

Daughters Day:

Fostering Self-Esteem in Adolescent Girls

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Adolescence is a difficult time for boys and girls alike. However, approximately thirty percent more girls than boys suffer from a decline in self-esteem. As young girls enter adolescence, they begin to struggle with the image of the "perfect" girl, often depicted in the media as pretty, thin, nice, and quiet. The self-confidence and strong spirit that is characteristic of preadolescent girls is now hidden. Many adolescent girls turn inward, becoming self-critical and even destructive. Compared to boys, girls are twice as likely to be depressed, between three to five times more likely to attempt suicide, report higher levels of stress, and are victims of eating disorders to a disproportionately greater extent. As Lyn Mikel Brown states, "Girls learn to silence their own ideas and ignore their own instincts."

Take Your Daughter to Work Day

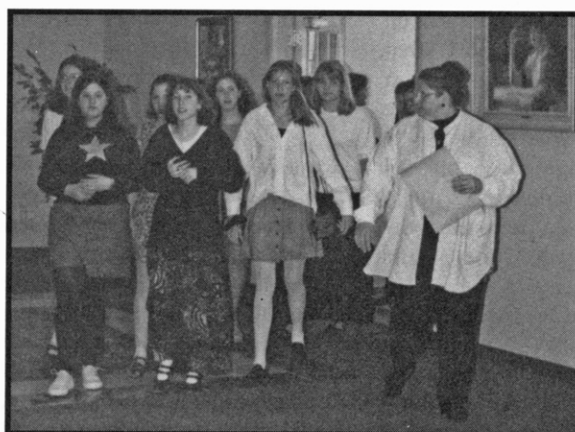
A misunderstood "holiday," Take Your Daughter To Work Day was conceived with the best of intentions. The Ms. Foundation, concerned by groundbreaking research on self-esteem in girls, wanted to develop a public education program to address the problem. To launch the program, the Ms. Foundation recommended taking girls to the workplace as a sort of Career Day. Take Your Daughter To Work Day was intended to boost self-esteem by making girls feel important and empowered, even if just for one day. As author Anna Quindlen stated, "The simple fact is that no one has to assure her sons that a boy can grow up to be president." Similarly, most children in America see men who are accountants, attorneys, engineers, judges, pediatricians, presidents of banks, heads of corporations, superintendents of schools, ministers, rabbis, and priests. Few women are represented among most of these careers in the everyday American community.

In 1993, the Litchfield County Women's Network, an organization in northwestern Connecticut, was poised to adopt a Take Your Daughter To Work program. The Network was founded in 1981 for women professionals and business owners so they could network in a fairly isolated geographic area. Members met monthly for meetings, dinners, and business development. They represented diverse fields including business, health care, law, accounting, education, government, medicine, banking, real estate, publishing, and many others.

The idea that "networking" might be extended to young girls who would follow in the members' footsteps appealed to the Network's Board of Directors. Yet the Ms. Foundation's original program design needed adjustments to fit the local environment:



- Because our largest city was relatively small, it contained few large employers where the world of work could be showcased to a daughter.
- Many working parents were employed in small businesses or in positions where having a child at work all day would be difficult for both employee and employer.
- If few parents were likely to take their daughters to work, a large segment of girls would be "left out" or disenfranchised. Indeed, the Ms. Foundation's program seemed to be geared to the "advantaged" girl who already had great exposure to career opportunities and other privileges.
- Many Network members who were older women did not have daughters in the high-risk age range (nine to fifteen) to bring to work.
- Those members who did have girls of high-risk age reported that their daughters had been to their workplaces on numerous occasions (such as when they were sick or had a vacation).



The girls stream into the banquet hall. PHOTO CREDITS: Annie Lennon Carroll