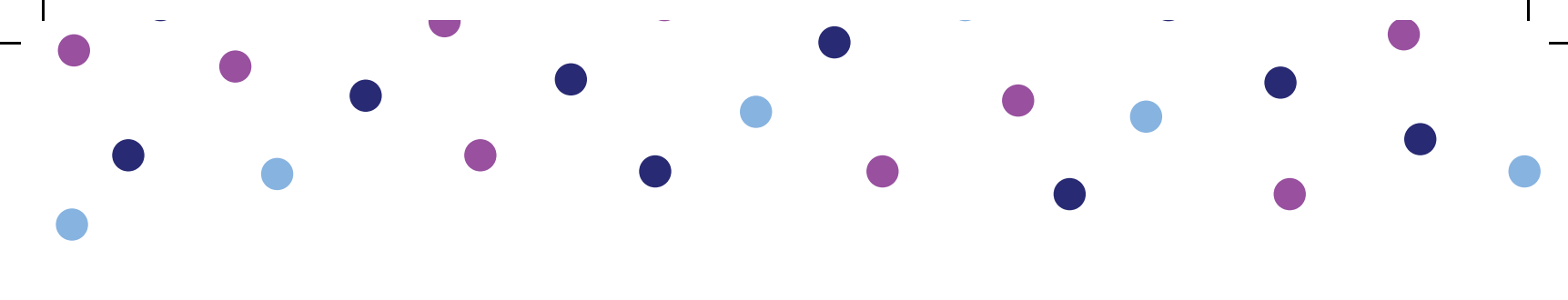




Teaching Girls to Embrace Imperfection



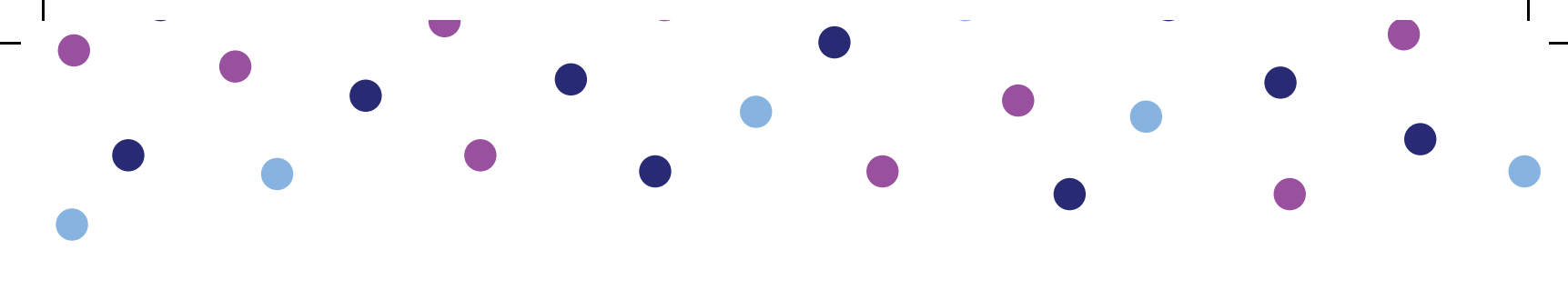
In our culture today, girls seem to be hardwired to please everyone. Recent research from the American Psychological Association points to a rise in young people (especially girls) striving to be perfect. The authors, Thomas Curran and Andrew Hill, define perfectionism as a combination of excessively high standards and intense self-criticism. When it becomes unhealthy, it can lead to eating disorders, anxiety and depression.

How does perfectionism become so ingrained in girls?

When they are babies and toddlers, girls receive messages that they should be nice, neat, polite, play quietly and be put together. And they are praised when they do these things. At school, they are praised by teachers and faculty for being helpers and A students. When they are loud or assertive, they are chastised for being bossy.

“Well-meaning parents and educators guide girls toward activities and endeavors they are good at so they can shine, and steer them away from ones they might find frustrating, or worse, at which they could fail, “ said Reshma Saujani, author of *Brave, Not Perfect*.

On the other hand, boys are given free reign to mess up, fall down and fail at things. In other words, they get to be imperfect while girls are trained to be perfect.



How can we break the cycle? What can we do as parents, relatives, caregivers, educators, etc. to change the paradigm? Here are a few tips

Practice being brave everyday

“Bravery is the antidote to perfectionism.” –Reshma Saujani

Encourage girls to practice small acts of bravery each day. Some examples include:

- Raise your hand in class.
- Try something new even if you might fail.
- Tell a friend how you honestly feel.
- Take on a new physical challenge. Playing sports can help develop resilience in girls.
- Say “no” to a request because you already have too much on your plate.
- Learn to use your hands / fix things / build things. Try assembling something from IKEA; take a coding class; or build something with a hammer and nails.

Consider asking: How were you brave today?

Help them develop a growth mindset

We can help girls embrace that they are a work in progress rather than focusing on the outcome or achievement. This is the growth mindset approach, which was developed by Stanford psychologist and author of Mindset Carol Dweck. Dweck explains that the brain is a muscle that can be strengthened when used (for any age!) and that mistakes are an integral part of learning.



Help girls choose to think the following thoughts:

“I can do hard things.”

“Mistakes are a chance to learn.”

“I learn new things everyday.”

“Struggling makes me stronger.”

“I can’t do it YET.”

“Creative solutions aren’t always easy.”

“I can take risks.”

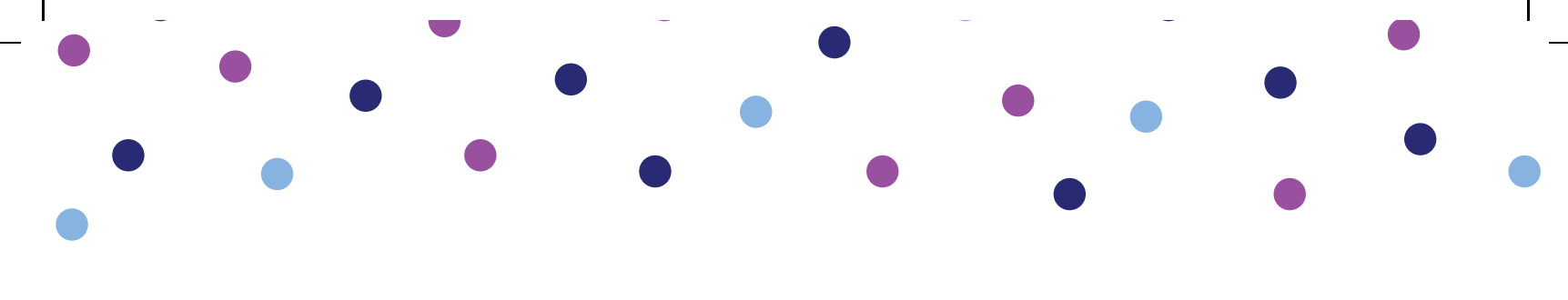
Help them see they are not defined by “likes” or others’ opinions.

The most debilitating form of perfectionism (associated with worse anxiety and depression) is the other-oriented version where the girl becomes overly focused on winning approval from others whether it is parents, friends, social media followers, boys, etc.

Remind her that she is more. More than how many likes she gets. More than what people think of her. Encourage a healthier relationship with social media as a way to connect and say something about herself; to not use it to ask a question about what others think about her; to ask the “why” before she posts (why am I doing this? What do I want to accomplish?). Encourage social interactions in person, too.

Walk your talk

Are you striving for perfection in your own life? You know they are always watching you! Be careful that your words match your actions.



“For example, a parent may say ‘kindness to others’ is paramount, but his actions focus attention on high achievement and status; this, researchers say, let’s children know he or she values these traits more.”
-Rachel Simmons, “Perfectionism Among Teens is Rampant (and We’re Not Helping)”, *The Washington Post*.

Listen & be empathetic

Don’t underestimate the power of being a good listener! Growing up is hard and they need us to listen without judgment.

“Research confirms that naming and sharing emotions helps lower levels of cortisol, the stress hormone in our system. When we empathize without judgment or criticism and without trying to fix the problem, we create a safe place for our daughters to share.”

Teach them resilience

A few ways to teach resilience include:

- Letting her solve her own problems and resist the urge to rescue.
- Teaching her coping skills for when life doesn’t go her way.
- Giving her more independence and responsibility in the home.
- Giving her opportunities to help others. Help younger siblings, help a teacher, participate in service projects, etc.
- Teaching gratitude.

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Sources & Further Reading

Books

Brave, Not Perfect, Reshma Saujani

Mindset, Carol Dweck

The Curse of the Good Girl, Rachel Simmons

Enough As She Is, Rachel Simmons

Articles

Raising Girls: Self Esteem and the Curse of Perfectionism, The Parenting Partnership, Heather Rutherford

How to Help Girls Avoid the Trap of Perfectionism, U.S. News & World Report, Katie Hurley

Perfectionism Amongst Teens Is Rampant (and We're Not Helping), The Washington Post, Rachel Simmons

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