3 C's: competence, confidences and connectedness. Deak's research has found these attributes are necessary to self-esteem. After much research, she noticed self-esteem always comes through the 3 C's.

The book highlights a few activities that are good at helping create and maintain girls self-esteem: outward bound, all girls summer camp, mentoring, etc. Now, I'd like to show a video of a great example of self-esteem in a girl. I think she encompasses the 3 C's (competence, confidence, and connectedness). Does anyone know Chrissy Stratton? The video is of her niece who lives in Fairfax, California. This video is “self-esteem in a bottle.” <http://www.makeastandlemonade.com> (Video shows a 9 year old who bottles up organic lemonade to sell in order to raise money to end child slavery -- “ending child slavery one bottle at a time.” Each bottle comes with a button; collect enough buttons and you free a child from slavery.)

CK: I found this next portion of the book a little over my head at first, and I went back to look at it multiple times. Crucible moments and events are those that “forge a human being.” Examples are discipline, risk-taking, change, death, divorce and friendship. The good news is that parents can make a huge difference. As we talked about earlier, girls remember what they were wearing when father or mother said this to them, and we as parents can give good talking examples of how to manage through these things. It's important for kids to know that “missteps” are part of the process of learning and growing.

Resilience is a big topic now: how are kids resilient? What makes the more resilient to change? Research suggests the *quantity* and *quality* of family time in a child's life makes largest impact on kids. Deak says “children who basically feel loved and are part of an environment that feels relatively safe and consistent can withstand many adult missteps with little or no lasting negative effects.”

Girls need a “North Star.” This could be a horse, a dog; something that is always there for them, something totally reliable and precious to them. Studies of girls who have a “North Star” show that these girls excel in various things, delay sexual activity and engage in healthy behaviors. Girls also need a “Green Blanket” -- a strong and steady adult figure to whom she can always go. Girls need one of these at home and one at school. The North Star and the Green Blanket

are our insurance policies, making sure our kids have protection for when they are struggling or lost their way.

Throughout this book there are many mentions of other books you should read. We compiled the complete list here [please see last page of these notes].

That's the book in a nutshell. I missed a lot so I recommend reading it, but I want to open the discussion to all of you now to hear other points of view, ideas you have that have worked, etc. I'd like to ask who has girls under 5 years old (1/3 raise hands); 5-12 years old (1/3 raise hands), over 12 years old (1/3 raise hands).

What would you add to list of 3 C's? I kept thinking of word integrity and how integrity relates to girls. I think of integrity as: "what you do follows what you believe." I'm not sure it's included in Deak's 3 C's and I think it's necessary to self-esteem. I think of integrity as it directly relates to sex, speaking up about things on playground; what you believe you have voice to deliver. What do you think? What are other things you need to have to have self-esteem?

Audience: I'd like to ask about women who have a smaller voice. My experiences with women show they have a great, large voice [referring to voice figuratively]. You have a great voice, Carrie -- how did you get that voice?

CK: I'm 44, they say women self-esteem gets to a different level in 40s. Girls must get used to living in a woman's body in a short time frame around adolescence. Problems with self-esteem and the loss of voice happen during the transition into womanhood, which start in about 4th grade and also during the ages 14-17.

Check out this website: <http://blog.pigtailpals.com/2011/08/waking-up-full-of-awesome>. When did women forget we're full of awesome?! Anyone else have ideas on the what comprises self-esteem? Something you'd add to list?

Audience: It sounds like self-esteem is a learned skill and not an innate skill. But as a teacher I see different people "come out of gate" with different levels of self-esteem.

CK: That's a good comment. This little girl comes out of gate like that (shows girl from <http://blog.pigtailpals.com/2011/08/waking-up-full-of-awesome>).

Audience: So, how do you instill confidence/self-esteem?

Audience: I'm not sure if this will answer the question, but I'd like to share what we do. We have a two year old, and we have a consistent routine that creates a level of security. She has an emotional attachment to the things we can provide. Although I have no idea if she came out of the gate as confident kid or if we have the right resources to instill confidence, (i.e. ability to be around, create routine and sense of security, etc). What does research say about security

and self-esteem for girls who don't have everything, like a lot of the girls in Jackson have?

Audience: I take a neuroscience course. In the course we discuss how all of our minds are constantly asking “Are you there for me? Are you there to back me up? Is momma bear going to be there to back me up?” Optimally the answer is “yes,” but when there is a lack of security in the home, violence, alcoholism, etc, these conditions challenge the brain to function optimally.

CK: (directing remark toward audience member with 2 year old who asked about underprivileged children) Research says the positive things you're doing with kids helps their brains function optimally.

Audience: Our discussion about confidence reminded me of happiness, and research suggests happiness can be learned; that we can make the choice to be happy or not. We can help our daughters choose to be happy if we give them opportunities to experience confidence. We can help them choose to be happy.

Audience: Our confidence as adults influences how confident our daughters are. We need to be the role models.

CK: Grooves are worn in the brain from thinking patterns, and they become more entrenched with the same way of thinking. We need to figure out which way our daughters become wired. I have two kids wired differently. We need to be sure to give our daughters the opportunity to change what might be functioning as a broken record.

Audience: Even if our children have different personalities than we do, we need to celebrate who our children are.

CK: There has been a lot of research on babies' temperaments. It is important as a mom to recognize who our children are.

Aud: I have 5.5 yr old. When she was I born, I had a misconception that I had power, that my nurturing skills would be the be-all, end-all. What I found was that my daughter has a stronger nature than my nurturing ability. The most important thing has been for me to recognize the small things that I might otherwise be dismissive of, such as can she choose what she wants to wear everyday even though she may choose 'impractical clothes.' Giving her responsibility and choice gives her confidence. It's the little pieces of confidence building that I didn't understand until last year. Growth in confidence requires her to step up and make choices for herself. This understanding has been huge for her and me in our relationship. She says positive about herself things that I'm shocked she can say.

Audience: There is a neuroscientist named John Medina who wrote *Brain Rules for Baby*. He talks about neuropathways we are born with. If we don't use or encourage the neuro-pathways, they roll up and die. Therefore it is extremely important for kids to encourage these pathways and let them test their pathways.

Audience: When I was growing up my voice wasn't supported. Now, it's very important for me to support my children's voices. I can help them. If your children know you love being with them, they feel supported and that you can hear their voice.

CK: We did a survey here in Jackson that found most girls in Jackson felt *loved* by parents, but many didn't feel *liked* by them.

Audience: I've read something about the importance of laughing and being physical with your kids. In this day and age, we need to let them relax and play with them and tickle them. My mother raised 3 kids solo but, we had a very normal childhood and she emphasized fun. Now, with my kids I make a point of hugging, kissing, tickling and laughing with them.

Audience: One thing Deak talks about in her other book is subtle messages we give as parents, i.e. "you can't wear tank top to school; it's -5 degrees out." We don't realize that these little things we're saying are stopping our kids voices. Most of the time these little things we say and do are with great intentions but, they could be internalized by our kids as "we don't like your outfit (aka your choice)."

Audience: I am a family therapist and I tell parents to create time to play. It's critical to play with your children. The time you spend with your children creates the connectedness of 3 C's [of self-esteem: connectedness, confidence, and competence.].

CK: So, you find in your work as a family therapist that family "play time" is missing?

Audience: (family therapist responding) Yes.

Audience: I think in order for everyone to function as clear thinking souls, living in the moment, we must swing our children around in the yard, be goofy and let it all go.

Audience: Going back on our point of whether self-esteem is inherent, we saw that our girls found self-esteem in something they are passionate about, whether it's singing or art or gymnastics or skiing. Our 7 year old is confident now because she can see things she's good at. We as parents can help our children discover things they're good at.

Audience: I don't have kids of my own, but am pediatrician. We've talked about providing a nurturing environment. But, I wonder at what point can you generate confidence by letting kids to fail? This town is not so good at letting kids fail. Is there an age? A time when it's appropriate?

Audience: This is a great point. Here, in Jackson, none of our kids have ever failed. (audience laughter)

Audience: I've tried to encourage my child that the goal is not first place but to try your best.

Audience: There is one of these little girls in everyone [referring to the child dressed in sunglasses and a 'wild' outfit at <http://blog.pigtailpals.com/2011/08/waking-up-full-of-awesome>]. It is our job to find something like that in every girl.

CK: I've been fantasizing about coming downstairs one morning in a wild outfit to show my girls it's ok.

Audience: There is a psychological study of women in their 20s who were struggling. The therapists kept asking the patients about the stability of their parents and home life; all patients reported very supportive lives. So the therapists looked at the common denominator, which was that the patients parents had never let them fail. This study was useful for me because when my daughter was let down, I didn't have to feel like I had to fix things; instead we made it a learning experience. The results of the study validated that it was okay, and even beneficial, to let my daughter experience failure as a child. It's better to fail early because the consequences of failure as an adult can be much harder.

CK: There is an article on our website about this [raisinggirlswyo.org].

Audience: The book *The Price of Privilege* covers this topic well. I'd rather my child miss a homework deadline than the college application deadline. The book talks about how young adults are going through intensive crisis because they haven't been allowed to fail.

Audience: We as parents have to show children that we fail. I am therapist of adults. I see parents trying to be perfect for kids, but there has to be a balance. I tell parents that we have a 65% success rate.

Audience: Kids have to be resilient. We need to provide role modeling for kids; not only in what you do, but also how you handle the failure. Kids have an extremely high level of emotional intelligence, much higher than cognitive intelligence, and they easily pick up on emotional reactions.

Audience: I am just returning from a Harvard conference. Abigail Lipton is working on a success/failure project where professors submit rejection letters to indicate the number of rejections/failures they had. Howard Gardner, the creator of multiple intelligences, was asked if he could submit a letter for the project. After a long pause the questioner, embarrassed, said "Oh, I'm sorry -- you probably don't have any rejection letters." Gardner looked bewildered and said "I have 100s of rejection letters. I keep them in a file called 'ray of hope file.' I use the old letters to go back to ask if I can resubmit my work."

Audience: Best advice I got as a mom is let her fail now [in early years] because it's so much easier to pick up the pieces.

Audience: I think there are two more C's related to self-esteem: citizenship and communication. One thing we did as a family every night was insist that at dinner there be no phones, no TV and we talked. No topic was off-limits. Now, as adults, our daughters told us how much they appreciated the openness and that it gave them confidence. I also want to add that patience is a virtue. Our youngest never knew what she wanted to do but, now at 47, she is getting her bachelors degree.

CK: On the note of communication re: confidence and connectedness... there is a book called *The Curse of the Good Girl* by Rachel Simmons. It tells us how to teach our daughters how to say no and to stand up for themselves. How to find their voice. There is also a Girls Leadership Institute where you can go to learn communication techniques. Do you see her taking risk? Standing up for what's right? How does she handle criticism? I recommend this book for help in communicating. Are there other things that people think are necessary to self-esteem?

Audience: I have two daughters, one who is 22. She had a mentor in school who saw what she could do. Encouragement from the outside was huge asset, not just mom and dad.

CK: Exactly. The outside mentoring piece is essential.

Audience: I have twin daughters who started school this year as confident girls. But, now their teachers says they're both doing fine but *they* don't feel confident. So, it's perplexing, they're doing well but, they don't feel that way. I don't know where to go with it; the teacher didn't have much feedback. On a sidenote, we all know the hokey-pokey dance, and the other day I saw a bumper-sticker that said "What if the hokey-pokey really is what it's all about?" So, we went home and danced to hokey-pokey and had a blast.

Aud: I have two daughters 5 and 6. I realized one of my daughters was saying "I'm not good at that" only to watch our reaction. She was testing Mom and Dad.

CK: It sounds like the self-esteem conversation has shifted to character conversation. So, character being zest, grit... Has anyone heard of Angela Duckworth? She has a 15-question survey to test grit and tenacity. The character questions include: How hard you they work? Do you give up or do you complete something? However, this survey doesn't address the mystery of whether it's the school's responsibility to help with confidence-building. In other words, she may have confidence in the awesomeness of our home, but when she's at school, what happens?

Audience: Can we teach confidence in kindergarten?

CK: What they now expect of kindergartners is what they expected of me in second grade!

Audience: My daughter entered kindergarten this year with confidence and good self-esteem.

However, she wasn't expecting early bullying and lots of rules/expectations she's never seen before. Now her confidence is low and she doesn't feel like she's great at anything. It is a struggle for a parent to see this shift happen. How did other parents deal with this shift?

Aud: (counselor) Turn it on kids: "Why are you feeling like this?" And maybe they can tell you. Try asking your children questions about what/how they are feeling.

Audience: (counselor) Kids perceive far more than we believe they're picking up on, such as what we say to ourselves when we make mistakes. What we need to be sure to portray is that when we make mistakes, it doesn't mean failure. Teach positive affirmations because they help teach integrity.

CK: You're right. The more I read, I find asking kids questions is effective. Once they've answered then you can start a conversation asking "why do you feel like that?" Versus just telling the children they're great. Don't always give immediate positive feedback.

Audience: I have a 22 yr old son and an 11 yr old daughter. For me, with both kids, one of the most important things I've done is making sure conversation can happen, creating an environment in which they feel comfortable talking. My son would come home from work at 11pm and he would lay on bed and talk. Even though I was completely exhausted, I would make the effort to stay awake and ask questions because that's where the conversations would happen for him. With my daughter now in middle school, her heart is getting hurt by comments people make where she perceives they don't like her. So, with her, it's a daily debrief "what do you think they really meant?" But, there's a different pressure at middle school where transition occurs, and we need to be there when those transitions happen. Some kids' parents aren't there, and those kids are doing things solo. I'm insistent about making sure our connection is there on a daily basis. My son didn't have these same issues.

CK: A few useful resources include books *The Curse of the Good Girl*, and *Queen Bees and Wannabes*. These books have printed dialogue examples.

Audience: We can help create a supportive emotional filter.

CK: Let me refer back to the part in the book about crucible moments and events. Research shows parents do make difference. If there's a parent to make a safe place for child, she can weather most anything. So that's the good news. Deak points out that the different ways girls are wired puts us parents under a lot of pressure. But, there are things we can do to help relieve this pressure. For example, the book recommends writing a letter to your daughter containing "things you want her to know." We can also share ideas and thoughts for what we want our daughters to know while talking to friends and partners: "I want this because I didn't have it," or "I want it because I did have it."

Audience: We need to be aware of what we say. People say things unconsciously, i.e. "I'm out

of shape,” “I’m so fat,” etc. -- our daughters pick up on that.

Annie Riddell: If anyone is interested there are copies of *What Makes Girls Thrive?* at Valley Books.

Audience: These parent-related sessions are invaluable. Speaking on behalf of Teton County Library, please stop a librarian to find out where our parenting section is. Start a parenting group of your own, reading parenting books, requesting books. We’re delighted these discussions go on here; they are tremendous resources for community.

Audience: Is it possible to start a girls math club?

Audience: The librarians are open to that. Talk to Beth or Dee for younger students; Steve for older kids. In the Teen section of the library there is a sign: “Kids want to start a club?”

Audience: Speaking of clubs, there is a 3 part media-smart kids workshop in April, May and June. The main focus is 'how do we raise kids to be digital savvy citizens?' You can sign up here or go online to sign-up for library newsletters. This workshop is a huge focus of the newsletters right now.

Further Reading recommended by JoAnn Deak, PhD

- Girls will be Girls: Raising Competent and Courageous Daughters by JoAnn Deak, PhD
- In a Different Voice by Carol Gilligan, PhD
- Sex & Cognition by Doreen Kimura, PhD
- The Female Brain by Louann Brizendine, MD
- Failing at Fairness by Myra and David Sadker
- Mathematics and Gender by Elizabeth Fennema and Gilah Leder
- Women’s Ways of Knowing by Mary Field Belenky
- What Kids Need to Succeed: Proven, Practical Ways to Raise Good Kids by Peter Benson, PhD
- Building Self: Adolescent Girls and Self-Esteem by Sundra Cee Flansburg
- A Whole New Mind by Daniel Pink
- Five Minds for the Future by Howard Gardner, PhD
- American Association of University Women website: <http://www.aauw.org>
- Managing Transitions (2nd Edition) by William Bridges, PhD
- Youtube.com video “Shift Happens”
- Reviving Ophelia by Mary Pipher, PhD