



Enough As She Is: “When girls know why they matter inside, they become more resilient in the face of stress”

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In light of the toxic culture of self-promotion and perfectionism that has overtaken the internet, along with the cyberbullying and trolling that accompanies it, there is talk of both cleaning up the online world and arming our children, particularly our daughters, with the resilience to cope with its devastating negativity. But what exactly does it mean to instil resilience in girls? What role can parents play? And why is it so important?

The release of Rachel Simmons' new book, *Enough As She Is: How to Help Girls Move Beyond Impossible Standards of Success to Live Healthy, Happy, and Fulfilling Lives*, has been met with widespread acclaim for its down-to-earth advice designed to help adults give girls the tools to overcome the growing culture of self-criticism that means that “no matter how hard they try, they will never be smart enough, successful enough, pretty enough, thin enough, popular enough, or sexy enough”.

Simmons — author of *Odd Girl Out* and *The Curse of the Good Girl*, and an educator at the well-known American women's university, Smith College — warns that “we have raised a generation of young women so focused on achieving that they avoid healthy risks, overthink setbacks, and suffer from impostor syndrome, believing they are frauds”. In addition, while they spend more and more time projecting an unrealistic image of themselves online, they are withdrawing “from the essential relationships that offer solace and support” and which bolster their self-esteem.

Girls may be more successful than boys in getting high academic results and heading to university, writes Simmons, but “they have also never struggled more”. Outwardly “exceptional” girls are inwardly anxious and overwhelmed, under pressure to be a “supergirl” and constantly comparing themselves in person and online to their peers.

Simmons cites data from the United States showing that depressive symptoms in girls increased by 50% between 2012 and 2015 (twice the rate of increase for boys) and that the Girls' Index, a survey of girls in Grades 5 to 12, found that the number of girls describing themselves as “confident” declines more than 25% throughout middle school.

On the other hand, asks Simmons, “aren't girls the ones crushing boys at school?” Aren't girls going to university in greater numbers than boys? Yes, she writes, but “all that girl power seems to have come at a cost”. All too often this success is fuelled by intense self-criticism and fear, leading girls to feel anxious and overwhelmed.

What girls need is practical advice from trusted adults to help them reject “supergirl” pressure and toxic stress so they can become resilient adults leading happy, healthy and fulfilling lives. Simmons' top three tips for parents are to:

- Tell your daughter about your mistakes and failures so she won't make the mistake of trying to be perfect. Resilience can't be learned by watching a parent excel at everything but by watching them screw up and handle setbacks.
- Model self-compassion when something goes wrong in your life so that she will learn to be less self-critical when she makes a mistake. People who are gentle on themselves when they make mistakes are less stressed, anxious and depressed. They are also happier and more highly motivated.
- Model body acceptance. Between 40% and 60% of primary school age girls monitor their weight. "Overthinking about the body," writes Simmons, "is partly responsible for the gender disparity in depression." Avoid negative comments about your daughter's body or your own. Don't talk about what you've eaten or how little you have exercised. Instead, talk to your daughter about being healthy, strong and agile.

Simmons also has the following advice for parents:

- Empathise with your daughter and tell her that stress is normal.
- Keep your own anxiety in check so it doesn't add to hers.
- Cultivate gratitude in your daughter for who she is and what she has right now.
- Tell your daughter about "imposter phenomenon" — that *everyone* feels like they are a fraud or don't belong sometimes.
- When your daughter is upset, ask her whether she wants advice or just to vent — and if it's to vent, then "sit on your hands and just listen!"
- And, finally, remind your daughter why she is enough as she is because, "when girls know why they matter inside, they become more resilient in the face of stress".

References

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