

Supporting healthy connections for girls

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As 2024 marches on, the world continues to face ongoing uncertainty and change, much of which directly impacts girls and young women. The International Coalition of Girls' Schools (ICGS) has developed a new six-episode podcast series, *The Connected Girl*, to help support girls' development as healthy, whole and well young women despite the challenges they may face. This series brings together leading experts from around the world to explore why so many young people, and especially girls, are feeling more disconnected. In a world driven by the connections of social media, technology and modern life, understanding how to empower girls' engagement with the possibility of rich and diverse connections in their lives can help support and guide them as they develop confidence and assurance in their value and purpose. What follows are some key takeaways from the first two episodes of *The Connected Girl*.

Being 'connected' is a term widely used today. But we need to understand what this really means for girls and adolescents in order to support their holistic, healthy wellbeing and development. When we consider that girls can become disconnected from peers, sleep, nature, caring relationships and their own bodies, it reinforces just how important it is that healthy connections are supported and encouraged. But what do we really mean when we talk about connections? **Dr Tori Cordiano**, consulting psychologist and director of research at Laurel Schools Centre for Research on Girls in Shaker Heights, Ohio, USA, aptly describes this as the importance and power of relationships, not only with parents and caregivers, but with other adults in a girl's life such as teachers, coaches, mentors and tutors.

Girls will have close family relationships but will also develop other relationships with trusted adults. These adults may have seen these girls at different stages of their development, know and understand each girl's uniqueness, and support them to feel seen as their own selves. As Dr Cordiano says, from an adolescent girl's own perspective, it is important that she 'feels that she can be fully and authentically herself', knowing that she can be confident, but that she can also 'be vulnerable, she can be uncertain, and she can know that she can bring that to the relationship without fear of judgement or reproach and she is accepted for who she truly is' (Hall, 2024a). This truly becomes important when we consider the stress and negativity many families fear could impact their daughters.

As parents and adults seek to support the girls and young women in their lives, many feel overburdened by the negative media and events facing the world. A brief perusal of news and social media outlets reveals the extent to which parents are warned of the many threats that could affect their child. This can create a sense of fear and trepidation as families seek to support girls' healthy development. How can we empower confident, holistically healthy young women in a world that often appears to be spiralling with negativity, horrific crises, loss and trauma?

Some may fear the solution is to over burden girls further, scheduling regular family time or events, and ensuring that relationships with parents and caregivers are stronger than ever. Yet there isn't a need to place this type of pressure on young girls. Instead, families can focus on the natural moments that occur where girls feel safe and accepted: As Dr Cordiano says, 'places that are maybe a little bit more neutral or welcoming for them' (Hall, 2024a). This is about more than a successful family gathering or event, and is about maintaining what **Dr Judith Locke**, a clinical psychologist and researcher from the Queensland University of Technology in Australia, calls 'a healthy connection to your daughter as she becomes her own person', even when she makes 'mistakes and choices that make you shake your head and make her roll her eyes' (Hall, 2024b).

While maintaining healthy relationships to build connections is important, parents can also be aware of signs that girls are becoming disconnected. Repeated or ongoing changes in behaviour are crucial clues to this disconnection. Parents can, however, help girls navigate this challenge. In the busyness of today's world, this means that girls also need downtime of their own. This ensures that they have the time to build important connections with family, but that they also have time 'that is unclaimed, that is their own': In Dr Cordiano's words, 'it's helpful to think about that level of balance' (Hall, 2024a).

Dr Locke reflects on similar themes when she talks about parents having the best of intentions with ongoing involvement in their daughter's life, from building a relationship based on 'love, affection, quality time, praise, all the stuff that warms your heart as a parent', to the burning desire to ensure your child achieves well, enrolls in the best courses and avoids disappointments (Hall, 2024b). But sometimes supporting girls' connections means stepping back. Having a positive, loving, healthy relationship is undoubtedly important. Yet helping girls learn how to navigate disappointment while building resilience and coping skills is just as essential as building a positive relationship with her parents. Developing these connections isn't easy, but it allows families and educators to support girls' holistic and healthy wellbeing during times that are often clouded with such tumultuous change around the world.

Dr Cordiano talks about this experience for girls as a 'sort of uncertainty and searching for identity and wondering if you fit in, how you fit in, and who your people are', suggesting this is 'sort of a hallmark of early adolescence' (Hall, 2024a). She reinforces that taking a step back can allow parents to 'recognise the good things that are also present in addition to the worries that we have about... kids and teenagers' (Hall, 2024a). This doesn't necessarily make the path of developing connections easy. These relationships require ongoing work, nurturing, at times repair, and positive role modelling. However, this process is one that will empower girls to be the best version of themselves in a globally changing world, ready to face the challenges they meet each day as individual, unique young women.

The Connected Girl podcast series is a valuable resource for parents, educators and other adults involved in girls' lives. The opportunity to enrich girls' connections with their families, voices and confidence makes these podcasts exceptionally appealing for listeners. Add to this the calibre of guests, and it is clear ICGS has curated an excellent opportunity to explore ways to support young women to be holistically healthy. Episodes 4 to 6 of *The Connected Girl* podcast continue to explore the themes of connections for girls, including setting healthy boundaries, consent, grief, life online and more. Many of these are very confronting topics for parents given what is regularly reported in the media, but as Dr Locke says, this is a time for parents to support girls, '[a]ccept their strengths... [and] accept their weaknesses' without pre-writing their story (Hall, 2024b). Parents need to be prepared for the difficult conversations, but also the 'genuine sense of accomplishment' that girls will experience as they learn to be unique, independent and healthy young women, empowered to take on the world and create meaningful change (Hall, 2024b).

Listen to the Podcast here: <https://girlsschools.org/advocacy/blog/2024/01/24/on-educating-girls-the-connected-girl-podcast-series/>

References:

- Hall, T. (Host). (2024a, January 24). Forging powerful relationships, with Dr. Tori Cordiano (No. 1) [Audio podcast episode]. In *Connected Girl*. International Coalition of Girls' Schools. <https://girlsschools.org/advocacy/blog/2024/01/24/on-educating-girls-the-connected-girl-podcast-series/>.
- Hall, T. (Host). (2024b, January 31). Connecting with parents, with Dr. Judith Locke (No. 2). [Audio podcast episode]. In *Connected Girl*. International Coalition of Girls' Schools. <https://girlsschools.org/advocacy/blog/2024/01/24/on-educating-girls-the-connected-girl-podcast-series/>.



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