Who is teaching girls in foster care what it means to be a woman? Peers, media, young men, marketing firms, service providers, and parents. Probably in that order.

Pop culture and media greatly influence adolescents' beliefs, actions, and appearance. Overt and subconscious messages about females' appearance, behavior, and place in the world form the backdrop for a girl's developing self-image. Family also has an enormous influence. A girl's understanding of sexuality, femininity, power, beauty and relationships is initially shaped by her experiences in her family—what she sees and hears as well as what she is told.

Even though adolescents naturally move away from their families as they develop greater independence and stronger peer relationships, family values and positive family connections continue to strongly influence their beliefs and behaviors. For girls in foster care, the continuity of the family connection and emotional support is interrupted.

Oftentimes, the reasons girls are removed from unsafe homes include emotional abuse and unhealthy, violent, inappropriate relationships. For these girls, the danger is removed, but too often the unhealthy relationships are not purposefully replaced with healthy ones, leaving girls particularly vulnerable because of their desire and need for emotional connections.

In the absence of a connection with a committed, caring adult, media and peers are likely to become the primary influence on a girl's values and behaviors. This is particularly problematic for girls whose personal experiences do not provide counter-messages or teach them to question encouragement of early sexual activity or sexualized and misogynistic stereotypes of women in media, video games, and music. It is also problematic for girls whose sexual identities do not conform to traditional gender norms or who are questioning their sexual identities, because popular culture includes little support for or positive portrayals of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or queer/questioning.

Although the impact of popular culture on system-involved girls has not been studied in depth, the influence of marketing, media, and pop culture on the development of girls' self-concepts, sexual identity, and gender identity has been widely studied. The American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls published a 2010 report discussing the
impact of media on girls’ emotional, physical, and sexual development. The findings tell us that a deliberate effort should be made to connect girls to positive female role models; teach them to be critical consumers of media; and involve them in productive activities with prosocial peers.

These suggestions aren't quantified in the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) child well-being outcomes. But those who understand adolescent development will see how they fit squarely within the outcome of "receiv[ing] services to adequately meet their physical and mental health needs." Research findings are clear that girls react more negatively to adverse events occurring within the family, leading to greater incidence of depression. A supportive family environment or a positive stable relationship with a caring, committed adult is one of the most often cited protective factors contributing to positive self-esteem, delayed sexual involvement, school success, and mental and emotional well-being of girls.

Today there are approximately 190,000 girls in foster care. The child welfare system has met its mandate to remove these girls from immediate danger, but that's not the end of the path. Someone will guide these girls along their journey from girlhood to womanhood. The question for systems—and for all of us—is, who should lead them into their futures?

Some organizations respond to this question with conscious attention to whom and what is influencing girls. These organizations understand the gender-specific needs of adolescent girls and how to meet those needs in positive ways that lead to successful futures. For example, Crittenton Services, Inc., in Wheeling, West Virginia, offers services tailored to meet the needs of adolescent girls experiencing difficulty with behavior, emotions, substance abuse, parenting, and relationships. Inwood House in New York City has similar programs designed to help girls “take charge of their lives and become healthy and self-reliant adults.” The Pace Center for Girls in Florida helps girls achieve their potential through a variety of approaches based on positive connections. Project Kealahou on Oahu takes a systemic approach, working concurrently with girls, families, and systems to help girls heal from trauma and become resilient, connected adults. Finally, the National Girls Institute, administered by NCCD under a cooperative agreement with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, is a resource for learning more about promising practices and model approaches for working with girls.

Gender-informed organizations such as those mentioned above are guiding girls from childhood to adulthood using research-informed models, common sense, and the power of positive relationships. Their path is one that we should all follow.

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