

Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls

Connecting with and Supporting Girls



Why a health initiative?

When we commit to caring for ourselves, we can then fully commit to our purpose and mission. We can commit to God's command to make disciples in the world and stand ready to serve others. Healthy women can produce healthy families, churches, and communities, as well as develop healthy, more just, and more holistic societies.

Connecting with and Supporting Girls

In order to achieve the shared goals of the health initiative, our plan includes a commitment to raising up healthy women and girls by:

- **educating** women to care for themselves physically, spiritually, and emotionally.
- **sharing** knowledge and experience in order to prevent women and girls from continuing today's health risks tomorrow.
- **advocating** for more research, particularly to hasten the elimination of heart disease and stroke in our lifetime.

To carry out that plan, we pledge the following:

- As **emotionally** healthy women we will engage in and seek healthy, meaningful activities and relationships to better support one another.
- As **spiritually** healthy women we will engage in Bible study, spiritual renewal, and holistic healing.
- As **physically** healthy women we will make healthy choices for our bodies.

Only when we raise up a total woman's ESP—emotional, spiritual, and physical health—it will make a positive difference in the lives of many girls.

The Status of Girls

Listening to today's media has convinced many that the status of girls is a new issue and that it only affects girls labeled at risk. However, research conducted as far back as 1985 examined health and risks of all adolescent girls. In October 1995, the results of a 10-year study conducted by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development reported that adults in the U.S. are not only neglecting its 19 million children ages 10-14, but the results predicted millions of these children would become lifelong casualties if the country does not act soon. The study further reports that children 10-14 go through the most difficult passage of life during this period and that society is less likely and ill equipped to help them.

The impact of this neglect is seen in the rising number of girls who are more depressed, suicidal, and sedentary. Life-altering conditions including diabetes, heart disease, and asthma are at an all-time high, and our nation's girls are in danger of living in poverty, violence, and fear.

All hope is not lost. The report states that before age 14, damaging behavior patterns have yet to be established, and—with parents, schools, businesses, government, community organizations, and the media working together—progress can be made toward ensuring the healthy development of adolescents.

Raising Girls

Today the White House Council on Women and Girls exists to help ensure that American women and girls are treated fairly in all matters of public policy. In order to raise up the whole girl, women of faith can turn to Deuteronomy 6:1–9, a template for providing a lifestyle that will raise whole and healthy girls, leading to whole and healthy women. Relationship building is at the heart of these instructions. Both the Carnegie research study and Deuteronomy 6:1–9 suggest that talking with and being with our children (girls) early in their lives will help us help them navigate their most challenging life passages.

This resource does not negate the effect a father-daughter relationship plays in raising up healthy girls but rather emphasizes that girls need the women in their lives more than ever to raise them. Girls are searching for a deeper connection and reason for belonging; it's more than their BFF (best friend forever) can provide.

Inside every acorn is an oak tree and inside every girl is a woman. The tree within the seed has even more potential as a tree. That potential discerned by the creative eye of an artist looks past the tree to produce a chair, floor, bookcase, building, and so forth. Girls are small containers holding gifts that need releasing for use in the faith community as part of God's plan. We simply must re-adjust our eyes in order to see the woman within. Then we can begin to nurture and guide how she uses her gifts as she grows.

Girls are wired to need love and nurturing from the women in their lives. No matter how times advance or culture and trends change, women are still the primary source for nurturing and caring for children both emotionally and spiritually. Women must therefore use their circles of support to assist them with this endless and complex task.

Let's Get Started

Long before the farmer or novice gardener plant seeds, they prepare the soil and expect to be successful. Likewise, as bold women we must first prepare ourselves for this work. And because we are not alone, we can expect successful results in raising up healthy girls in community.

Begin by surveying. How many others are raising daughters in your faith community?

Study together. Begin with Deuteronomy 6:1–9. Talk together about your own faith development. Who were the women who helped you as a girl? Name their characteristics. Next, look at mother/daughter and woman/girl relationships in Scripture such as Miriam and Jochebed, Ruth and Naomi, Mary and Elizabeth. Take turns researching and leading the studies. It is great practice for when you lead them with the girls.



How to Use This Resource

This resource can be used by both an individual and a planning group. It is designed to take about 60 minutes for the initial gathering session. To introduce the resource, begin with the “Let’s get started,” “Begin by surveying” and “Study together” activities. The session may be expanded by allowing additional time for reflection and discussion.

Open and close the session with prayer. Participants will need a Bible, pen, and paper. In preparing for a planning group session, allow time for participants to reflect on the first session. You may provide discussion questions or simply ask participants to share their thoughts and hopes for this new venture. Make sure there is time for your planning to happen. Take into consideration the makeup of the group. After some brainstorming, begin to shape an idea starter to fit your group. Plan one activity at a time so you don’t overwhelm your potential participants. Always include a time for biblical reflection and prayer in each activity you plan. Set a time-line for planning future sessions. Give yourself plenty of time. Evaluate before moving to the next activity.

Developing Your Newly Formed Group

After your initial group preparation session, feel free to incorporate as many of the following activities and ideas to suit your group. Discussing these prior to closing the preparation session will allow participants to maintain their enthusiasm and look forward to the continued formation of the group.

Offer times to gather. Talking with others about personal expectations and hopes for your daughters is very uplifting. Look for other women (grandmothers, aunts) who may be raising girls as well. The more the merrier. Invite women in all stages of child rearing. You cannot lead where you have not been. Moms can learn valuable lessons from each other through these gatherings.

Host educational sessions. If you don’t know, ask. The issues our girls are facing are complex and life threatening—we cannot guess at a course of action. Begin with your parish nurse or other healthcare providers who can assist you in finding speakers or workshops to attend as a group. Ask your pastor or Christian education person to speak to the group about faith formation and your role in it. Invite them to pray for the work of this group.

Plan a retreat or sleepover. Women raising girls need time together to slow down, “remember when,” and encourage empathy and compassion for the girls you are raising. You also need a place to celebrate the great job you are doing and to garner support for staying one step ahead.

Expand to include others. Start a prayer circle. Prayer changes things. Praying for and with girls is essential to raising healthy girls. Invite grandmothers, godmothers, aunts, moms raising boys, all women who are willing to pray for the girls and moms in your congregation by name. The work of this group is vital to this ministry with girls and should be designed for the long haul. It’s important to engage women whose daughters, granddaughters, nieces, and sisters are outside the congregation as a way to encourage them as well.

Preparing for Takeoff

When you board an airplane, instructions are given to prepare you for your part in assuring a safe journey. If the oxygen mask drops from the overhead panel, the flight attendant says, “Put on your own mask before assisting others.” Apply the same philosophy to this endeavor. You will know when you are ready to engage the girls. Once you are ready, you can focus on your time with the girls. Spend time planning with all the moms. Decide how often and how detailed the activities will be. Pay attention to cost, family dynamics, and other activities girls may be already involved in. The key is quality of time spent together, not sheer volume. Girls need consistency. Do not promise what you can’t deliver and do not over-stimulate. This process is to help women and girls build relationships, not to build a climate of disappointment and frustration.



Mother/Daughter Group Interactions

Planners are encouraged to include mothers and daughters of all ages to participate in as many activities as possible together. Although it may seem easier to plan by age group or grade level, this practice is contrary to how girls navigate community. Women and girls are relational and emulate what they see while processing what they feel comfortable incorporating into their own style. Moms will also appreciate the support and the opportunity to see through others where they are and what they will experience down the road. Visit www.girlshealth.gov, a Web site developed by the Office on Women's Health in the Department of Health and Human Services, for current statistic and reports.

Begin with the tried and true. Use the Girls' Day Out model and take the group to brunch or out for milk and cookies after worship. This will make for easier conversation about faith and allow the girls a comfortable space to express their faith. Questions will come, but remember, you don't need to have all the answers. "I don't know but, we will find the answer" is always a good response.

Build community. Girls need to see who they can trust and depend on when they need help. They also need to see women engaged in the work with them.

Organize a dancercise class. Many girls today live more sedentary lives. Dancercise (moving to music free-style) will get them up and moving. These classes are less structured and are easy to organize. Walking together is also an effective means of exercise. Provide information on 10,000 steps and a pedometer as an added treat. Positively challenge your group to meet measured goals. Encourage each other.

Plan a movie event. Pick up a DVD of a current movie. Preview it with a group of moms and develop discussion questions about the meaning and hidden meanings in the movie. Then invite the girls to someone's home to watch the movie, make some popcorn, and let the fun begin.

Host a servant opportunity. Covenant with moms to participate in serving as Jesus serves, providing the girls with space to practice discipleship. Consider the age of the girls when choosing an opportunity. Contact a local food pantry or talk with your women's group about quilting or making school and health kits. This activity is essential to raising balanced girls.

Give back. Begin planning to involve girls in the Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls initiative.

Finally, evaluate often. Never do anything more than three times if it doesn't work for the group. Have fun and enjoy yourself and the girls you are raising up.

¹Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, ²so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. ³Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you. ⁴Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:1–9³

¹ W. "Study finds U.S. guilty of neglect toward young teens.(Originated from Knight-Ridder Newspapers)." Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service. 1995. *HighBeam Research*. (September 29, 2009). <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-17622055.html>

² W. "Study finds U.S. guilty of neglect toward young teens.(Originated from Knight-Ridder Newspapers)." Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service. 1995. *HighBeam Research*. (September 29, 2009). <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-17622055.html>

³ New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Copyright © 2009 Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Written by Valora K Starr, Director for Discipleship, Women of the ELCA. All rights reserved. May be reproduced for use in Women of the ELCA congregational units and by synodical women's organization of Women of the ELCA provided each copy is reproduced in its entirety and carries this copyright notice. Please direct all other requests for permission to reproduce to women.elca@elca.org.

Did you know?

Women of the ELCA resources, such as this one, are available free to individuals, small groups, and congregations. Covering a variety of topics, we are bringing Lutheran perspectives and new voices to issues that matter. By making a donation to Women of the ELCA, you will help us continue and expand this important educational ministry. Give online at womenoftheelca.org or mail to Women of the ELCA, ELCA Gift Processing Center, P.O. Box 1809, Merrifield, VA 22116-8009.