

FOSTERING LEADERSHIP SKILLS IN GIRLS

By Lena Hakim

Today all levels of art, science, and technology are dependent on good leaders and good leadership skills. Leadership does not just happen and leaders do not just stumble upon leadership opportunities. Leadership is the result of confidence, resilience, knowledge, wisdom, and the guts to step up to the opportunity. True leaders hold a deep love and respect for people, team dynamics, and teaching. As a business skill leadership is often used to unite people and help them move towards a common goal. Within the greater society leaders are the driving force towards manifesting justice. In the world of science and technology leadership skills often dictate the success or failure of research, its directive, and outcome. Simply put: leadership skills matter.

For young women leadership skills begin at home. The home is a girl's first exposure to justice and injustice. How she is taught to react and respond to family dynamics can greatly impact her confidence and her ability to trust herself and others. Family dynamics often cannot be predicted or controlled, but it is up to parents to instill basic confidence by addressing injustice within their own lives and the lives of their daughters. Beyond confidence is the development of leadership skills, and there are specific actions and environments which can be created in a girl's life which can set a strong foundation to nurture future leadership skills in women: *creativity*, the *independent pursuit of one's interests*, and *financial independence* are the core.

Fostering Creativity

Creativity is a key component to successful leadership, self awareness, and drive. Leaders often need to think outside the box to solve problems and create new directives. All creativity begins with curiosity, and curiosity starts at the earliest of years. Einstein once said "I have no special talent. I am only passionately curious." Curiosity and creativity go hand in hand. When a child expresses an interest in a subject and questions begin, serious time and effort should be given to help her find the answers she is seeking. Girls, especially, love to role play, and they often take their curiosities into these games. Allow girls to go wherever they like with their imaginations without teasing or restricting them with comments like "you're being silly" or "that can never happen". Let her pretend, without interruption, that she is the Queen of Shiva or Captain of the Starship Enterprise. Let her art creations be as crazy as she likes, and always encourage her to explain her creations. Creativity is about thinking outside of the box, so be patient and nonjudgmental when she talks about ideas or interests.

Pursuing Her Interests

It is important for girls, especially by the age of 12, to pursue several of her interests seriously and with depth. Younger than 12, girls may express too many or not enough interests. If she is passionate about an interest at only 9, she should still be encouraged to pursue it. Often a girl may hold interests in things like fashion, makeup, or dance. Though these may seem like unimportant pursuits, if a girl really loves fashion she should be encouraged to take a sewing class and a pattern design course. Learning to design clothing is a serious skill and the basis for good engineering. If she is interested in ballet she should be encouraged to perform, learn the proper French words, and understand the reason behind moves. The key is to teach her to approach her interests with depth, hard work, and the pursuit of excellence.

Financial Independence

One of the most difficult transitions all women make is the one from her parent's home to independence. Most women in this world never make this transition and instead continue their dependence with a husband. Financial independence is the single most important reason Western women have reached (relatively) equal status within our society. With financial independence comes true confidence, the ability to make choices based on intuitive desire and drive, and the freedom to define one's own values and quality of life. The single most important thing we can do to prepare our daughters for a dignified and happy life is to educate her on healthy relationships with money. It is not about becoming rich, but rather about pursuing her true passion and serving society with this passion while making a decent, dignified living. Girls should be taught not to secretly hold a desire to be rescued or obtain money that she did not earn (the 'Cinderella disease' is still alive and well and the source of much unhappiness among women). Some steps parents can take to foster financial independence:

- **Start a bank account** between 10-12 years old, even if she shows no interest. Deposit all gift money into the accounts and have her withdraw her money with her own debit card or checks. Teach her to balance her own account and encourage her to grow her account through work.
- **Start earning money** through small jobs like babysitting or additional chores around the home. If babysitting and paper routes are out of the question, consider teaching her to sell unwanted items on EBay, and have her collect a percentage of the sales. An occasional job (especially when school is not in session) is important while growing up.
- **Take risks with money and time** by encouraging her to invest in a project, or a stock, or her own company. Encourage young girls to sell her crafts, or compete in a science competition. It's about learning to take one's resources and time, and create a positive result.
- **Volunteering** can help her become exposed to many different work environments, learn the importance of service, and define her interests. Volunteering can foster empathy and understanding even at a young age.

The world needs as many female leaders as we can nurture. Let it be our daughters.