The Myth of the Perfect Girl

Helping Our Daughters Find Authentic Success and Happiness in School and Life

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Readers Guide

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Introduction

The Paradox of Girls’ Success: Why Girls, Why Now

“Girls and young women feel that they are succeeding in school and that they are failing in life for the same underlying reason—namely, they are all too good at becoming who they think others want and need them to be” (4).

In the Introduction, I explore why girls and young women are achieving more in the classroom and the workplace than ever before but also experiencing alarmingly high rates of mental illnesses. Here are some questions to consider when examining this phenomenon:

1. What does it mean to “fill in the box” instead of “thinking outside of it?”
2. Is it possible to be too goal-oriented? What happens when we focus too much on achievement instead of happiness?
3. Do you ever feel like you are running on a “success treadmill” (14)? Where does this lead?

“We need to see the epidemic of meanness, for example, for the sign it is: whole ranges and cohorts of girls who are struggling to adjust to their own lives and developments in the face of academic and social pressures, with no internal compass or sense of who they are” (13).

Do you agree with this statement? How could the “epidemic of meanness” be stopped?

“Without reflection, we’re vulnerable to the agenda-setting whims of the many minor authorities that are propped up in our culture—from celebrities to diet-book gurus to abstract notions like ‘prestige’ and ‘perfection’” (11-12).

What is the danger of allowing these “minor authorities” to direct our lives? Why do girls avoid self-reflection?
Chapter One

The Perfect Girl Myth: Why It’s So Prevalent and Such a Problem

“A series of modern and hypermodern developments that we think of as in part defining our current world are combining to bring the pressures of compliance and success to a new pitch of intensity” (16).

In this chapter, I discuss why the challenges facing girls have intensified in recent years—a trend that is expected to continue. Here are some questions to consider:

1. How is everyday life different for today’s girls than it was for previous generations?
2. How does early-onset puberty affect the way that a girl thinks about herself and how others perceive her?
3. New technologies such as the Internet, cell phones, and social networking websites have drastically altered the way we communicate with each other. How do these technologies contribute to the pressures felt by many girls?

“When and how did we get to this place, in the last few decades, where schooling has become, in many cases, synonymous with testing?” (19).

Consider this question and the implications it has for teenage girls, who often describe feeling “like little more than the sum of my numbers” (18). How could this focus on testing distract from learning?

“Girls and young women are now bombarded with the message that they can and should be able to do it all, all the time. Now, not being successful at everything is akin to failure” (42).

Although today’s girls are freer than ever to chase down opportunities and achieve their dreams, many feel restricted by the sense that they are expected to strive for more and that nothing they do is ever good enough. Have you ever felt this way? How do you find satisfaction with what you have accomplished?

ACTIVITY

Come up with a few conversation starters to discuss with your daughter or another young girl in your life. Here are a few examples:

1. Who are the people you admire the most? What makes them special?
2. If you had a free day to do whatever you wanted, without homework or other obligations, how would you spend your day?
Chapter Two

So Many Ways to Be Boxed In

“What I am suggesting, though, is that beneath the surface of everyday life for many girls exists a darkness and pain that results from box-filling behavior and its ensuing emptiness” (49).

In this chapter, I present eight profiles that illustrate the ways in which girls can become “boxed in.” These profiles, such as the Socially Centered Starlet and the Worst-Case Scenario Worrier, are intended to help the reader recognize potential problems and begin to think about solutions. Here are some questions to consider:

1. What profiles do you personally identify with? Do you see yourself in many of the profiles, or are there one or two that are most true to you?
2. How do the profiles show that surface-level interactions may hide what is truly going on?
3. Are there any profiles that you would add?

“Girls can overcompensate in attempts to find a system that will be the answer to all their social and emotional struggles that impact the academic ones. Other girls who struggle academically simply check out and shift their efforts elsewhere because they feel there is far too much to do and they don’t know where to start” (49).

Do you know any girls who are either overly organized or have completely given up all attempts to manage their lives? What are the dangers at both of these extremes?

“As in many of the facets of student life I will be describing, the calls to conform to acceptable norms have gotten louder, even as the norms themselves have become much more tightly defined” (48).

Why do you think that the call for conformity has become more prevalent amongst teenage girls, and what do you see as the consequences of this?
Chapter Three

Parental Attitudes and Approach: Part of the Problem or Part of the Solution?

“My advice, if parents really want to embolden their daughters to think for themselves, is for them to embrace the opportunities found in new kinds of fulfilled lives, break down the boxes, and work to create a world outside the box” (68).

In this chapter, I explore how parents can be either part of the problem or part of the solution in their daughters’ struggles with the challenges of today’s world, and how parents can help their daughters become authentically happy and successful. Here are some questions to consider:

1. How can parental expectations, such as “I know you will make the varsity water polo team” (70), make a girl feel limited and anxious? Why do so many girls today feel like they need to live up to these expectations in order to be loved?
2. How can a micromanaging parenting style be damaging to girls and stunt their development as individuals? Why is it important to let girls succeed and fail on their own?
3. Why is it important to let girls develop their own goals and dreams, even if they seem impractical or impossible? Have you ever had a dream crushed by someone else? How did you feel?

“There’s nothing wrong with encouraging excellence and believing in continuous progress and improvement. But Campbell’s parents’ focus on numbers achievement had the negative effect of making her want to give up” (69).

Campbell is happy with the improvement in her grades, but her parents want her to keep striving for more. She becomes “sullen, withdrawn, and seemingly unmotivated” (69), feeling as though “nothing were ever good enough” (69). Why do her parents’ efforts to motivate her backfire? How do you think her parents could have changed their approach to get a more positive response?

“In today’s world, children are constantly sent the message that being extraordinarily overachieving is crucial for being labeled a success. Unfortunately, this definition creates a narrow window for success with standards that only get more rigid and unobtainable” (86).

How do you define success? Do you believe that it is necessary to be happy in order to be truly successful, or do you think that success is based entirely on external achievements?
Chapter Four

Breaking Down the Boxes

“In we want girls to feel confident and empowered to explore and build their own world, we have to give them options for moving beyond the external standards and voices that can quickly drown out their personal efforts. In many ways, they have to embrace alternatives and ways of perceiving their own options and reality that allow them to focus on building their own individual world” (122).

In this chapter, I discuss ways that girls can break down the boxes that are preventing them from fulfilling their potential. I want girls to discover a sense of purpose that will give them happiness and satisfaction, and provide exercises to help them allocate their time to maximize their overall wellness. Here are some questions to consider:

1. How can goal-setting become a problem for girls who are focused on achievement, and how can girls set goals in healthy ways?
2. How do active living and engaged learning promote greater confidence in girls?
3. Why is “Taking the B” sometimes a good idea, and how can it open up new opportunities instead of restricting choices?

“Discovering a sense of purpose is a daring, yet altogether essential challenge for girls if they want to move beyond box filling and become builders of their own world” (95).

How can you encourage the girl in your life to discover a sense of purpose based on what makes her happy, rather than what she thinks others want her to do?

“A fearless learner is open to trying new things, taking healthy risks, and expressing her curiosity. She isn’t afraid of failure and is excited to try something new that she might grow to love doing” (111).

Why is our “reckless love for the new” (111), or fearless approach to learning, diminished as we grow up? How can trying new things and pursuing personal interests allow girls to gain confidence and become more motivated and inspired?

ACTIVITY

The Game of Threes is described extensively on pages 104-107. Encourage your daughter to create a list of activities that she could use for the Game of Threes, and help her find ways to incorporate the three things that she chooses into her schedule for the next few months. You could even try some of the activities with her—you might find a new passion of your own.
Chapter Five

Putting Purpose into Organizational Practice

“A student who has a basic, effective system for keeping things in order, managing her time, and practicing good study habits is freer to think, work, and explore. Her brain is uncluttered by the constant feeling of unmet commitments, overwhelming schedules, and half-forgotten details. She can exude a sense of calmness and feels more in control of her possibilities, opportunities, and potential” (125).

In this chapter, I examine organizational strategies that can help girls manage their time, keep track of their assignments and other commitments, and create work environments that are free of distractions. Here are some questions to consider:

1. What organizational systems does your daughter have in place? Does she have binders for each subject? Are the files on her computer neatly sorted and easy to find? Does she have a planner that she updates regularly? Would she be less stressed if she had all of these systems in place?
2. When your daughter is studying, does she spend the entire time working or is she simultaneously working, texting, on Facebook, etc.? Would she be more efficient if she worked for two hours every day without interruptions or distractions?
3. How often do you have your daughter regroup and clean old papers out of her binder, evaluate her organizational systems, and make sure she is keeping on track with long-term projects and assignments or other things on her to-do list?

“For students, too, the temptation can be irresistible: that ten minutes of checking Facebook turns into an hour of going through a friend’s most recent status updates, music choices, and photos. Or the fifteen-minute break reading online magazine articles swells to two or three times the scheduled length” (144).

How do the new challenges created by the presence of the Internet make it more difficult for girls to focus on their work? Is it necessary to completely ban all unnecessary technology during study time and monitor girls when they are doing homework on the Internet to make sure they stay focused? Do you think girls are capable of regulating themselves if they know how much more free time they can have if they do two hours of uninterrupted work every day?

“Each girl is different, and it is hard to say in advance what will be greeted with excitement and what with skepticism. But I do know this: We all inherently want to be well rested, relaxed, and confident. We want to feel good about our abilities and find ways to make our lives easier” (146).

How can you introduce these organizational systems to your daughter in a way that will make her eager to implement them? Would she be more receptive if you presented these ideas in a certain way or if a certain person introduced them to her? How can you show her that these strategies will help her reduce stress and have more free time?
Chapter Six

Rome Wasn’t Built in a Day: Strategies for Quizzes, Tests, Projects, and Finals

“Firing on all cylinders for a few-hour stretch, exhilarating as it may seem, is both deceptively inefficient and unsustainable over a long period. The following crash is often longer than the high-octane work period. And when girls fall into a pattern of depending on this kind of pressure to get their work done, they inevitably burn out, and often in more areas of their lives than simply the academic” (151-152).

In this chapter, I provide strategies for quizzes, tests, projects, and finals that allow girls to improve their performance in school through better preparation and planning, allowing them to avoid unnecessary stress and burnout. Here are some questions to consider:

1. How can procrastination and poor time-management lead to decreased productivity and even more difficulty accomplishing tasks?
2. Why is it important for girls to use personalized and active strategies when preparing for quizzes and tests?
3. What can be done to diminish the fear and anxiety associated with big tests, long-term projects, and final exams?

“When Leslie implemented these strategies, she started feeling more confident in her abilities and became engaged in her classes in ways she never had before...Instead of feeling bogged down by her academic challenges, Leslie was able to understand and own how she learned best; she then took those strategies and self-knowledge into others areas of her life” (153).

How can you help your daughter develop unique strategies in order to improve her school performance? Has she already explored different learning strategies? Do you think she could benefit from trying new ways of studying to find the most effective method?

“For some students, fear of big tests can block preparing for them. They get so caught up with the idea of being overwhelmed that they waste enormous amounts of time explaining their worry rather than working to alleviate it” (159).

How can preparation for big tests, projects, and finals be broken into smaller pieces to make seemingly impossible tasks more manageable? How would this segmented preparation help girls avoid the exhaustion that comes with trying to tackle a large task in one work session?
Chapter Seven

Social Wellness: Putting the Fun Back into Fun and Games

“In many girls, hanging out with friends can be relaxing; after all, having supportive friendships is incredibly important for our own sense of personal wellness. At the same time, though, most teenage girls find that friends can also be a source of drama and stress; many girls knowingly recognize their friends and/or frenemies are sources of both joy and pain” (174).

In this chapter, I examine the concept of social wellness and how girls can develop true, lasting friendships and avoid potentially harmful or damaging relationships both in-person and on the Internet. Here are some questions to consider:

1. How do social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter change the way that girls relate to each other and form friendships? Do you know how your daughter is using technology such as the Internet and cell phones and who she is talking to?
2. Have you noticed that today's girls are increasingly sarcastic and rude to each other? How can mean comments, even when they are said as a joke, be hurtful? Do these kinds of comments and interactions damage girls' self-esteem?
3. If a girl is having trouble making friends at school, how can she find a support system and connect with her peers in a different setting? In what ways can your daughter be social if she does not have many friends at school?

“Look at any reality show or teenage docudrama: backstabbing, vindictiveness, and betrayal are common and somewhat expected behaviors. Are these media influences establishing new norms for future generations or are they merely mimicking what already exists? I would argue that it is a little bit of both” (177).

Do you agree that shows like The Bachelor, Real Housewives, and Keeping Up with the Kardashians set bad examples for how girls treat each other and themselves? Do you believe that girls try to imitate the behavior that they see on these shows? How could that be harmful to both their personal development and their relationships with others?

“So girls seem to build big, rich social worlds, but they are then proportionately more liable to be upset by status postings, events that they are not invited to, and other people's relationships” (180-181).

How does social media make the ending of friendships or relationships even more painful and dramatic? Is it really beneficial for a girl to be able to see what other girls say they are doing or thinking at all hours of the day?
Chapter Eight

Emotional Wellness: Compensating and Problem Solving

“When girls have a problem, they can engage in active problem-solving behavior or passive compensatory behavior. Detrimental behaviors include drug and alcohol abuse, caffeine, overeating, extreme exercise, self-mutilation, and Internet addiction—basically anything that diverts attention from the actual problem” (203).

In this chapter, I discuss the destructive ways that girls often cope with stress, and offer ideas for how parents can help girls develop a system that allows them to proactively deal with potential problems instead of reactively compensating for these problems in dangerous ways. Here are some questions to consider:

1. Why are many girls experiencing mental health and emotional issues, and what do these issues indicate about how many girls are dealing with their problems?
2. What are some of the symptoms that might indicate that a girl is struggling with a difficult emotional issue, and how can you encourage the girl in your life to communicate about her problems and seek help when she needs it?
3. How does a girl reach emotional bankruptcy, and how can she make more deposits than withdrawals in her emotional wellness bank?

“Much of the time, the mental breakdowns and significant emotional challenges we see in girls are grounded in things that happened much earlier on and were never addressed or healed” (206).

Why do girls have so much difficulty opening up about their problems, and how can we encourage girls to actively look for solutions and seek support?

“At some point, when the withdrawals far exceed the deposits, we reach emotional bankruptcy, and the internal feeling of emptiness contributes to the mental and emotional health issues we see with many preteen and adolescent girls” (210).

How can the C’s of Success (compassion, cooperative collaboration, creative coping, community, and courageous connections) prepare girls to tackle issues that they might face?

“Having a network can be crucial because there may be situations in which girls feel more comfortable talking to someone else (family doctor, therapist, clergy member, school counselor). It is important for this system to be in place before challenges arise” (218).

What kind of support network does your daughter have? Does she have several different mentor figures that she can turn to in times of crisis, and does she realize her options for seeking support if faced with a challenge?
Chapter Nine

Physical Wellness

“A girl can not be considered to be doing well if she has great grades, high standardized test scores, and a long resume of extracurricular commitments but feels terrible about herself, is anxious all the time, and is continually exhausted or suffering from injuries” (220).

In this chapter, I discuss the importance of physical wellness, focusing on nutrition, exercise, and sleep. I examine how being physically well can benefit girls both socially and academically, and I present healthy ways to look at nutrition and exercise. Here are some questions to consider:

1. Does your daughter have a healthy relationship with food, or is she consumed with counting calories, weight, and fat grams? What is it about today’s culture that makes so many girls today struggle with eating disorders, and how can we change the way we view food?
2. Does the common, “no pain, no gain” philosophy in sports reflect a healthy perspective on exercise or does it suggest that today’s girls are being pushed too hard to excel in their sports? Why are so many girls sidelined with sports-related injuries, and how can we prevent them?
3. How is sleep deprivation harmful and why is it so important that girls get enough sleep? Does your daughter consider her sleep schedule before signing up for classes, extracurricular activities, and other obligations?

“It’s nearly impossible to be nice to others when you are feeling terrible inside. Any girl who has ever been irritable and lashed out at others for no apparent reason can recall how lots of little things can build up to create an overwhelming explosion” (221).

Why is physical wellness necessary for personal happiness and positive interactions with others? How do you feel when you are sleep deprived or have been eating poorly?

“Think about the student who is trying to balance the expectations of multiple coaches or is dealing with the increased competition of trying to make the starting roster on the school team or gain the coveted spot on the prestigious traveling club team” (240).

How can playing sports competitively become an additional source of stress for girls? Are coaches today too concerned about winning and not concerned enough about the health of their athletes?
Chapter Ten

Spiritual Wellness: Reflecting and Connecting

“For girls who struggle with so many external messages, focusing on their spiritual wellness can guide them in their decision making and give them a sense of comfort when dealing with challenges and opportunities” (250).

In this chapter, I discuss spiritual wellness as the “core values a person chooses to live by” (249), and emphasize the importance of spiritual wellness in providing girls another source of support and guidance as well as a way to discover and pursue what is important to them. Here are some questions to consider:

1. Why is it important for girls to reevaluate their own development, adding new interests and letting go of things that they have moved beyond? What areas of their lives can girls “edit” to reflect their evolving interests?

2. Why is the blaming approach not an appropriate or productive way to handle problems, and what can girls do instead to address a difficult situation with maturity and grace?

3. How can girls be helped by disconnecting from technology and taking time to listen to reflect and listen to their own voice?

“One of the most damaging potential losses is the way so many girls prevent themselves from cultivating their own sense of spirit and promoting their own spiritual wellness” (249).

Why do you think spiritual wellness is often ignored in today’s world? What can we do to help girls understand the importance of developing a strong inner voice and reflecting on what matters to them?

“Ultimately, a girl’s spiritual wellness is grounded in her understanding of her own personal integrity. In their attempts to build their own worlds, girls need to understand that their beliefs are theirs alone and don’t necessarily need to be approved by anyone” (255).

In this chapter I tell the story of Rosalie, a young woman with wealthy but personally unfulfilled parents. Though Rosalie’s parents provide her with many luxuries, Rosalie eventually decides to take her own path and refuse her parents’ financial support. If you were Rosalie, what would you do? What can you learn from Rosalie’s eventual sense of personal satisfaction, success, and independence?

“There is a certain spiritual component to allowing ourselves to be flexible and play and have fun for no reason other than it is what we feel like doing. It can bring calm and comfort in trying times and bring the opportunity to cope and expand perspective and possibilities” (261).

How can you help your daughter recognize opportunities for spontaneous fun? What activities does she like to do or places does she like to visit that would make for an enjoyable afternoon?
Conclusion

Implementing the Strategies

“There will inevitably be starts and stops, but try to focus on helping to create an environment that promotes a sense of purpose, fun, and wellness. Allow opportunities for your daughter to regularly stop, regroup, refresh, relax, and refocus” (264).

In the Conclusion, I give an overview of the tips provided throughout the book and provide a few last pieces of advice for implementing some of the strategies in your daughter’s life. Here are some questions to consider:

1. How can you stay positive if your daughter is reluctant to make changes or implement the strategies presented throughout the book? Is there a way in which you can approach her to make sure she is responsive?
2. Are you the best person to present these strategies to your daughter? Would she be more receptive if another adult role model talked to her about them, instead of you?
3. When would be a good time for you to sit down and talk with your daughter and then start implementing these strategies? Remember, any day is a good day to start!

ACTIVITY
Create a sample six-step strategy like the one that is presented on pages 267-269. Decide which exercises you want to do with your daughter and come up with a plan for when you will do them.

Thank you for reading The Myth of the Perfect Girl. I hope that I have sparked your interest in the challenges that today’s girls face and what strategies parents, educators, and girls themselves can use to raise happy, successful daughters.

If you have questions or would like to share your story, please visit facebook.com/MythofthePerfectGirl to continue the conversation and connect with me and other readers. You can also find videos on my YouTube channel (bit.ly/RGVEgA) featuring teenage girls trying out the Game of Threes and other exercises from the book.

The Myth of the Perfect Girl is available now from Perigee Books. Visit anahomayoun.com for more information.