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# Shortchanging Girls

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# FAMILY TIES

## Shortchanging GIRLS

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

**G**irls with healthy self-esteem have an appropriate sense of their potential, their competence, and their innate value as individuals. However, in study after study, girls and women are less likely to feel those things than men and boys. Should that be any surprise? We continue to live in a culture ambivalent toward female achievement, proficiency, independence, and the right to a full and equal life.

I am most comfortable defining self-esteem as coming from three sources: 1) how one views herself, her performance in areas in which success is important to her, who she sees when she looks in the mirror—her self-respect; 2) how she believes she is perceived by significant others, such as parents, teachers, or peers—her self-image; and 3) her self-worth, which is based on her innate value as an individual, her license to take up space in the world, her right to be heard and to express the full spectrum of human emotions—her value to God.

Middle school is the beginning of the transition from girlhood to womanhood and, not coincidentally, the time of greatest self-esteem loss. Peggy Orenstein found that at the moment of that transformation girls learn in a new and profound way that boys are central in every aspect of the culture.<sup>1</sup>

Although in her study girls were consistently articulate, insightful, happy, and successful throughout their eighth grade, Orenstein was astonished that they repeatedly dismissed their academic triumphs but willingly embraced their failures. About a third of the girls she studied had suffered a bout of bulimia, carried burdens from their parents' unhappy marriages, and were afraid to call attention to themselves. One girl was afraid to even cough in class.

It is interesting to note that African-American girls are more likely to retain a positive overall self-esteem during adolescence and are twice as likely to report feeling “pretty good at a lot of things,” maintaining a stronger sense of both personal and family importance. What we are telling our girls individually, and as a culture, has a significant impact.

Without a strong sense of self, girls enter adulthood at a deficit. They are less able to fulfill their potential, less willing to take on challenges, and less willing to explore new life choices. Orenstein suggests their successes will not satisfy them; their failures will be more catastrophic, thus confirming their own self-doubt. They will be less prepared to weather the storms of adult life, and more likely to become depressed, hopeless, and self-destructive.

We must look more carefully at what we are telling our girls, often unconsciously and subtly, about their value and worth to us—the wider community—and to God.

Susan Murray is an associate professor of family studies who teaches behavioral science and social work at Andrews University. She is a certified family life educator and licensed marriage and family therapist.

1. Peggy Orenstein's bestselling book, *Schoolgirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem and the Confidence Gap*, is the classic study of teenage girls and self-esteem. Now Orenstein uses the same interviewing and reporting skills to examine the lives of women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s in her newest book, *Flux*.

