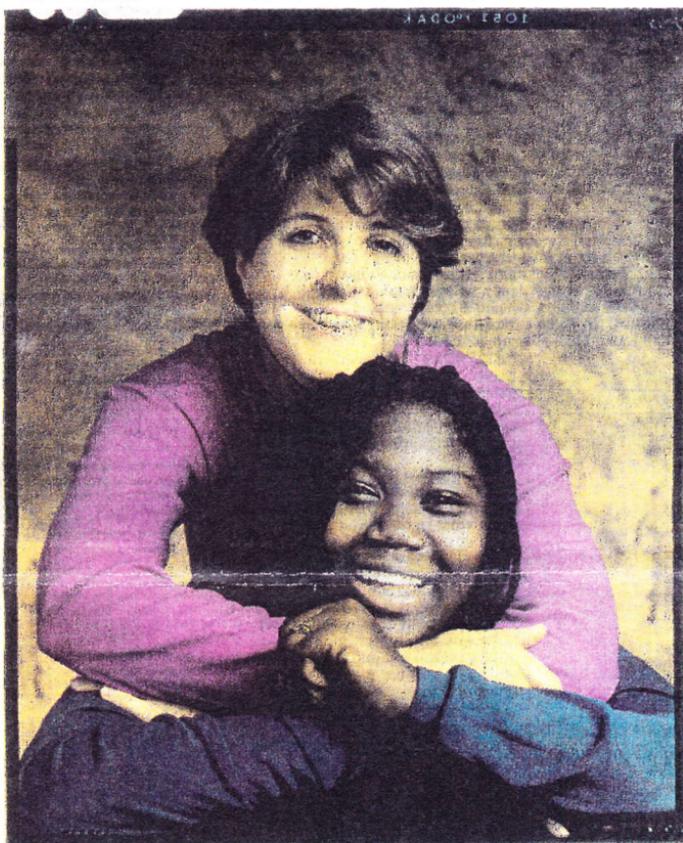


Think positive

Mentors open girls' eyes to discover their potential



Tribune photos by Bob Fila

By Marya Smith
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

The first time I went on a photo shoot, I was so afraid I was going to mess up. The photography coaches let us borrow very expensive cameras, like a 35 mm Pentax, and I had never even used a camera," says 12-year-old Annice Fisher, a participant in Picture This, a mentoring program pairing professional photographers with grade school girls in Chicago.

"But the coaches showed us what to do, and they said, 'This is yours, you're in control, you tell people in the picture what to do.' Now I know exactly what to do, and it feels good. I like to be shown the first time, but then I like to be independent."

"The women come in from all different companies," says 17-year-old Chicagoan Doretha Boyd, a participant in Women Employed's Career Links program.

"They give us a scenario of a job situation, and we talk about what we would do. The main thing I learned from them is how to stand up for myself and speak out.

"They took us on a field trip to see behind the scenes at Second City, and the tour guide asked if anyone was interested in theater. I spoke up and said 'I am,' and she gave me a scholarship for their Youth Workshop. We're learning acting, improvisation and how to communicate better."

Fisher and Boyd take part in

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'The role of women in girls' lives is critical ... mentoring helps girls of all ages, but especially around the ages of 11 and 12, girls look to us — to women — to learn how to navigate the world.'

Lyn Mikel Brown,
assistant professor at Colby College

◀ Karen Kring

Annice Fisher ▶



Mentor

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mentoring programs designed to encourage a strong sense of self in girls and young women.

"It's hard to measure success," says Karen Kring, president of Picture This and a professional photographer. "You can't exactly ask, 'Is your self-esteem better?'"

Mentoring programs for girls operate on faith that they can make a difference. It's a faith based on research findings from a variety of sources, including studies by the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women commissioned by the American Association of University Women Educational Foundation as well as the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girls.

Development under the direction of Carol Gilligan at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

These researchers discovered that both boys and girls experience a significant drop in self-esteem as they move from childhood to adolescence, but the drop is more than three times greater for girls than for boys.

One factor may be the pervasive gender bias girls face in the classroom, documented by the AAUW study. For example, the study showed that boys and girls "learn" that teachers and other adults believe males can do things and girls cannot.

In addition, the AAUW study revealed that talents are more important to boys' self-esteem while physical appearance is more important to girls' self-esteem.

"As girls reach puberty they are pressured to conform to gender roles more than they were before," says Heather Johnston Nicholson, associate national director of Girls Incorporated, a national organization that sponsors a variety of esteem-building programs for girls.

"The message of society (to these girls) is be thin, dumb and socially adept — who wouldn't experience a dip in self-esteem? It's hard on girls who are supported and is even more complicated for girls with other pressures in their lives. There is a need to create programs that promote the idea that it is great to be a girl."

The Harvard Project found that up until the age of 11 or 12, girls trust their own authority, but by the age of 12 or 13, many girls start censoring vital parts of themselves — their honesty, insights and anger — to conform to the cultural norms for women.

But not all young girls. "One of our findings is that girls who resisted loss of self-esteem had strong women in their lives who took them, and what they were struggling with, seriously," says Lyn Mikel Brown, co-author with Gilligan of "Meeting at the Crossroads" (Ballantine, \$12.50) and assistant professor and co-chair of the Education and Human Development Program at Colby College, Waterville, Me.

"The role of women in girls' lives is critical," Brown says. "Mentoring helps girls of all ages, but especially around the ages of 11 and 12, girls look to us, to women, to learn how to navigate the world.

"Risk-taking, in particular, is a big issue for girls. They need models in risk-taking. Strong mentors are really important; there's no way around it. There are a variety of approaches; we're all trying to find our way."

The premise of many mentoring programs is that girls and young women can build self-esteem by focusing on education and careers. This often entails broadening the economic horizons of the participants.

"The Take Our Daughters To Work Day is a wonderful idea, but not if you don't have a parent who works," says Sister Bonnie Kearney, principal of Josephinum High School in Chicago, one of the Career Links program sites.

"In the mentoring groups, the girls become comfortable with professional women. They can ask what it's like to work, how to dress for it. It's a support system, and an introduction to the working world."

"The speakers were good, but I liked talking in the small groups the best because you could talk to them about anything," says

Tracey Garrett, 18, a Josephinum Career Links participant who will attend Eastern Illinois University this fall.

"The women helped us figure out career moves, how to go about job interviews, and they told us about all different kinds of jobs, from business to working on your own, being an entrepreneur. They help you as a woman to know you can make your own way in the workforce. They also taught us to be prepared for competition there."

"They motivate you to go on in school. I knew I wanted to go to college and study psychology, and they had me do background research on what I could do with a degree in psychology."

"I went to the library and talked to people in the field. One of the ladies who came in was a case worker, and she talked to me, told me to get a bachelor's degree first, and to take some sociology as well as psychology. She told me I can go further too and get a master's degree. My plan now is to use my degree to become a case worker."

Not all mentoring programs are job-oriented.

"If Picture This results in a career in photography, we're excited they want to follow in our footsteps, but it's about expression as well as vocation, about process and getting them to think," says Kring.

"There's also the element of amplifying their voices. The coaches would say, 'You can't tell them what to take.' The photos were through the kids' eyes. One girl took a picture of a ring bearer and flower girl and cut off the bride and groom's (the adults') heads. It's what they see."

"There's a lot of esteem-building when you take a picture that you've picked out and it's good, and when you use a good camera and work with someone good."

"I don't want to be a professional photographer," says Fisher. I want to be a doctor, and if I have time, I'd like to take pictures in a hospital. One of my coaches sent me a big book of photos of people in hospitals — a lady in labor, a man who had been burned — in all different countries."

Programs like Career Links and Picture This are few, according to statistics from the Chicago Foundation for Women, which supports both programs and other projects aimed at building self-sufficiency in women and girls.

Executive Director Marianne Philbin says: "Less than 5 percent of the total dollars given away every year go to programs specifically targeted for women. An even smaller percentage of philanthropic funding goes to programs specific to girls."

"There is an increasing awareness of the need for gender-specific offerings that deal head-on with the risks girls face, which any parent can tell you are different from the ones boys face. But the funding community hasn't caught up with the interest out there in programs that address the needs and concerns of girls."

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"One of my pet peeves is that (private funders and the U.S. government continue to be hesitant about girls' programming, saying, 'Why can't it be co-ed?' But we've done co-ed, and we've done all-girls, and the results are so different," says Anne Cole, trustee of the Remmer Family Foundation, a philanthropic organization with a mission to encourage programming for girls. (The foundation held a conference on Developing Strengths in Girls last fall in Boston to encourage cooperation between practitioners and researchers.) "Girls have different developmental needs than boys, so programs have to be designed differently to meet those needs."

Says Kring: "We've done both all-girls and co-ed programs, but now it's mostly girls, possibly because most of our coaches are women photographers."

"With kids, a nice camera is empowering. We found that the teams with a female coach were even more powerful. And it's not a hit-and-run approach; the coaches don't ditch the girls, and some work with them apart from the program."

"When I was with a coach, I got to talk to her and ask her about things," says Fisher. "The coaches would take us behind the scenes to museums and places we can't get into ourselves. We got each other's phone numbers and got to know each other."

"Some of the coaches came to my house and got to know my family. Working with the coaches is like working with a big sister, not like other adults."

"It shouldn't be a radical thing for girls to be brought up aware of every career option that exists," says Philbin. "The reality that women are now a force in the marketplace at large only means that (there is a need) to equip girls to deal with the world facing them."