

Promising Practices for Engaging Families

SPOTLIGHT 05: 3 TIPS TO ENCOURAGE GIRLS IN STEM

Girls don't start out with less interest in STEM. In preschool, they are curious, bold in their actions, and filled with dreams. **Yet, by age six, girls are less likely to think girls can be really, really smart.** This belief matters because it affects girls' willingness to try challenging activities. Instead of settling for the status-quo, let's reimagine how we talk to girls. Let's show them what we value by what we say to them.

#1

Talk about what a girl does, not what she wears.

"Oh, you look so beautiful." "Oh, that's such a pretty dress." What can be wrong with compliments like these? Plenty, when you consider how often girls hear comments about how they look. In visits to a summer STEM program I overheard comments like these to girls, but never to boys. Renee Engeln, author of *Beauty Sick: How the Cultural Obsession With Appearance Hurts Girls and Women* advises, **"Don't talk about how people look. Don't spend time focusing on who looks so pretty because that sends the message that 'pretty' is important."** Let's do our part to help enlighten parents, program staff, and role models about the power of words. Let's talk with girls about what they've learned and what they're interested in.



#2

Don't let girls think it's okay to avoid a challenge or step away from an activity that is messy.

When they say, "I can't do it" answer back, "You can't do it, yet." Mistakes and messes are an important part of making science discoveries, learning to code, or figuring out why the circuit they're building doesn't work. **Girl Scouts offers tips to build girls' confidence.** I especially like Andrea Bastiani Archibald's suggestion to encourage "fun failure," the idea that when a girl tries something hard or new, if it doesn't work out that's okay because she learned from the experience. For role models who embody perseverance, introduce girls and parents to **Margot Lee Shetterly's Hidden Figures**, the story of four African-American female mathematicians who supported some of the greatest achievements in NASA's space program.



#3

Empower mothers. Empower girls.

Make-HER offers workshops for girls ages 8-12 and their mothers (or other significant females in girls' lives) at the Sunnyvale Public Library in Northern California. Together they learn new technologies **while working on very fun activities** like designing wearable technology, light-up superhero masks, fractal Valentine's cards, and paper microscopes. Mothers and daughters are guided by role model **#LadyMakers** who communicate high expectations and celebrate failures and lessons learned. "You can figure it!" "Failure. Failure. Super!" These are important take-away messages for girls and mothers alike. Librarian Nancy Andrus notes the power of this mother-daughter program she helped to create. By empowering mothers, we show girls that females can do anything they set their minds to. By empowering girls, we show mothers that their daughters do like STEM-challenges, failures, messes and all.

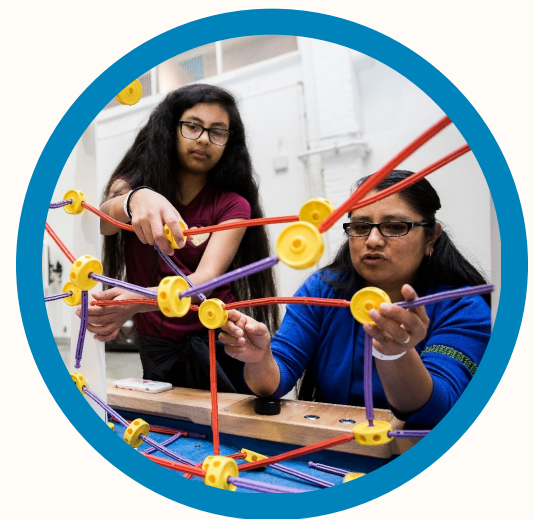


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