

Empowering Girls: Breaking the Girl Box – Clinic Notes

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“There are probably girls dropping out (of sports) because they’re too worried about what people are saying about them.” Kayte Christensen, former WMBA

The Girl Box

- The **Girl Box** – a box created long before you were born based on thoughts adopted about females and ways females are expected to act, speak, dress, groom, and conduct themselves because they are females.
- According to the Common Sense Media report (2013), a lifetime of viewing stereotypical media becomes so ingrained it can ultimately affect female’s career choices, self-worth, relationships, and ability to achieve their full potential.
 - Visual images and spoken/printed words reinforce society’s stereotypes
 - Female athletes deal with “gender marking” – words and images chosen to delineate (identify) male and female: athletes, athletic abilities, teams, and sporting events.
 - Senne (2016) stated female athletes are “still greatly underrepresented in all types of media and are usually not recognized for their athletic ability, but instead for their physical appearance, femininity...”
- For the female athlete, the Girl Box mindset affects their ability to develop and achieve their full athletic potential. Let’s look at the following areas: limitations, fears, and assumptions based on an athlete’s mental, physical, social, and emotional makeup to break the Girl Box and change the female athlete’s mindset.
- We will use athletic identity, which is defined “as the extent to which one identifies with the athletic role (Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder. 1993)” to empower girls to break the Girl Box. That’s right! The athletic identity or lack of has everything to do with who you are as an athlete.

Limitations

- What limitations have female athletes identified as reasons why they are unable to be their best?
- 72% of girls feel society limits them.
 - Girls should be perfect.
 - Girls are weak.
 - Girls aren’t strong.
 - Girls can’t be brave.
 - Girls can’t have muscles.
 - Girls are crybabies (emotional).
- A girl’s confidence can plummet making her more likely to accept limitations.

Fear

- Failure is the number one fear holding athletics back.
- The fear of failure can be paralyzing for female athletes.
- Failures are not setbacks; failures are fuel to keep going, to keep growing, to keep making progress.
- “We only truly fail when we don’t even try.”
- The more afraid your athlete is, the smaller her comfort zone becomes and the more difficult it is to break out of it. **Taking risks will help her grow.**

Assumption

- Female athletes deal with lots of assumptions that are assumed, even without proof.
- If the female athlete accepts limitations, fears, and assumptions placed upon her by society, she will begin to hold back, not try her best, and even quit her sport.
- Her acceptance of these assumptions of her worth, which are fueled by society's gender stereotype messages, is not dependent on her athletic ability but on her sexuality, physical attractiveness, and the clothes that she wears.

Breaking the The Girl Box

- Develop a balanced athletic identity one that seems generally be a positive self-concept where the athlete is able to make a social statement about who they are and how they want others think of them.
 - An athletic identity is developed through acquisition of skills, confidence, and social interaction during sport.
 - It plays a part in a cognitive and social role. As a cognitive structure, athletic identity provides a framework for interpreting information, determines how an athlete copes with career-threatening situations, and inspires behavior consistent with the athlete role.
- Athletic identity also has a social role in that it may be determined by the perceptions close to the athlete (family, friends, coach).
- As a self-concept, athletic identity can define the way in which an individual evaluates their competence or worth. The amount of worth and competence an individual places on self-concept may influence their self-esteem, affect and motivation (Brewer et al., 1993).

Final Coaching Thought

- You have control over keeping your female athlete inside the girl box or assisting her with getting out.
- Your coaching style will reflect your core values, what you believe is important.
- What you say to your female athlete will either reinforce or break down gender stereotype walls and even influence her self-esteem and motivation.
- You speak out against these gender stereotypes and challenge bias ideas; your athlete will hear you loud and clear.
- Girls function based on their understanding of what society has deemed acceptable (gender stereotypes), you have to get her to see there are no limits and she has the ability to achieve anything she sets her mind to.