

The Double Bind

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For the past two decades, we have told our girls that they can be whatever they want to be, that nothing is beyond their grasp. However, while it is true there are many more opportunities for girls, the challenges are also greater than ever.

The first is that they must handle the traditional girl expectations: look pretty, be nice, and get a boyfriend. Additionally, they are expected to excel at “girl skills”, which include empathy, cooperation and relationship building.

A second expectation is that our girls must also be good at traditional “boy goals”: getting straight A's, be a super-athlete, and gain acceptance to a top college. The realization of both of these expectations leaves adolescents in a seemingly un-winnable situation. How do “best friends forever” compete over the ever-diminishing number of college slots yet remain in a supportive, caring relationship? How does a powerful athlete, who doesn't fit into size 2 jeans, navigate the “must be thin and pretty” expectation?

As a result of these incongruous social expectations, many girls are feeling confused, frustrated and self-blaming. These feelings can turn into anger, despair, or resignation. Many girls feel that have to do all of this, and do it perfectly.

Statistics demonstrate the toll these expectations take. The age for the onset of depression is lower each year, increased aggression and violence as well as significantly higher rates of self-mutilation, binge eating and suicide. Our daughters often sacrifice key portions of their identities to manage these expectations. What can replace that is feeling overwhelmed pressured and a sense of self-hatred for not meeting these assumptions.

We need to counteract these societal expectations by teaching our daughters to truly be who they are. Encourage them in pursuits that provide self-esteem and enjoyment. Have a conversation about what her *real* priorities are. No one can do it all; focus on what parts of these opposing social expectations are realistic. As parents, we should also be aware of how we are communicating *our* expectations to our children. Making sure your message matches realistic expectations and family values is an important first step in helping your child survive these challenges.