

5 THINGS YOU  
CAN DO TODAY



TO EMPOWER GIRLS

Kay Bolden

## Introduction

It is very easy to tell girls, ‘Be strong, you are beautiful, you are capable, don’t do this, do that, don’t worry about that, who cares what others think, etc. What is missing is the idea of instilling worth. How do we raise a girl to feel she is worthy — worthy of good friends, worthy of healthy relationships, worthy of speaking her mind and of being heard, worthy of her dreams, worthy of trying something nobody else has done?

~ Girls’ Empowerment Workshop

How do we teach our girls that they are valuable and have a voice? By creating safe spaces for their creativity, by respecting their ideas, by NOT rescuing them when they’re working toward a goal. When girls feel confident about their bodies, their intelligence, their worthiness and their sexuality, they have the opportunity to go into the world and fully express themselves — as girls, as women, as humans.

~ Girls Rock!

We have fallen into the destructive habit of worrying more about “making kids feel good about themselves” instead of giving them opportunities to work toward a goal. In fact, constant praise doesn't improve grades, reduce antisocial behavior, deter drinking or drugging, or do much of anything good for kids. Even telling kids how smart they are can be counterproductive; some children who are convinced that they are little geniuses tend not to put much effort into their work.

The solution to this muddle is actually simple: *If you want self-esteem, then do estimable things.* Accomplishments and know-how can't be handed out. They must be earned through individual effort. It is the endeavor that generates a sense of pride and inward esteem. Imagine handing a fisherman a prize catch. You may think you're doing him a favor and saving him the trouble, but you are robbing him of the pleasure – and the sense of accomplishment -- instead. A fisherman wants to catch his own fish, not be given one.

~ Psychology Today

*“We need to change the perception of the value of girls at the individual, community and institutional levels; foster an enabling environment for adolescent girls’ education; and engage and equip girls to make life decisions and important contributions to society.”*

*~ First Lady Michelle Obama, on the Let Girls Learn initiative ~*

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## 1. Start Seeing Girls!

Remember the push by motorcyclists to remind drivers to SEE them? For a car or truck driver, motorcycles tend to be invisible. Bikers have to be proactive and diligent to make themselves seen – and respected -- on the road.



Girls, too, are often overlooked in daily interactions. Girls as young as 7 or 8 have already learned to look down; to hide their faces; to wait for permission to speak; or to mimic sexualized behavior in their bid to be “seen”.

Acknowledge girls in social situations ... in grocery store lines or at the museum or walking your dog. Smile, make eye contact, say good morning or have a nice day.

In conversations with girls you know (your nieces, for example, or the daughters of friends), comment on their talents or their interests, rather than their appearance. (They’ll get plenty of commentary on their hair and clothes without you, never fear.)

Remember that compliments and praise don’t build self-esteem; achievement does. Ask girls what they’re working on. A challenging piece of music? A dunk shot? House training the puppy? New video game? Whatever has them excited, let them tell you all about it. Pay attention when they talk. Ask questions; let them teach you something you don’t know.

Show girls that what they think and say matters to you.

In a group setting, don’t let others dismiss or silence girls.

Speak up for girls!

## 5 Things You Can Do Today to Empower Girls

*“Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.”*

*~ James Baldwin ~*

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### 2. Let Girls See YOU

Let girls see YOU interacting comfortably in the world. Take your daughter inside the bank with you, take your niece to a fancy restaurant, take a girl to a play, a professional sports event or a poetry slam.

Let girls see YOU handle a mistake on the bill or a rude taxi driver.

Let girls see YOU be kind to a stranger or be polite to wait staff.

Let girls see YOU listen to other women with respect.

Let girls see YOU have healthy conversations/relationships with men.

Let girls see YOU laugh with good friends.

Let girls see YOU jog or sky dive or write a novel or plant a garden or learn Italian.

Let girls see YOU be passionate about your own interests.

Let girls see YOU take care of yourself.

Let girls see YOU set healthy boundaries.



*“Countries with higher levels of gender equality have higher economic growth. Companies with more women on their boards have higher returns. Peace agreements that include women are more successful. Parliaments with more women take up a wider range of issues - including health, education, anti-discrimination, and child support.”*

~ Ban Ki-moon ~



### 3. Wonder Out Loud

“I wonder,” my mother used to say, while we watched TV in the 1960’s, “why there aren’t any black families in Mayberry?”



“I wonder,” she would muse, during the 1973 Watergate hearings, “why are all the senators men?”

“It seems like that woman is ashamed of her body,” she would venture, during 1980’s commercials for feminine hygiene products. “I wonder why?”

Occasionally these “wonderings” would morph into conversations about gender bias, racial inequality and self-respect, but not usually. She would just mention something she noticed and move on. I didn’t realize it at the time, of course, but she was planting the seeds of critical thinking. She wanted me to question things, rather than accept them at face value. She wanted me to look beyond the surface, and develop my own opinions. She wanted me recognize bias when I saw it.

Try wondering out loud with the girls in your life. Wonder about those song lyrics on the radio. Wonder why the female heroes in her video games are half-naked. Wonder what people mean when they call someone a “bitch” or “pussy”.

And in case you’re wondering, in 2016, 80 senators out of 100 are men.

*“A woman’s best protection is money of her own.”  
~ Claire Boothe Luce ~*

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#### 4. Take the Mystery out of Money

Best-selling author and financial guru Suze Orman says girls often develop a dysfunctional relationship with money, and grow into women who let others control their finances, or who become dependent on others for support.



Girls need to learn early that the only way to get money is to earn it. Don’t “rescue” girls who’ve blown their allowance; a short-term inconvenience will teach a long-term lesson.

Teach girls under 10 to save with clear jars or piggy banks. Let her make a list for the grocery store, compare prices and help you decide the best value. Does she want a new cell phone or laptop? Work out how to save for it. Older girls can have their own bank account, and teens with jobs should be required to save a certain amount from every check.

Even if you’re on a tight budget, talk to your girls about money from a positive perspective. Instead of saying, “we don’t have enough money for that” say “how can we save up for that?”

Girls who manage their money will grow into financially independent women. A woman with her own income is a woman in control of her own life.

*“Do something that scares you every day.”*

*~ Eleanor Roosevelt ~*

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## 5. Do Something Scary

What are you afraid of?

Dining alone in a snooty restaurant? Learning to ski? Taking a solo vacation? Letting someone see your paintings, or read your short stories? Saying no to a friend or family member? Making a speech in front of a large group?

Whatever it is, it's time to do it.

Because the girls in your life need to know how to overcome fear. They need to learn how to take risks. They need to discover how to step outside their comfort zone and trust themselves to handle whatever happens.

There are no magic words or pills that will eliminate fear. The only way to overcome fear is to act.

Too often, our girls are encouraged (even rewarded) for holding back, for playing it safe, for overestimating risk.

Too often, we women try to wait until our anxiety lessens before we act.

That's completely backwards.

The only antidote to fear is action.

The quickest way to acquire self-confidence is to do what you are afraid to do.

So do it. The girls in your life are watching.



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**Additional Resources**

Let Girls Learn

<https://letgirlslearn.gov/>

The Girls Empowerment Workshop

<http://thegirlsempowermentworkshop.org/>

Black Girls Rock!

<http://www.blackgirlsrockinc.com/>

United Nations Sustainable Goals – Gender Equality

<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>

Women and Girls in Science

<http://womeninscienceday.org/TakeAction-AZ.html>

Adolescent Girls and Body Image

[https://www.socialworkers.org/practice/adolescent\\_health/ah0204.asp](https://www.socialworkers.org/practice/adolescent_health/ah0204.asp)

Setting Healthy Boundaries

<http://oureverydaylife.com/teaching-girls-set-boundaries-19398.html>



**5 Things You Can Do Today to Empower Girls**

is dedicated to all the girls who woke up today in refugee camps,  
or in the hands of human traffickers;  
to all the girls engulfed in war or famine, or fleeing epidemics;  
to all the girls living with hunger or pain, fear or despair;  
to all the girls who woke up today in mortal danger;  
to all the girls trapped in places where their lives have no value.

When we empower our girls, we take another step toward that day  
when everyone recognizes that women's rights are human rights,  
and that no girl should be left behind.

### About the Author

Kay Bolden is an author, speaker, CEO and accidental farmer. Since 1991, she's been at the helm of Warren-Sharpe Community Center in Joliet, creating programs to address youth gangs, family empowerment, and food security. The Center's food pantry supports over 600 households every month, and the youth-run farming initiative, Green Sprout Urban Farm, is a pilot program seeking to eliminate urban food deserts.

Kay is the author of *She Lives in You! The Kathleen Bolden Story*, *Veggie Casserole: Kids Cook the Darndest Things*, and *More Wine, Please ... A Heathen on the Way of St. James*. Her articles have appeared in *Woman's Day*, *Mothering Magazine*, *American Baby*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicken Soup for the Single's Soul*, and numerous other publications.

Contact her via email ([kay.bolden@att.net](mailto:kay.bolden@att.net)) or Twitter ([@KayBolden](https://twitter.com/KayBolden)). Or, just take a ride down to Green Sprout Urban Farm. She's probably out there picking veggies with her girls.