People think that girls should be the ones who do all the cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the kids and that the guys should be the ones working and making money. I don’t think that’s right.

—Brittney, sixth grade

Girls have more options available to them than ever before as it pertains to occupational choice; however, this has not always been the case. It was only during the Second World War that women began to enter the workforce with regularity in order to assist the nation in a time of warfare. In doing so, women realized that they enjoyed, and were good at, various occupations outside of the home and at the end of the war desired to maintain their employment. Girls and women began to explore their occupational interests and found a whole new arena from which to gain satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment.

Our occupations are a part of our identity and our careers help define who we are. When we initially meet new people, invariably the question is asked, “So what kind of work do you do?” We categorize and rank one another based on these social
and economic categories, and we place great importance on our work identity. Unfortunately, we do not spend very much time career planning, and some of us often view the process of career development as a sort of planned happenstance. When you think about your own career development, what comes to mind? Consider the following questions:

CAREER SURVEY

1. When I was a child, I thought I would be a __________ when I grew up.

2. When I was in middle school, I wanted to be a __________.

3. When I started college, I majored in _________ and thought I would be a ______________________________.

4. The career that I currently have is
   a. the worst ever. I can’t wait to leave.
   b. fine for now, but I’m always looking for the next opportunity.
   c. good and stable. I know what to expect from day to day and I’m comfortable.
   d. the perfect fit for me. I can’t imagine myself doing anything else!

5. The biggest influences on my career decisions have been __________________________________________.

6. My biggest regret about my career development is ____________________________________________.

7. If I had known in high school what I know now, I would have ____________________________________________.

How much of your own career decision making was planned happenstance, a situation where chance events and environmental factors determined your career direction? What were the interests, curiosities, life circumstances, and realities, that helped influence your career path?

When I was in kindergarten, we had a career day where each student had to choose a career and then memorize a poem that
accompanied the profession. I can’t remember if I was assigned this particular career, or if I chose it, but I was to be a nurse. I wore a nurse’s uniform and said, “When I grow up I’ll be a nurse to help you when you’re sick. I’ll do the best things I can to make you better quick.” By the time I got to middle school, I was heavily involved in sports, so I thought I might want to be an athletic trainer. Then, once I got to college, I was convinced I was going to be a pediatrician and started college as a pre-med major. After breaking multiple glass beakers and test tubes in chemistry class and gagging while dissecting a pig in biology, I thought I might need to reconsider my career path, thus prompting my studies in psychology and education.

I’ve talked to many adults about their own career development. Some can easily say that they knew since they were in elementary school the career that they would have. One teacher told me, “I knew that I would be a teacher from the time I was in second grade. I never wanted to do anything else and I never even considered another career path. It was what I was meant to do.” Others have less intentionality and less of a clear and direct path. One very successful business owner told me, “I started out as a high school history teacher, but I was so close in age to the students that I didn’t think I would last long at that job. I quickly moved on to sales and found that it was something that I was pretty good at. I kept seeking out opportunities for promotion and increased responsibility and was successful at that for a time. But there was a point that I realized that I wasn’t going to make it any further in that particular company, so I took a risk and started my own business. It has turned out to be the best decision I ever made but at the time was one of the scariest things I had ever done.”

It is interesting to compare these two career paths. Both people are content and fulfilled in their work, but they had two very different paths. The teacher was female and the business owner was male. Can we draw any conclusions about gender differences in career paths?

GENDER STEREOTYPES AND CAREERS

While there is not necessarily a gender difference around early career decision making or intentionality of career path, there are gender differences that exist related to the types of careers
that males and females choose. Despite great gains over the years in the occupational opportunities that are available to girls, there still exists a very strong stereotype regarding the types of jobs that are more appropriate for men or women. Read through the list of the following professions and think of the very first image of the person that comes to mind when you read each word:

- Construction Worker
- Hair Stylist
- Elementary School Teacher
- Police Officer
- Pediatric Nurse
- Truck Driver
- Computer Engineer
- Heart Surgeon
- Florist
- Secretary
- Auto Mechanic
- Stock Broker

If you are like many people, the images that popped into your mind were overwhelmingly traditional in regards to gender. While you may have had a few of the occupations listed conjure a specific person who was not of the stereotypical gender, in general we tend to have very rigid ideas about who we see in different environments and settings.

Often, this happens without conscious awareness and we find that our ideas about who does what type of job to be engrained in us as long as we can remember. In fact, it probably is as long as we can remember, because much of our career understanding and conceptualization happens during our childhood and elementary school years.

**CAREER DEVELOPMENT: EARLY CHILDHOOD YEARS**

Some of the early career influences for girls are related to the types of exposures that girls have when they are very young. Let’s consider the types of toys that are marketed toward boys and girls. Boys’ toys tend to be much more action-oriented and skill-based such as robots, Legos, Erector Sets, science kits, cars, and trains. These are toys that promote movement, skill acquisition, and spatial reasoning. Girls’ toys overwhelmingly include baby dolls, ironing boards, kitchen sets, makeup, and clothes and fashion. These toys promote nurturing, caretaking, and domestic work—girls
can even have a baby doll that wets itself so girls can learn how to change a dirty diaper. (See Peggy Orenstein’s book, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, for a more in-depth review of this topic.)

While it is hard to know the impact of these activities and exposures on children, it can be reasoned that some of the earliest ideas that children develop about skills, activities, and the world of work happen during play. Children learn through play and they understand very quickly the toys and activities that are for boys and the ones that are for girls. Dolls are for girls, cars are for boys. Girls learn how to cook, boys learn how to build. Kids begin to develop their early ideas around careers when they are quite young, and so we want to ensure that their career ideas are vast and varied from these very early ages.

**Activity: Take a Field Trip to the Toy Store**

Take a walk through your local toy store or down the toy aisles of your local general store. Look at the various toys that are marketed to boys and to girls. What do you notice? First of all, you are likely to notice a big difference in color schemes. The girls’ toys are overwhelmingly pink, but boys’ toys are all different colors! See if you can find the exact same toy in a boy version and in a girl version. What colors do you think define a boy or girl version? For example, you might find PlayDoh that is available in primary colors as well as PlayDoh that is available in pastel colors.

Now, take a look at what skills you think each toy would help develop in a child. Do you see different opportunities for boys and girls?

Next time you have to buy a toy for a child, think about what you are saying to them about their roles, skills, and competencies!

**CAREER DEVELOPMENT: ELEMENTARY YEARS**

During their early years, there is a great deal of career education that happens for young children. Between the ages of 3 and 5, children begin to understand the concept of work and
develop an early understanding of professions (Gottfredson, 2002). They understand that adults go to work and have jobs. Kids this age might start to talk about what they want to be when they grow up and will begin to identify real-life occupations rather than say they want to be a super hero, a cartoon character, or an animal.

Between 6 and 8 years old, children form an understanding of who does what type of work. At this stage the initial gender assignment begins (Gottfredson, 2002). Kids know that women are nurses and that men are construction workers. They see scientists as men in white lab coats and administrative assistants as women at a computer behind a desk.

Even at these young ages, introducing students to the idea that men or women can occupy any job can be a daunting task. Individuals tend to hold very rigid expectations about occupations and gender, and to consider men or women in careers that seem to be gender-incongruent can be difficult. One middle school counselor said,

> When we talk about nontraditional careers for boys or for girls, I experience the “giggle” effect. It is really difficult for kids to think about men who work in salons, or as nurses, or women who are construction workers. What makes this so funny and what are we teaching them that results in this?

This is an extremely valid question. Where do children construct their ideas about various occupations, and who does what type of job? Historically, professions have been dominated by one gender or the other and overwhelmingly careers are stereotyped as male or female. Consider the title of this chapter. I remember when I was growing up—and even still today—I would hear the following, “She’s a lady doctor” or “He’s a male nurse.” While unnecessary, providing the gender clearly points out that the person occupying the position is in some way unusual. This type of stereotyping is damaging to both girls and boys because it limits their career options from very young ages. It makes both feel that they should not consider specific careers because they are not meant for people of their gender.
I asked a group of fifth grade girls about their career aspirations. Each took a turn sharing what they thought they wanted to be when they were older. The range of responses included stylist, lawyer, fashion designer, teacher, singer, and pediatrician, to name a few. With few exceptions, girls had identified careers that were much more female dominated than gender neutral or male dominated. Next, I asked the girls if they believed there were some careers that were better suited for men than for women. There was an emphatic, “No!” followed by a, “Well . . . maybe there are some jobs men should do instead of women. Like construction and stuff. I am not saying that women can’t do it, I just think that women wouldn’t really like to do it.” Another girl said, “I think there are jobs that people think men can do better than women, but I think we can do anything that we want to do.”

It was interesting to see that at this stage, overall, girls believed that they could be or do anything that they wanted. However, most identified with more traditional careers for themselves. I conducted similar focus groups with mothers and asked them questions about their daughters’ career aspirations. The mothers’ responses were interesting as it became clear that many had never talked to their daughters about their career ideas. A few mothers had vague ideas of the interests of their daughters, one said, “I have never really heard her talk about anything specific.” Another mom shared, “I told my daughter that she doesn’t have a choice when it comes to her career. I’ll tell her what she will be.”
When I asked the moms about jobs that were more appropriate for men or women, their initial response was similar to the girls’, “No!” followed by a, “but . . . ” The “but” was connected, in large part, to the mothers’ concerns about the ability to effectively manage a career and motherhood. One mom stated, “I told my daughter, ‘You can be anything that you want. You can be a doctor, or a lawyer, or a CEO. . . . But just know that it will be hard to have a baby, too.” Girls learn from a very early age that motherhood and career success may conflict, and this message is reinforced to them throughout their lives. On the other hand, boys may be denied the opportunity to choose fatherhood over career. Kids will reject careers based on gender incongruity before they will assess whether a career is accessible to them or a good fit for them (Gottfredson, 2002).

**Activity: Who Do You Know?**

This activity is designed to help girls identify real people in their own lives who have nontraditional roles or careers. Help girls identify people that they know that fit into the following categories:

1. A working mother with a child under the age of 2
2. A stay-at-home father
3. A dual-career couple who has decided to remain child-free
4. A woman who is a scientist, engineer, or IT professional
5. A man who is a nurse, elementary school teacher, counselor, or social worker

If girls have difficulty identifying people that they know, this is an ideal opportunity to have a conversation about some of the long-held stereotypes about men’s and women’s roles. Talk with girls about why each of the individuals named would make the choices that they have made. Ask the girls what they see as some of the challenges that each might face in their daily lives.

You might be in a more traditional role yourself. You can use your own valuable experience to share with girls how you came to your decision around your career or family role. What were the pressures you experienced or continue to experience? Is there anything you would have done differently?
CAREER DEVELOPMENT: MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL YEARS

Once kids have a firm understanding of gender and gender roles, they begin to notice other characteristics of individuals and careers. Between the ages of 9 and 13, kids begin to pay attention to the prestige of different jobs. They start to recognize that there are socioeconomic differences between people and they begin to make correlations between socioeconomic status (SES), prestige, and various occupations. At this point also, teens start to make decisions about where they see themselves fitting into certain occupations based on their perception of themselves (Gottfredson, 2002). Similar to what happens with gender incongruence, when youth perceive a disconnect between how they view their own level of prestige and the prestige levels of various careers, they again eliminate some desirable but perceived unrealistic choices. Because men, overall, have more prestigious careers than women, girls have a more difficult time identifying with higher powered, higher paying jobs. Boys and girls are again narrowing their options yet probably don’t even realize that this is happening.

At ages 14 through 18, teens begin to consider internal characteristics such as motivation, values, and ability. Many begin to explore their perceptions of their own mental ability, academic skills, and determination. How hard am I willing to work for a particular outcome? What is my dream job and do I think I am smart enough to have it? If there is an inconsistency between how a teen sees himself or herself and how they view a particular occupation, the career options are further eliminated.

As adolescents go through this process, they begin to develop a sense of the level of career accomplishment that they want to have in life. Throughout the years, they have eliminated careers that don’t fit the perception they hold of themselves. If I think that I am interested in chemistry or chemical engineering, but I don’t
see any one of my own race or gender in that field, I am likely to have difficulty seeing myself there. This, often subconscious, process results in the development of a social space—a zone of potential and acceptable occupational options that fits with self-concept (Gottfredson, 1997). It is essentially a narrowed set of options based on how I actually see myself.

SELF-CONCEPT AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

We know that the adolescent years are when young people begin to make sense of who they are within the larger context of the society in which they live. Adolescents tend to have an evolving self-concept, or way in which they construct the world around them, and they are constantly seeking to make sense of who they are and where they belong in the world. For girls, self-concept declines markedly from elementary school to middle school, and then again from middle school to high school. The adolescent years are when girls’ self-concept and self-esteem are at their lowest points.

If girls’ self-esteem is lowest during adolescence, and a great deal of career decision making happens during adolescence, then how are girls’ career decisions impacted?

In the following chart, the negative thoughts that girls have about themselves and their abilities, behaviors, aptitudes, and interests, can have a significant impact on the decisions that they make about their futures. We need to work to instill in girls a strong sense of themselves as capable and competent. We need to provide girls with opportunities to develop skills and to realize that they are good at any number of things. We need to build them up during these tumultuous years so that they are able to consider the widest range of options for their futures. Our understanding of the unique issues that affect girls’ career development, specifically as it relates to self-concept, is important. With this fundamental background, we can help girls engage in the career development process with increased awareness of how their thoughts and feelings about themselves can impact their ideas around career planning.
As girls begin to envision who they can be, we don’t want their dreams to be negatively impacted by low self-esteem. We want girls to see themselves as successful, happy, and fulfilled in their future career. We need to provide them with the opportunity to explore their “possible selves”—or who they can be in the future.

When we encourage girls to explore what they hope, expect, or fear becoming in the future, we motivate them to make intentional academic and occupational choices. Envisioning what we want to be in the future, and how we see ourselves in the future, can guide our academic and career decisions. This is the first step in career planning—becoming aware of choices and decisions.

Career decision making is a developmental process. As girls mature, they pass through a series of developmental tasks that allows them to begin to form ideas about who they are and what they might be able to accomplish as adults. Consider career

### CAREER PLANNING

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<tr>
<th>Girls’ Self-Concept</th>
<th>Career Decision Making</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Self-concept, or the way that I feel about myself, is at its lowest point for girls during adolescence.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Girls develop lowered career expectations.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Girls begin to question their abilities, intelligence, and competence.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Girls impose limits to their options based on the fact that they don’t perceive themselves as a good fit for lots of careers.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Girls internalize societal messages about what girls can do or should be.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Girls choose less prestigious, lower paying careers.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<th>Girls’ Thoughts</th>
<th><strong>“I’m not really that good at anything.”</strong></th>
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<td><strong>“I don’t think I am smart enough for that career.”</strong></td>
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<td><strong>“I don’t see anyone who looks like me in that job.”</strong></td>
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<td><strong>“I don’t think I can have a family and be successful in that career.”</strong></td>
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planning as a series of stages that we pass through in an attempt to make a career decision. Use the Career Awareness and Planning Model above for reference (Hinkelman & Sears, 2009).

Start with providing girls the opportunity to learn about educational and career decisions. Where do they see themselves? Will they go to college? How much money will they make? Getting a sense of the possibilities that exist is the first step in planning for the future.

Next, we want girls to have the opportunity to learn about themselves. What do they like and dislike? What are they passionate about? Some questions to ask girls include the following:

1. What kinds of things or activities do you like to do?
2. What are your favorite subjects in school?
3. What subjects seem easy to you?
4. What are the subjects in which you do your best work?
5. What do you like to do for fun or as a hobby?
The third step is for girls to explore various occupational options. There are many resources now that can provide girls with information about a wide range of careers. One of the easiest and most accessible is an online resource called O*Net (The Occupational Information Network—www.onetonline.org). O*Net is a database that contains information on hundreds of different occupations. Individuals can explore various professions and examine the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are required for each occupation. Educational requirements, salary information, and anticipated demand for the profession are included as well.

The fourth step is to make plans for the education and training that is required for the types of careers that seem interesting. We can help girls understand the importance of the academic and curricular decisions they make at the various points throughout their education. Girls can inadvertently foreclose or restrict future opportunities by the course patterns they choose in middle school. For example, girls who avoid advanced math courses minimize or eliminate their chances to pursue science, engineering, or technological occupations in the future. Encouraging girls to take the most rigorous courses that are available and then helping them be successful in those courses is very important. Girls might think it is better to get an “A” in a general math class than to get a “B” in a higher level course. But colleges report that it is better to take higher level courses and earn slightly lower grades than it is to take easier courses and breeze through with all “A’s.”

Some girls are now taking courses in middle school that count for high school credit. This means that the traditional idea of the ninth grade year being the year where things “start to count” is no longer true. Middle school is now where the college planning track begins, and it is important for girls and their parents to recognize this reality. Girls cannot explore or choose educational or occupational goals without relevant information and an understanding of the consequences of their curricular decisions. Mapping out courses well in advance of the next academic year is a wise and thoughtful decision. Starting this process in middle school will ensure that girls have the opportunity to take the highest level courses.

The final step is taking action. When girls register for their high school courses, sign up for a job shadow, or apply for internship experience, they are taking action. Point this out to them and continue to encourage their active participation!
WHAT CAN WE DO?

Much of the career exploration and development curricula that are utilized in schools focus on characteristics of different types of work and on individual interests, traits, and abilities. Unfortunately, these approaches to career development fail to account for the way that interests, traits, and abilities are developed and shaped in individual children. If a girl’s sense of self is changing, unstable, and easily influenced during adolescence, then social, environmental, and psychological factors must be considered as we attempt to promote career development.

Ensure that girls have access to a wide range of gender-neutral toys, experiences, and activities

We know that children learn through play and develop early ideas, as well as skills and competencies through their early exposures. Provide both boys and girls with toys that will allow them to develop the widest range of skills. Boys can learn to be nurturing and girls can learn to build.

Broaden the horizons of young girls

Some of us may think that occupational stereotypes are no longer a problem and that girls have much broader visions of what they can do. In some instances, this is in fact the case. But many of the same stereotypical ideas about what occupations are like and what girls should or should not pursue cause many girls to undervalue their talents and skills and ignore nontraditional occupations. You can make a difference by helping girls learn more about themselves, assess their skills accurately, and explore a wider breadth of occupational options. We need to recognize the social pressures that exist for girls and work to illuminate role models and successful women in a wide range of careers. Conveying the message to girls that they can be successful in any type of career, including male-dominated careers, may inspire young women to consider occupational possibilities that they may have initially discarded.
Provide opportunities for career-related internships and job shadows

Internship programs can give girls the opportunity for actual work experience and the opportunity to try out a possible occupation. Internships, co-ops, and job shadows can give an authentic sense of what it might be like to work in a particular industry and allow girls to see how it might fit with their own skills, interests, and abilities.

Provide opportunities for intensive programs

Intensive summer programs can provide in-depth opportunities for career exploration and development. It gives girls the chance to immerse themselves into a field or a subject and be around others who share their interests. Many organizations, colleges, and universities offer intensive summer programs for girls. Check with your local institutions of higher education, Boys and Girls Clubs, recreation centers, and youth organizations to see what type of summer programming they offer.

Connect girls with career mentors

Provide opportunities for girls to connect with career mentors who are older, more experienced people who act as role models and advocates. Career mentoring can have academic, professional, or personal functions and can be developed through formal or informal networks. Career mentors can help model or validate the career possibilities of young girls (Packard & Nguyen, 2003). Often, girls have fewer same-sex and same ethnicity work models to observe than their male counterparts. Many girls have not been exposed to women in nontraditional occupations and thus fail to see themselves as possibly succeeding in those occupations. Providing girls with opportunities to meet with female mentors who look like them and listen to speakers from nontraditional occupations are strategies that you can use to help female students begin to view themselves as individuals who can be successful in various career areas.
Confront the stereotypes that girls are not good at math and science

We need to question why so many girls like science in the beginning of elementary school but have begun to lose that interest before middle school. Research supported by the National Science Foundation (2003) showed that in fourth grade 66 percent of girls and 68 percent of boys reported liking science. While the boys’ interest continues, girls begin to lose interest in science by the end of elementary school. Perhaps girls are socialized to see math and science as something only boys do. Research shows that teachers’ and parents’ support are critical to fostering girls’ interest in science, engineering, and math. Making girls more aware of the science and math-related careers that are available can influence their decisions about what courses to take in high school and lay the foundation for an engineering, math, science, or technology career.

Expose female students to successful career women in nontraditional occupations

Continually, young girls endorse career aspirations that are stereotypically female, because they do not have exposure to women who are in nontraditional careers. While girls might easily have exposure to women who occupy traditional careers, there is a lack of female role models throughout the educational system and in society as a whole. Direct and personal exposure to actual women who embody nontraditional occupations is imperative to the conceptualization of various career possibilities for young women. It is additionally important that girls have the opportunity to see women who are of the same ethnicity as they are in different career roles. Having the opportunity to picture oneself in a particular job makes the possibilities seem more realistic.

Conduct activities and develop support groups for girls that focus on improving self-esteem and self-concept

With the recognition that self-concept is inextricably related to career development, we can devise individual and group activities that foster self-reflection. Through an examination of the
types of stereotypes that exist in our culture for women and the way in which women are portrayed in the media. girls can look within themselves to clarify what is truly of value to them and compare that to the values society holds. Activities can teach girls to recognize the ways in which media and society work to enhance girls’ insecurities and perpetuate an unequal distribution of access to power. Group activities are ideal for adolescents because it gives them a safe place to express their feelings and to explore their deep thoughts and beliefs. They are able to examine self-doubts and come to the realization that they are not alone in their thought process and that their peers share the same concerns. Girls find comfort in knowing that the insecurities and pressures that they experience are not unique and often readily accept such social support (Wigfield, Battle, Keller, & Eccles, 2002).

🌟 **Challenge institutional and societal reinforcement of stereotypes**

Promoting change in an unsupportive environment is difficult; however, maintaining the status quo can result in the lack of forward progress of students. Schools can be prime examples of the reality of gender stereotypes: Women occupy the majority of teaching and secretarial positions, while men engage in more of the powerful administrative positions of principals and superintendents. Young women need role models who demonstrate the belief that they are competent, capable, and entitled to pursue careers that may be inconsistent with those they see in their environments.