

Co-Principals' Address: Community Potluck and Curriculum Evening 2009

Dawn on the latest research:

In selecting Linden, you chose a school committed to intellectual play, feminist pedagogy and girl centred practices, which foster self-advocacy, leadership, and healthy interpersonal relationships.

Research has long indicated that small schools are significantly better for students, their families and teachers. In addition, the **UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies**, led by principal investigator **Dr. Linda J. Sax** – whose life work has centred on gender issues – released a study in spring 2009 that indicated **differences between girls who attended single-sex institutions versus coeducational institutions**; the study was commissioned by the **National Coalition of Girls' Schools (NCGS)**, an international organization advocating for girls' education of which we are a member. Among other differences, girls who attended single sex institutions demonstrated:

- Increased academic engagement;
- Higher academic self confidence – especially in the areas of math and computer sciences; and
- Greater political and co-curricular involvement.

This study, which surveyed over 20,000 women in the United States, is one of the largest of its kind – and these are just a few highlights. If you are interested in further information from the NCGS, visit their website at www.ncgs.org or see a copy of the executive summary that we have left at the front desk.

That being said, it is not enough to just be an all-girls' school. In **Rachel Simmons'** new book ***The Curse of the Good Girl***, which is based on her work with girls and their parents, she states that we live in the age of fiercely successful and amazing girls – a time when they outnumber boys in college and graduate school both in enrollment and graduation rates. In high school, they also pursue more leadership roles and extracurricular activities than boys and are more likely to see themselves as leaders. She is quick to point out that girls' applications to college and university are stamped with the 21st century notion of girl-power, but girls' "psychological resumes" lag generations behind.

She goes on to describe that "The Curse of the Good Girl" erodes our daughters' abilities to know, say and manage a complete range of feelings. It urges girls to be perfect and selfless, thereby limiting self-expression of their needs; it demands modesty and diminishes assertive body language. It reaches across all arenas of life – cutting to the core of our daughters' authentic selves. This curse is the product of a society and culture that remains confused about gender equality.

It is for this very reason that we work here at school to counter the phenomenon of "learned helplessness" that the research so clearly identifies as a risk for girls. We ask the students to do things that are difficult because we know that the leaps in confidence which come with that type of achievement are critical to their academic success and development of their voice. We encourage your daughters to take risks and push themselves beyond their comfort zone both in their academics and in their personal growth.

The research confirms that:

- Self-confidence will be achieved when girls are able to feel competent (not perfect) in the things they do – whether they be academic, athletic or artistic. They do not have to be able in everything, but they do need to feel able in some things.
- Self-confidence, as well as self-knowledge, comes when students reach outside themselves and connect with their world by working with others in their community. In ***The Self Esteem Trap***, Polly Young-Eisendrath warns against focusing too much on each child's "uniqueness" and "specialness" as they grow and develop, instead of emphasizing their contributions to the community and their relationships with others.

Ina on how you can help your daughter:

At Linden, the development of self-confidence and authentic sense of self happens because we, as parents and educators:

- Provide a place in which relationships are intrinsically important.
- Value individuals for their contributions to the community and provide many opportunities for each individual to be seen and heard.
- Provide space in which taking risks, making mistakes and dealing with consequences can happen – one in which learning occurs because girls are given support and we trust them to advocate for themselves. They will not always succeed, but our girls know they are supported in this learning process.
- Give the girls the space to work through some of the difficult conflicts and issues in their school life. They will need your support at home to facilitate this learning.

When you ask: "how can I help my daughter?"

Our answers will be:

- Talk with her about her work. Be genuinely curious. Ask your own questions about the content.
- We urge you as parents just as we urge our faculty to be authentic providers of praise. Offer praise when it is specific and when it is earned, and give constructive feedback to improve learning.
- Ensure that your daughter sees you as part of her community of learners. Recognize that she holds the knowledge about her learning, and she is teaching you.
- Support her school; it is her place of work. She needs to see that you value and support it. In particular, we make our special annual plea tonight that when you come to see your daughter at a drama night, the Science and Technology Fair, the art show, or the Festival of Lights that you also show an interest in her colleagues' work by visiting other science fair exhibits and by staying for the whole programme, even after your daughter has performed or presented.
- Your support at home may sometimes sound like "it's bedtime now" or "that's enough time on homework" or "you need to practise for 10 minutes" or "have you done your laundry recently?" or "it's time to put away the games/get off the computer" or "let's all go out for an ice cream"...etc.
- Congratulate learning rather than results. Ask "What did you learn today?" rather than "What did you get?"
- Teach her by example to celebrate the successes of others, and to offer support when things are not going well.

As teachers and parents:

- We must rejoice in student successes, and provide support and listen as they talk through their failures, negotiate difficult relationship issues or difficult academic questions. As much as we might try, we cannot do their academic or personal growth work for them.
- We must practise listening rather than fixing. We all want things to be easy and smooth for our children, but when we jump in too quickly we undermine them and show a lack of faith in their ability to solve their own problems. (“Sit on your hands!”)
- We need to give them the space to develop their own solutions, which as they get older may or may not incorporate our accumulated wisdom. Don’t worry – we don’t hold you responsible for your daughter’s mistakes.
- We need to keep the lines of communication open. We will notify you if we have concerns (or praise); please do the same.
- Remember, there will be many successes to celebrate and there will tears to mop up – both are necessary for growth.

Want more information? Have questions? E-mail Kate Raven, Communications Coordinator, at kater@lindenschool.ca