

Imperfect Girls Make Perfect Role Models

People who are “works in progress” can be more inspiring than the preordained successes of powerhouse figures.

By **Katty Kay, Claire Shipman and JILL Ellyn Riley**

Feb. 23, 2021

Female role models, you might say, are having a moment.

Powerful female heads of state across the globe are out-leading their male counterparts in handling the pandemic. This year’s Nobel Prize in Chemistry went to an all-female team. In the United States, there is at last a female vice president, tough, powerful — and also the first Black and Indian woman to hold that office. The women’s soccer team isn’t just winning World Cups and widespread adoration but is also waging a public, uphill battle for equal pay. Women are making their way into what had seemed a permanent men’s club: the elite special operations ranks of the armed forces. Oh, and how about the youth poet who mesmerized the Inaugural audience and then moved on to the Super Bowl?

While we are still far from gender parity, it’s an incredible moment for girls, who, facing pandemic limitations, may be especially eager for glimmers of motivation and hope.

Role models inspire by showing us what is actually possible. Research supports that it works: These trailblazers not only help us imagine where we might go, they also help us map out the path to get there. Role models have also been shown to have a bigger impact on women and underrepresented communities — people who’ve not easily achieved their goals. Now that they see more women in the world of science (teachers, pioneering researchers or even their own peers), girls today are more likely, when asked to draw a scientist, to draw a woman than they were in past decades. Even one role model can benefit a child, helping her perform better in school and maintain a positive mind-set.

But the notion of “good role models” needs an update, especially when it comes to girls, or the steady stream of gleaming snapshots of achievement they see can actually lead to self-doubt. In addition to role models, our extensive work on girls and confidence has found that what girls could really use are “work in progress” models.

While representation is important, it's not enough to point to the mere existence of these powerhouse women, shards of the broken glass ceiling in their wakes on their seemingly smooth trajectory to the top, and then expect inspiration to simply flow.

“Even the idea of a role model can be immediately intimidating,” said Rachel Simmons, the author of “Enough As She Is,” and a consultant on raising emotionally healthy girls. “They seem designed to display outcomes like trophies.”

We were struck when one of our daughters, recently reading what was supposed to be an uplifting blurb about a teenage scientist's pedigree, moaned, “Look at what she invented at 15! What have I done? Way to make me feel like a loser!”

Girls want to please, judge themselves harshly and suffer from rampant perfectionism. They need to see the screw-ups and failures and struggles in their role models, as well as heavy doses of perseverance. Anything that smacks of a trajectory preordained and success effortlessly attained can deflate instead of inspire, playing into girls' worst flawed thinking patterns.

Phyllis Fagell, a middle school counselor, parenting columnist, and author of “Middle School Matters,” explains, “What you don't want to do is layer another set of unrealistic expectations on girls. Ideally the portrayal is realistic and attainable.” Ms. Simmons agrees: “Young people need to see, especially these days, if they take a wrong turn, or are hit by an act of God, it's not only OK, it could turn out even better.”

In our new book “Living the Confidence Code,” we looked for role models whose stories would really resonate with other girls. We highlighted not traditionally “accomplished” or celebrated girls, but those who had also stumbled, shown perseverance and were open about it.

Yekaba Abimbola, in Ethiopia, promised for marriage at 12, was candid about the conflict between her deep desire to please her family, indeed her whole community, and her passion for her independence. She fought against the conventions of her culture, stopping her arranged marriage and winning the right to continue her education.

Ciara-Beth Griffin, an Irish teen on the autism spectrum, struggled to develop an app for other neurodiverse kids. Voicing a theme we heard over and over, she told us, “You get taken over by ‘What if I fail? What will other people think?’ And the nasty perfectionist voice in your head ...” Yet she, and all these girls, managed to find an infinite variety of ways to silence that voice and say, as Ciara-Beth puts it, “Knock it off!” and do what they set out to do.

What really works to make someone a role model? Think *story* and *struggle* — multidimensional women, with revealing flaws and failure, *along with* compelling, bumpy narratives.

We've put together some essential tips for increasing role-model wattage for parents, educators and all girl allies.

Tell a story

Storytelling as an exceptional teaching tool is well-documented. When we're engaged in a narrative, our brains connect the information more deeply, making predictions and gaining perspectives that last. And girls hunger for the connections they find in a narrative. "Girls need to look under the hood, to see the process they went through," Ms. Simmons said. "That's what really hooks someone — it's not who you are now, but how you got there and what you weathered."

Details, details

Have a robust family discussion about a specific role model, suggested the child psychologist Bonnie Zucker, author of "Anxiety-Free Kids."

"Say: What's her life story? What was essential about it?" she suggested. "That allows a real connection, and that's key. Think: What's the idea of that person, not just the more one-dimensional image of change or achievement she represents."

Values speak

Ms. Fagell said that a multilayered story also allows girls to understand they don't have to share interests with role models. Those details offer a broader spectrum of relatable characteristics.

"It's essential," she said, "to focus on characteristics, traits and values, not simply achievement. That way the girls can share the values or admire the journey of an athlete, for example, and find something in common, even without the same skills or interests."

Ordinary is extraordinary

Helping girls to see the extraordinary in the seemingly mundane, Dr. Zucker explained, is also a powerful antidote to unrealistic expectations. "Everyday heroes, who don't get noticed, have special impact. Talk about the incredible values of a young girl who might be burdened with raising her siblings when her mother vanishes, for example. She might not

have a splashy social media profile, but her bravery, her sacrifices, or her emotional labor, are, in fact, heroic.” Ms. Simmons suggested using role models as a jumping off point for discussions about: “What is the definition of success, anyway? Money? A purposeful life?”

We should, of course, collectively celebrate the notion of another first, of new ground broken. But a role-model makeover with some breadth and depth, story and struggle, will allow girls to find not only inspiration but also enough space and comfort to find themselves.

Katty Kay, Claire Shipman and Jillellyn Riley are the authors of “Living the Confidence Code.”
