



How to Raise Empowered Girls: Psychologist's Advice

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"You are so beautiful, and so smart, and it kills me that you don't think you're good enough." America Ferrera's character Gloria in the movie Barbie

As someone from an Asian household, I have always been expected to be agreeable, accommodating, and pleasant. I have always tried to steer away from this by being tough and firm, yet that would be seen as defiant and impolite. I remember when I was in 1st grade, and I really wanted to wear pants to school—so I did! But I was laughed at, and was asked to go home and change into skirts because girls need to look pretty and presentable, and wearing pants is not it.

I have always behaved well when there are visitors and get countless praises every day: "She is so well-behaved," "She looks pretty," "She is just like a princess." Over time, I started leaning towards what they thought girls should be: nice, pretty, obedient, and quiet. I wanted to be the perfect girl everyone assumed I would be when I grew up, but I was unhappy. I let everyone decide for me what I like to eat, drink, and even wear. I became smaller.

Barbie proved to be a cultural phenomenon when it opened in cinemas. The reason? Not because Barbie is pretty, glittery, and pink, but because the movie addresses a strong conflict that many girls and women face: the struggle between how we are expected to appear and our desire to decide who we really are. The film points out this impossible balancing act: from the young age, girls are told to be extraordinary yet shrink themselves, to be independent but also pleasing to others. By putting this tension front and center, the authors of Barbie invite us to rethink and improve our approaches to raising girls.



Experiences and expectations about how girls should behave are not the same for everyone. Different families and cultures have their own ideas about what is "proper" for girls, and some parents may encourage independence more than others. Still, across many backgrounds, girls can face unspoken pressure to act, look, or dream a certain way. By sharing my experience, I hope to show that whatever your family situation, these pressures are real for many girls, and all of us need to reflect on how they might show up in our lives.

We must help girls build healthy self-confidence, independent thinking, and the courage to stand up for themselves and be firm with what they believe in.

Many girls grow up watching princesses. They are supposed to teach girls to be prim and proper, to be demure, and to be attentive to other people's needs. Society tells girls they can be anything, and at the same time quietly pressures them to be pleasing and accommodating. While making sure girls grow up to be nice and polite, we might be accidentally eroding their bravery.

If we want to change this pattern, we need to rethink how we support girls every day.

Empowering girls must go beyond what we used to believe. We must help them build healthy self-confidence, independent thinking, and the courage to stand up for

themselves and be firm with what they believe in. The most powerful thing we can do is teach them that their value is not in how well they follow the rules, but in how boldly they break the ones that hold them back.

Confidence is built in an environment, not isolation

True confidence is about having a consistent belief that you are capable, that your voice matters, and that you can handle whatever challenges come your way.

We all want to build self-confidence, but not all confidence looks the same. Unhealthy self-confidence can show up as spotlight-seeking, focusing more on outshining others than on feeling secure in oneself. In contrast, healthy self-confidence is calm and steady. It is not afraid to speak up when needed and stands up for herself without stepping on someone else. True confidence is about having a consistent belief that you are capable, that your voice matters, and that you can handle whatever challenges come your way.



Confidence develops within a social environment. According to [Girlguiding survey](#), 68% of girls say gender stereotypes affect their confidence. Girls feel pressured to look a certain way, they often avoid "boyish" activities, and prioritize being pleasant over being assertive.

Simple comments about how one should behave and appear matter. When girls repeatedly receive these comments, they begin to adjust themselves to fit expectations, and their confidence shrinks—not because of a lack of ability, but because of narrowed permission.

How we can help girls build confidence

- **Praise effort, persistence, and creativity.** Girls often express creativity in the ways they do things, and it is important to see the effort they put in, and not focus on the appearance. For example, when they finish a project, try saying, "I appreciate your hard work," or "You did an amazing job finishing the project." You can also say, "I'm proud of how you didn't give up even when it was challenging." Shifting your praise in this way encourages girls to value their abilities and inner qualities.
- **Celebrate their bravery.** Taking risks and doing things outside their comfort zone, celebrate how brave they were! Even if the outcome isn't perfect, let them know that being brave is worth celebrating.
- **Expose girls to diverse female role models.** Let them know that they can be anything, and introduce them to females in different careers: Grace Hopper, a US computer scientist, Natalie Panek, a renowned rocket scientist, and Maria Petterson, a commercial airline pilot, were just some females in male-dominated careers that you can introduce! It's also important to show girls that inspiring women can be found closer to home.

[Watch Kids Academy video about women scientists in history:](#)



- Encourage parents and families to highlight women from their own community, or even within their own families, such as a teacher, a local doctor, an entrepreneur, or a grandmother who made a difference. These personal stories make the idea of strong role models more real and relatable, helping girls see what is possible for themselves. To encourage deeper reflection, try asking girls, "Which part of her story inspires you, and why?" This kind of question empowers them to connect with role models in a personal way and helps them begin to define what they admire and want to become.

Confidence grows through experience and encouragement.

Appearance is far not everything

In the age of social media, it is difficult for girls to shift their focus away from appearance, especially when they are often the target of advertisements. When appearance becomes the primary subject of praise, it teaches girls that beauty is the ultimate value and creates a lot of insecurity around their looks. To counter that, we can help girls not to obsess about their appearance by:

- complimenting their strength, humor, intelligence, kindness, and resilience;
- reducing appearance-focused compliments;
- avoiding comments on your own body or others' bodies in front of them;
- teaching media literacy, and letting them know that not everything they see on the internet is real and true.

Stop confusing assertiveness with defiance

Girls should feel safe expressing their opinions and questioning assumptions.



This begins in everyday moments—at home or in the classroom. Teaching girls to think, not just to comply, is often mistaken for defiance, but what if we saw these moments as sparks of empowerment instead? When girls challenge ideas or express disagreement, they are practicing essential skills for empowerment.

Girls should feel safe expressing their opinions and questioning assumptions. For example, when a girl is asked, “Why are you joining soccer when you are a girl?” this is a chance to reframe the discussion and confidently share her reasons. These moments are signs of a growing voice, not a problem to be fixed. Assertiveness is not aggression; it is clarity.

Gender stereotypes negatively affect girls’ academic self-concept—particularly in male-dominated careers like STEM. Most girls felt the need not to pursue this career because of an internalized belief: “it is not for me.”

When girls begin to doubt themselves, their confidence shrinks before their ability does.

[Assertiveness is not aggression; it is clarity.](#)

Encourage girls by:

- teaching them how to say “no” without apologizing for it when voicing their opinion or belief;
- validating their discomfort instead of dismissing it;
- modeling respectful boundary-setting;
- having real discussions about careers and their future;
- encouraging them to defend their ideas and showing your support;
- challenging stereotypes openly. For example, let girls choose what they want to wear and show your support by backing them up.

A future with possibilities

Empowering girls is not about making them “stronger” alone, but changing the messages they receive daily, and being there to support them.

As adults, we must reflect on our own biases: ask ourselves if we are praising compliance over courage.

Let girls be whatever they want, whether it's an astronaut (I know I wanted to be one!), an athlete, a mechanic, or even something unconventional; they deserve encouragement and support.

When we steer girls away from certain hobbies or roles, even just a little, we might not realize that we are narrowing their world. Every time we support a girl's curiosity, even when it challenges tradition, we widen what she believes is possible.

If I could tell my younger self one thing, it would be: never hold back, go to school wearing pants, and study to become an astronaut! That it is okay to be loud, brave, and different. I want today's girls to know that you can be anything you want, and you are not just a “girl.” And the adults in their lives have the power to make sure they never have to shrink themselves to fit someone else's expectations.



References

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