

Nurturing Gifted Girls' Self-Concept and Academics at Home

By Lauren Broome

Ronda Rousey, an Olympian and former UFC champion, destroyed the fighting world's glass ceiling, bringing women into a sport whose own president had previously stated would never welcome women. Gifted both athletically and academically, Rousey credits her mother's support for her success and perseverance. Instead of leading her to safer and more traditional female roles, Rousey's mother pushed her daughter to become a stronger, greater fighter.¹

Rousey is an extreme example of the pressures facing gifted girls, who often see unrealized and unfulfilled potential as a result of societal pressures to make the choice between being smart and fitting in.² Unfortunately, gender stereotypes may be perpetuated by teachers, who have been shown to more frequently call on boys in class,³ at times provide girls less rigorous tasks than their male peers,⁴ and even overtly "like smart girls less than other students."⁵ Clearly, social norms against girls are pervasive and prevalent.

How to Help Gifted Girls from Home

So, what can be done to level the playing field and help gifted girls? Like Rousey's mother, parents of gifted girls should empower their daughters to feel they can succeed in any field. They need

to actively work to build confidence in their daughters, since with self-confidence comes less of a need to hide their gifts and talents to fit in. Parents need to assure their daughters that how they are is how they should be, and there is no need to change to gain popularity.

Beyond the vital importance of developing your child's self-worth, there are some specific actions you can take to positively influence your gifted girl in the academic world.

Encourage your gifted daughter to take higher-level classes from which she might normally shy away. Boys rate themselves as being better in math, science, and history, even when grades don't support these beliefs.⁶ While the gender gap in STEM is closing in math and science, it is simultaneously widening in



technology, and boys are still scoring higher on math and science sections of tests.⁷ With this disparity often starting in middle school, girls are led away from higher-paying STEM-based fields such as medicine and engineering. Support and encourage your daughter's interest in STEM. With parental guidance and support, female students will be more likely to take these classes and succeed.

Find a mentor. This allows your daughter to connect with someone who has been in her place and gone through many of the difficult emotions she is encountering. It can also help in showing that any goals and dreams are achievable, in any field. Your gifted daughter can identify with another gifted woman, and realize her strengths.

Seek out peers, too. Being able to connect with peers similar

to themselves is also useful for gifted girls. Depending on her interests, seek out leadership activities, athletics, or academic competitions. Join a local Girl Scout troop, which by design promotes a positive and empowering view of females, leadership abilities, problem solving, and healthy supportive friendships.⁸ Or, look into local and school sports, as well as the Girls on the Run program, which teaches girls about self-empowerment and social skills to help them succeed. Many academic programs exist as well. Science Club for Girls is a Massachusetts-based STEM program for girls that seeks to close the gender gap in STEM fields, while also assisting the social and emotional development of the girls involved.

Use bibliotherapy to model positive influences. Bibliotherapy allows students to read novels or biographies about

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people with whom they can connect to based on their interests or the difficulties they are encountering. While therapy is in the name itself, it does not need to be an intensive process or require a licensed professional. Instead, reading a biography can help your daughter feel less alone. It also lets her see ways issues like hers have been successfully resolved. Knowing how others worked through their problems can help inspire gifted girls on what actions to take in their own life.

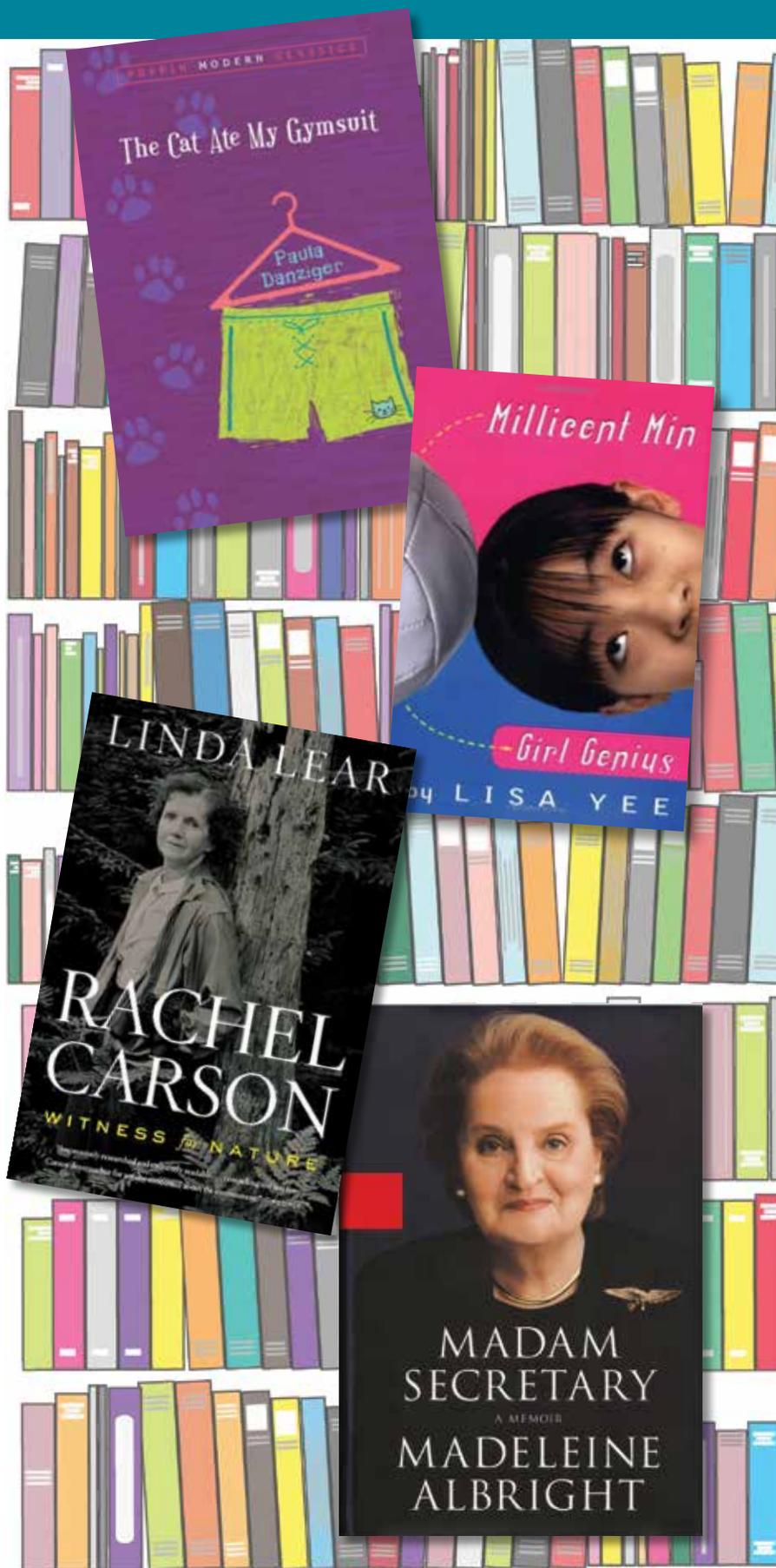
Tom Hébert, professor of gifted education at the University of South Carolina, suggests novels such as *Celine* by Brock Cole, *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* by Paula Danziger, and *Millicent Min*, *Girl Genius* by Lisa Yee, all of which are for middle school and high school girls. Also included in his book are many suggestions for biographies including those women in traditionally male fields, such as politics and sports. These books include *Madam Secretary: A Memoir* by Madeleine Albright, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* by Linda Lear, and *The Home Team: Of Mothers, Daughters, and American Champions* by RuthAnn and Rebecca Lobo.⁹

Advocate for professional development classes on gender equity practices at your daughter's school. Many times, gender biases in the classroom are not intentional, but the result of subconscious feelings from teachers and administrators. Helping teachers become more aware of their actions will help them to correct it. It is likely a lack of awareness and research that has stalled progress,¹⁰ and by parent advocates campaigning for awareness, it is possible to make changes.

Furthermore, by modeling support in your home, teachers may begin to see the impact of this support and realize they have a future historian, author, mathematician, artist, scientist, or creator waiting to blossom in their classroom.

Conclusion

Gifted girls face many social issues in their lives that impact their education and interests from a young age. Gifted girls need the support of an understanding parent—like Ronda Rousey's mother—to nurture their gifts. With strong familial and peer support, as well as the use of bibliotherapy and parent advocacy in the school, gifted girls can flourish and thrive while they learn to use and appreciate their gifts. ☺



Resources

Websites

Girls on the Run

www.girlsontherun.org

Science Club for Girls

www.scienceclubforgirls.org

Print

Greenspon, Thomas S. (2012). *Moving past perfect: How perfectionism may be holding back your kids (and you!) and what you can do about it*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.

Isaacson, K. (2002). *Raisin' brains: Surviving my smart family*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

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Kerr, B. A., & McKay, R. (2014). *Smart girls in the 21st century: Understanding talented girls and women*. Tucson, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Reis, S. (2002). Social and emotional issues faced by gifted girls in elementary and secondary school. *The SENG Newsletter*, 2(3), 1–5.

Reis, S. (2003). Gifted girls, twenty-five years later: Hopes realized and new challenges found. *Roeper Review*, 25(4), 154–157.

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Endnotes

¹ Rousey, R. (2015). *My fight/your fight*. New York, NY: Regan Arts.

² Reis, S., and Hébert, T. (2008). Gender and giftedness. In Pfeiffer, S. I. (Ed.), *Handbook of giftedness in children* (pp. 271–291). New York, NY: Springer.

³ Sadker, D. (1999, April). Gender equity: Still knocking at the classroom door. *Educational Leadership*, 22–26.

⁴ Rosser. [Video file.] Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/buo1AaK1pPM>

⁵ Reis et al., (2008).

⁶ Reis et al., (2008).

⁷ Sadker, (1999).

⁸ Girl Scout Research Institute. (2014). How girl scouting benefits girls. Retrieved from www.girlscouts.org/research

⁹ Hébert, T. (2011). *Understanding the social and emotional lives of gifted students*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

¹⁰ Sadker, (1999).

