

The Bad News on ‘Good’ Girls



By Jill Filipovic

Nov. 24, 2017

At a backyard barbecue when I was about 10, my little sister and I overheard my dad talking to another father. “You know, I think if they were boys, I would probably let them play a little farther down the street,” my feminist-minded dad said, in a moment of father-bonding frankness. My sister and I were incensed, and when we got home, we let him have it — how dare he suggest he would treat us differently if we were boys?

Like many middle-class millennial daughters, my sister and I embodied a new model of the “good girl”: well-behaved, college-bound A students who played sports, had a full roster of extracurricular activities and were expected (by our parents and ourselves) to be moving toward successful careers.

What girls like us didn’t realize — what too often our own parents didn’t realize — is that the entrenched and often invisible gender biases of the adults around us would indelibly shape our paths and often set us on a different (harder, less fruitful) course than the boys in our orbit.

Girls today receive two conflicting messages: Be mighty and be good.

Now-pervasive “Girl power” messaging declares that girls can be anything they want. But in practice, the more subtle rewards for compliant behavior show girls that it pays to be sweet and passive. The sexual harassment revelations that have come to light over the past few months show just how dangerous this model can be.

Routinely, victims of harassment and assault didn’t challenge their abusers or immediately file complaints not just because they didn’t want to endanger their own careers (although there was that, too), but because women have been conditioned for acquiescence to authority and male power their whole lives.

Men, on the other hand, have been raised to embrace risk-taking and aggression. Girls are taught to protect themselves from predation, and they internalize the message that they are inherently vulnerable; boys move through the world not nearly as encumbered and certainly not seeing their own bodies as sources of weakness or objects for others' desires.

While girls are being told to protect themselves, too many boys are growing into the men they need to be protected from.

This is not the world most parents want for their children. But ideas of how girls and boys (and men and women) should be run deep. Fathers today largely say that they want their daughters to be intelligent, independent and strong, but many men also seem to prefer sons. Although they may not mean to, parents and other adults do treat girls differently from boys — often to the long-term detriment of daughters.

Girls are more likely to be praised for being good, while boys are commended for making an effort. Being a “good girl” today means sitting quietly at school, following instructions, completing tasks and getting good grades. At that, girls have largely succeeded, which accounts for much of the gender achievement gap in education — if a decade-long pattern holds, more young women than young men will walk out the doors of their college in the spring with a degree in hand.

Girls are also generally raised to be more emotionally intelligent and verbal than boys. Dads sing to daughters more than sons, and the language they use with their girls is more analytical and emotive, something researchers suspect contributes to girls' higher achievement in school. With boys, dads are more physical, and more likely to roughhouse. And at the toy store, girls are still tracked toward the “pink aisle” of baby and princess dolls suited for quiet, care-taking play.

This good behavior gives girls an advantage inside the classroom, but it can cost them outside of it later on, especially in high-earning fields like technology that value assertiveness and creativity and entrepreneurial roles that reward risk-taking. Biology certainly plays a role in development and may also influence gendered preferences, but we are fundamentally social creatures who form identities in relation to our families and communities; whatever natural differences do exist are magnified, and often totally invented, by how we're nurtured.

While girls are being taught to be emotionally competent, they also learn to be responsive to the needs of others — not a bad thing in theory, except that it can cross over into subservience. When boys aren't learning the same, it's adult women who end up serving as caretakers for adult men, both in their homes and in their workplaces.

In the workplace, being seen as helpers rather than bosses undercuts women and their perceived competence. These gendered expectations cut the other way as well: Women who refuse to take on the helper role are seen as difficult, which also impedes their success.

And then, of course, there is the harassment too many women endure at work, a dynamic largely driven by male power and entitlement, and enabled by expectations of female obedience.

So what are parents to do if they want to raise both their sons and their daughters to avoid, or dismantle, these traps? Raising children without gendered roles and expectations seems to serve those children well, but that's tough to do outside of Sweden — in an age of “gender reveal parties” and the princessification of American girlhood, asking a sales clerk for help buying a baby shower gift brings the automatic response, “For a boy or a girl?”

One place to start is looking within. Many parents say they want their sons and daughters to be treated as equals in and outside of the home, but their actions don't seem to match their words. In more than a quarter of American families, the mother is the full-time caregiver for the children; the husbands in these families are less likely to promote female co-workers, and when the sons of stay-at-home moms grow up, they're less likely to pitch in around their own homes. Young men seem to have gotten the message: Nearly half of them think it's better if men are breadwinners and women stay home.

When children see the men around them in positions of power in the office and relaxing at home while the women are packing lunches, planning birthday parties and scheduling appointments, they internalize the message that men lead and women help. According to one study, nearly a quarter of teenage girls and 40 percent of teenage boys said men make better political leaders than women; just 8 percent of girls and 4 percent of boys said women are better leaders. But both boys and girls preferred women in traditional female roles, such as caring for children.

What could make a big difference is raising boys more like our girls — fostering kindness and caretaking, not just by telling them to respect women, but by modeling egalitarianism and male affection and emotional aptitude at home. While parents and

other adults teach girls to protect themselves against the Harvey Weinsteins of the world, that doesn't do much to stem the tide of Weinsteins. Raising our boys differently would.

Parents should also shift the ways they teach girls to protect themselves. When we're young, many of us were told to tell Mom and Dad if anyone ever touched us in a way that felt icky; as we grow up, we are armed with pepper spray and rape whistles, with instructions to always carry cab fare, not leave our drinks unattended at a bar, that no should mean no.

This is an understandable impulse, and some of the advice is good. But what girls don't learn is how to be the solo aviators of their own perfect, powerful bodies — to happily inhabit their own skin instead of seeing their physical selves as objects to be assessed and hopefully affirmed by others; to feel entitled to sex they actively desire themselves, instead of positioned to either accept or reject men's advances. Nor are we allowed full expressions of rage or other unfeminine emotions when we are mistreated. No wonder we try to politely excuse ourselves from predatory men instead of responding with the ire that predation merits.

One of the most important ways to move forward at this moment is to simply be aware that these assumptions and prejudices exist, and to deal with them head-on instead of pretending they aren't there. Here, daughters of conservative men are at a particular disadvantage: Three-quarters of Republican men say that sexism is mostly a thing of the past.

Which is why, 20 years later, I appreciate my father's candor, even if it wasn't meant for my ears. First, he named his own bias out loud, recognizing that despite his best intentions, he was perhaps predisposed to treat his girls differently from how he would have treated boys. And then he worked not just to protect us, or tell us to protect ourselves, but to push us to walk a little farther out in the world.

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A version of this article appears in print on Nov. 26, 2017, on Page SR1 of the New York edition with the headline: The Bad News on 'Good' Girls