

girls

without limits



helping girls achieve **healthy relationships**,
academic success, and **interpersonal strength**

lisa hinkelman

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FOR INFORMATION

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A SAGE Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
(800) 233-9936
www.corwin.com

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55 City Road
London, EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

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B 1/1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Acquisitions Editor: Jessica Allan
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Copy Editor: Kimberly Hill
Typesetter: Hurix Systems Private Ltd.
Proofreader: Eleni-Maria Georgiou
Indexer: Maria Sosnowski
Cover Designer: Gail Buschman
Permissions Editor: Karen Ehrmann

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Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record of this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 9781452241210

This book is printed on acid-free paper.



13 14 15 16 17 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Dedication

*Susan Jones Sears, PhD
1940–2012*

*You saw potential in me that I did not see in myself. Thank you
for paving the way for an entire generation of women
and girls. You were a trailblazer, a teacher,
a mentor, and friend.*

I miss you.

Preface

As I began to think about how best to study and work with girls, I was not sure where to start, nor was I sure where this research would lead me. I poured through scholarly research articles, books, and newspaper stories directed toward issues facing girls. I attended conferences and professional development trainings where counselors, psychologists, and educators discussed the “girl crisis.” Strategies were offered to increase the self-esteem of girls, expose girls to more diverse careers, and encourage girls to be anything that they wanted to be. But I quickly realized that the best starting place was to actually talk to girls and really listen to what they had to say! I wanted to understand what is going on in girls’ lives, in their own words. I wanted to understand why the adolescent years feel so tumultuous and lonely for girls and why they consistently report feeling that they aren’t quite good enough.

The research in this book took place over a period of nearly eight years. My research team and I have surveyed and interviewed thousands of girls from different backgrounds, ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, and ages. We have talked with girls who are incarcerated, who are homeless, who live in middle-class homes, and who live in mansions. We learned from girls who are in two-parent families, foster care, single-parent families, divorced families, and who live with their grandparents. We spent time listening to girls in very poor 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 did not pass judgment. We just listened.

What we learned is that there are vast differences among girls in regards to their experiences, their thoughts, and their

opinions. Girls' knowledge of various topics is based upon the environment where they are raised. Depending upon 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 talked with more and more girls was that the fundamental issues that are facing girls are much more universal than they are different. While girls can have extremely different experiences based upon 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 between and 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 many 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, be on a diet, feel pressure to look sexy, experience sexual violence, have low self-esteem, experience depression, and attempt suicide.

Despite these challenges, we know that girls are strong and resilient. They consistently exceed the limited expectations that are placed upon them by society and the media and they continue to amaze and inspire us. We 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. There are so many professionals, psychologists, teachers, and authors who have been telling us what girls want, what girls need, and what we should do with the girls in our lives, but few have taken the time to survey and talk to thousands of girls from many backgrounds. I wanted to know: What's going through girls' minds? What do they dream about? What fills them with insecurity? What do they think are the big things going on in their lives that adults don't understand? 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. For example, our research did not directly address some of the social, emotional, and developmental issues that face girls—such as sexual orientation and gender identity, spirituality, specific developmental or learning issues, drug and alcohol use and abuse, nor pregnancy and teen parenting. However, it does offer a perspective on the shared experiences of girls, and the ways that, 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

While this book has been a dream of mine for many years, I fully recognize that any endeavor such as this does not happen without the support and encouragement of many others. I have been blessed to have wonderful family, friends, colleagues, and students in my life that share my commitment to girls and who have contributed their time and talent in profound ways to help this project come to fruition.

My Grandma Irene was one of the first people in my life who truly demonstrated how women can step outside the box, push back against societal expectations, and live a full, rich, and happy life. She helped inspire my initial work with girls and women, and, although she has been gone for quite some time, her spirit continues to motivate me. How proud she would be to see the ideas that we discussed over pots of coffee in her kitchen come to fruition in a book that is focused on helping girls be limitless!

My husband, Bob Heine, has, without fail, been my constant and unwavering support. Giving me lots of space, patience, and understanding—he has set the bar for what a supportive, loving spouse and friend should be. Knowing when to comfort and take care of me and when to leave me alone to my own thoughts and musings, he has truly been my partner and rock throughout this crazy journey. I am blessed and lucky to have him in my life and do not know how I would have completed this project without him. He's the best!

My parents, Rich and Joan Hinkelman, instilled in me an early sense that girls can do and be anything that they want. Ensuring that I would not be limited or restricted by my gender, my parents supported my athletic, academic, and career aspirations for as long as I can remember. From throwing those 100 softball pitches every day with my dad in the yard to learning how to make a killer apple cake from my mother, I was afforded the opportunity to be affirmed

for being both strong and feminine. I never had to decide whether or not I “shouldn’t” be good at something because I was a girl or that I “should” be good at other things because I was a girl. My parents celebrated my individuality and encouraged creativity and risk taking. Being strong was as important as being sensitive, and taking care of myself was equally as important as taking care of others. 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 sense of limitlessness that my parents gave me.

My brother, Richard Hinkelman, has been the most amazing and supportive brother anyone could ask for. He has shown me unconditional love, ridiculous humor, and, when needed, appropriate challenge. Richard is the person who you call in the middle of the night when your computer crashes, when you do not have one more creative word left in your body, and when you question whether any of your work matters. He provides reassurance, a funny anecdote, and the motivation to persevere. His deep convictions, commitment to social justice, and love and compassion for others are a constant reminder to me that, while there is much work to be done, we are each responsible for doing our part to care for others and to add value to the world. I am so proud to be his sister and am grateful for our amazing relationship.

I want to extend my sincere thanks and gratitude to my friend and colleague, Deborah Schipper. Deb was one of the first people that I met during my initial graduate studies, and she was extremely influential in helping shape and focus the course of my life’s work. Her passion for, and commitment to, the safety of girls and women extends into all aspects of her life. As a professional women’s self-defense instructor, Deb has taught thousands of girls and women physical self-defense and she believes wholeheartedly in a girl’s ability to successfully defend herself from violence. Deb works to ensure that every girl and woman she works with also comes to believe this about herself. Deb’s feedback, editing, and consistent encouragement helped make this project seem manageable and achievable, and her bravery, honesty, and courage have inspired me to take risks and conquer seemingly insurmountable challenges.

My colleagues and friends, Dr. Michelle Bruno and Lauren Hancock, have served as creative, moral, academic, and social

support throughout this entire process. Providing hundreds of hours of data entry, transcription, and analysis, they have contributed a great deal to our deep understanding of the issues impacting girls. With a shared commitment to girls, equity, and access to education, these ladies have been the validation of my reality for many years. They provided friendship and encouragement as well as ongoing comic relief. They have been patient, flexible, creative, loving, and supportive. Our friendship has reiterated to me the importance, value, and strength in female bonds and I am grateful for their push for more moderation in my life. Every girl needs friends like Michelle and Lauren who will help lift them up, support and encourage them, reframe their setbacks, soothe their hurts, and celebrate their successes.

So many other folks have helped this project in large and small ways. From offering a writing retreat, to providing substantive and practical feedback on my ideas, to offering legal and professional advice, to keeping me sane and entertained, I am richly blessed by friends and colleagues who help sustain me. A heartfelt and sincere thanks to Jessica Allen, Maureen Casamassimo, Laura Comek, Esq., Dr. Patricia Cunningham, Michael Matalka, Loren McKeon, Tammy Roberts Myers, Dr. Melissa Ockerman, and all my friends at Premium.

I have also been blessed to work with a wonderful group of graduate students, school counselors, and ROX facilitators. These ladies have given of their time and tremendous talent to positively impact the lives of thousands of girls. They 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 their ongoing commitment to girls and their willingness to make a substantial and sustainable impact in the lives of each girl that they work with.

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 last 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 the stories and thoughts of thousands of girls. It is my hope that through sharing their stories with you, you are able to understand not only the challenges that girls face but also

recognize the strength, potential, and promise in today's generation of girls. These girls are the future, let's help them succeed!

PUBLISHER'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Corwin gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the following reviewers:

Scott Currier
Mathematics Teacher
Nute High School
Milton, NH

Terri Hadley
School Counselor
Dunlap Middle School
Dunlap, IL

Connie Hanel
Academic Achievement Specialist
Medaille College
Buffalo, NY

Robin E. Ruiz
Professional Educator Leader
PCSB, Denison Middle School
Winter Haven, FL

Dr. Marilyn Steneken
Science Teacher
Sparta Middle School
Sparta, NJ

About the Author



Dr. Lisa Hinkelman is the Founder and Director of Ruling Our eXperiences, Inc. (ROX), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that delivers evidence-based empowerment programming to girls (www.rulingourexperiences.com). Started in 2006 in Columbus, Ohio, ROX has grown to a regionally operated organization with thousands of participants in urban, suburban, rural, and parochial schools. ROX is focused on equipping girls with the information and skills necessary to live healthy, independent, and violence-free lives.

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 for the past seven years. She consults regularly for schools, organizations, and agencies on the critical issues impacting girls, bullying and relational aggression, child abuse and violence prevention, and other social, emotional, safety, and mental health issues facing students and schools. As a licensed professional counselor, Dr. Hinkelman also operates Equip Your Mind, LLC, a counseling, consulting, research, and evaluation practice in Columbus, Ohio (www.equipyourmind.com).

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 completed training in mental health counseling and school counseling and has served on the Counselor Education faculty at the Ohio State University since 2004, where she continues to teach

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CHAPTER 1

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

"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 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 importantly, how can we best support these young women?

These are the questions that I set out to answer nearly eight years 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.

As I talked to teachers, counselors, and parents, I learned that most adults are eager to help girls, but they often don't know where to start. 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 some insights into the lives of girls, as well as provide strategies for building 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. But, overwhelmingly, the issues that girls talked the most about were clustered around a handful of topic areas, including friendships, drama, dating, weight and 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 that is 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.