

Study finds unexpected biases against teen girls' leadership

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Making Caring Common (MCC), a project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, today released new research that suggests that many teen boys and teen girls—and some of their parents—have biases against teen girls as leaders. These biases could be powerful barriers to leadership for a generation of teen girls with historically high levels of education who are key to closing our nation's gender gap in leadership. The report also suggests that much can be done to prevent and reduce gender biases in children.

Titled "Leaning Out: Teen Girls and Gender Biases," the research report assesses the explicit (conscious) and implicit (unconscious) [biases](#) of teen [girls](#), teen [boys](#), and parents with regard to gender and leadership. Findings suggest that many teen boys and teen girls have biases against female [leaders](#) in powerful professions such as politics, that many teen girls have biases against other teen girls as leaders, and that many teens perceive their peers as biased against female leaders. Further, the research suggests that some mothers have [implicit biases](#) against teen girls as leaders.

"Our study points to insidious bias against girls as leaders that comes from many sources" said Richard Weissbourd, a faculty member at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and co-director of Making Caring Common. "Bias can be a powerful—and invisible—barrier to [teen girls'](#) leadership. Yet parents and teachers can do a great deal to stem these biases and help children manage them."

Making Caring Common conducted the research during the 2014-15 school year, including a survey of almost 20,000 students from a diverse range of 59 middle and high schools, smaller follow-up surveys, and a series of focus groups. More information about the research methodology can be found in the full report at <http://www.makingcaringcommon.org>.

"The question for parents and educators today is, 'How can we support girls in overcoming these barriers?'" said author and parenting expert Dr. Michele Borba. "We all have a part to play in creating a culture in which girls can reach their full potential."

Key Findings

Key findings from the report include:

1. Check your own biases. Parents' and educators' biases powerfully influence whether children develop biases. None of us are immune from bias, but we can work to spot and manage our biases and we can get feedback from family and friends about our biases that we may be unaware of.
2. Students were least likely to support granting more power to white girls as council leaders. In an "implicit bias" scenario that tested unconscious bias, students were asked whether they wanted to give more power to student councils led by Black girls, Black boys, Latina girls, Latino boys, white girls, and white boys. Students were least likely to support giving more power to the student council when it was led by white girls and most likely to support giving more power when it was led by white boys. (For more information about this scenario and for information about our findings on race/ethnicity, see full report.)
3. White girls appear to be biased against other white girls as leaders.

This gap between white boys and white girls appears to be largely explained by the finding that white girls tended not to support giving power to white girls. White girls presented with white girl-led councils expressed lower average support for the council than white girls presented with white boy-led councils.

4. Some mothers appear to be biased against girls as leaders. In responding to our implicit bias scenario, mothers' average level of support for councils led by boys was higher than their average support for councils led by girls.

5. Biases against girls have many causes. Focus groups and interviews suggest a variety of reasons for the biases above, including girls projecting negative images of themselves onto other girls.

6. Awareness of bias matters. The data suggest that awareness of gender discrimination may be related to less implicit, unconscious bias against girls as leaders. Other research indicates that awareness of bias reduces bias.

FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION

In light of these findings, Making Caring Common developed the following strategies for parents and educators to reduce and prevent bias in children:

2. Cultivate family practices that prevent and reduce bias. Parents and other adults can help prevent biases from forming in children by developing reflexes and practices in ourselves and our children that stem [gender biases](#). Parents can, for example, engage children in creating a home that is a bias-free zone, including seeking children's input about family practices that may be biased.

3. Teach teens to spot and effectively confront stereotypes and discrimination. Adults need to mobilize both girls and boys to identify and actively combat gender bias. Adults should brainstorm with teens strategies for responding to biases and stereotypes in their daily interactions.

4. Don't just let "boys be boys." Boys can be powerful allies for girls, but they can also be powerful antagonists. Adults should be alert to and challenge gender-based insults wherever and whenever they happen and "call out" the false bravado in degrading girls.

5. Challenge teens' biased assumptions and beliefs. According to our study, many teens overtly believe that males, for example, are better political leaders and females are better childcare directors. It's crucial that adults constructively challenge these beliefs, questioning the evidence supporting them.

6. Use programs and strategies that build girls' leadership skills. Many programs and interventions are available that directly or indirectly foster leadership skills in young girls.

7. Use this report to spur discussion. Ask teens how they understand the data reported here and facilitate discussions with them about how to achieve greater gender equity at school, at home and in the larger society.

Provided by Harvard University

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