

Six Myths About Teenage Courage

By Sandra Ford Walston, The Courage Expert

1. Teenage girls are encouraged to display their unique courage and they equally support other girls for their individuality. Teenagers have a big problem supporting each other's unique personalities. Conformity, the opposite of courage, is more the required standard of acceptance, and girls frequently taunt or ostracize each other if they declare their originality. Girls tend to brand each other with unfavorable labels, and this negative branding can last a lifetime if the girl internalizes the cruel comments. These behaviors undermine self-esteem and suppress speaking up. Phyllis Chesler's years of research led her to conclude: "Nice girls are not necessarily nice at all—and that most girls know this.... The teenage girls who engage in policing, shaming, and ostracizing other teenage girls are not exactly passive victims, but are in fact each of them actively protecting their own self-interest."¹

What can you do? Independently speak up and declare, "Now is the time for women to stop gossiping, backbiting and slandering other women." Betrayal will never advance teenage girls, and grudges only keep us pedaling in the same spot (even at work). Stop double standards for boys and girls. Do not encourage feelings of loneliness or rejection because a girl expresses her individuality in spite of the latest trend with the "in" crowd. The individualists among our girls tend to be labeled as "too strong," so take advantage of every opportunity to support the courage portrayed by each girl—the girl who is willing to stand alone on an issue, the girl who honestly expresses what no one else can (or will), the girl who chooses to be her true self, changing her behavior to reflect her spirit. Elevating your personal courage is not a sin. It is a virtue!

2. Girls learn to exhibit their courage at a young age when they communicate openly and demonstrate supportive behaviors. "Like girls, adult women intimates value their connection to each other so much that they are willing to sacrifice direct and honest communication."² Unfortunately, young girls are unskilled at speaking directly much less being able to express exactly what they think. This makes a courageous teen stand out from the crowd. How teenage girls demonstrate communication skills starts in grammar school, witnessing their parents and their community leaders.

What can you do? Support speaking directly without manipulation. Do not accept so quickly what one girl says about another girl. Observe if you speak more caringly and forgivingly to a boy. If so, why do you respond with different standards?

3. Girls demonstrate courage when they comfortably express their accomplishments and when they are openly complimentary to peers. Speaking up to share your experiences, such as getting an A on a paper or genuinely complimenting another

girl for her courage is often considered boasting or bragging, so girls are uncomfortable (and lack support) to express their accomplishments. Girls rarely express their accomplishments because it can be judged as haughty bragging. At this extreme it is not pretty and neither is “*machisma*.” Research now indicates that girls commonly ask out guys and that they are comfortable expressing this behavior. In other words, girls initiate the contact (“sometimes even sex, in a more aggressive manner”³) and consider it normal. So what’s wrong with expressing pride in your hard-earned accomplishments or newfound insights?

What can you do? There is nothing wrong with “going for it”—being all you can be. Advance your accomplishments (large or small) with grace, and encourage others. Extending compliments spurs support and extends genuine hospitality.

4. Girls outgrow and courageously overcome the need to gossip or start rumors about each other. No one wants to feel left out in the cold. Gossip and rumors do not end when you “grow up” and start work. These negative practices end with taking responsibility for your actions, admitting that you have done it to other girls and understanding what it feels like when it has been done to you.

What can you do? The last thing you want to do is hold a grudge. Do not allow your feelings to fester while you justify those feelings by telling your friends about the injustice of the situation. Before you become a martyr, put petty jealousies behind you. Watching her daughter grow and a former Denver Post writer, Angela Cortez says, “It takes courage for a teen to refuse to go with the crowd and avoid recording artists who degrade women in their music.”⁴ Find the courage to carry on in the face of complications.

5. Girls rarely bully each other. Unfortunately, girls do bully each other; then, they grow up and bully people at work. Doctors Gary and Ruth Namie started The Workplace Bullying & Trauma Institute years ago. Gary told me, “Fifty-eight percent of bullies are women, and of that fifty-eight percent, approximately eighty-seven percent are women bullying women. Sadly, when the bully finds his or her target, the target pays with his or her job.” It can be as simple as not returning a smile, saying hello or giving the “evil eye.”

Most of the time, it is the loudest and pushiest who set the bully standards for the group. (Unchecked, these same teens demonstrate the same tendencies as adults—e.g., overly zealous behaviors or entitlement). These behaviors do not stop simply because someone graduates from high school or college. Bullying is cruel and unacceptable behavior. The cruelty of children to children is real and it happens at a developmental stage when children are most vulnerable. Preventing bullying, no matter what form it takes, demands personal courage.

What can you do? Determine your real agenda. Is the bullying about you, or is it intended to silence and overpower others? Tell the bully that they cannot talk to you that way. Even though you cannot control the person, you have at least expressed your boundary, and that takes courage. A teenager’s situation is about not letting the bully keep

the power; then, the drama starts to diminish. I had to speak up to a female participant who was belittling me. I said, “Excuse me. You don’t get to speak to me that way. I am happy to talk to you, but not with that tone.” Everyone wants to feel accepted, so let us all recognize that trying to overpower other girls only degrades us all.

6. Cliques and “pecking order” are only a teen phenomena. Girls readily adopt social manipulation tactics, and the mechanisms of this manipulation, the cliques, continue into adulthood. Most girls have an enduring need to belong, and “cliques form a raft to help us navigate life’s choppy waters. And by their nature, cliques almost always follow an internal chain of command with others allowing those with the most perceived power to lead—even if what the leaders are doing makes us uncomfortable. Didn’t we leave all that stuff behind long ago, in junior high?”⁵ Not exactly!

What can you do? Speak up to end the perception that we are not all equal. “Appearance is not essence, perception is not reality, and the cover is not the book. Error is quite often convincing, which is an unpleasant fact to consider and accept. Everyone secretly believes that their own personal view of the world is ‘real,’ factual and true.”⁶ Be fierce and devoted friends to each other.

About the Author:

Sandra Ford Walston, The Courage Expert and innovator of StuckThinking™, is an international speaker and author, human potential consultant, corporate trainer and certified coach. Sandra’s expertise allows her to focus on the tricks and traps of the human condition through recognizing and interpreting courage behaviors and courageous leadership styles.

Featured on the speaker circuit as witty, provocative, concrete and insightful, she has sparked positive change in the lives of thousands of leaders each year. Sandra also provides skills-based programs for some of the most respected public and private blue-chip businesses and organizations in the world, such as IBM, Caterpillar, Inc., Institute of Internal Auditors, Hensel Phelps, Wide Open West, Agrium, Inc., Virginia Commonwealth University, Xanterra Parks & Resorts®, Procter and Gamble, Hitachi Consulting, US Bank, Healthcare Association of New York State, Institute of Management Accountants, and Delta Kappa Gamma International Society.



The internationally published author of bestseller *COURAGE The Heart and Spirit of Every Woman* and an honored author selected for Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic, Sandra facilitates individuals and groups to discover the power and inspiration of their everyday courage.

The COURAGE Difference at Work: A Unique Success Guide for Women, Sandra’s follow-up book to *COURAGE*, is directed at any woman, regardless of title or credentials, who wishes to grow professionally by introducing courage actions at work. Her third book, *FACE IT! 12 Courageous Actions that Bring Success at Work and Beyond* confirms that what holds you back on the job is the same as what hinders achievement—the reluctance to face and live a courageous life. Sandra is published

in magazines such as *Chief Learning Officer*, *Training & Development*, *HR Matters*, *Malaysia*, and *Strategic Finance*.

Sandra is qualified to administer and interpret the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®, is a certified Enneagram teacher and an instructor at the University of Denver. She can be reached at www.sandrawalston.com where she posts a courage blog and courage newsletter.

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¹ Phyllis Chesler, *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2001), 105-6.

² Phyllis Chesler, *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2001), 319.

³ Alex Kuczynski, "Teen girls' aggressiveness a resounding reversal," "The Scene," *The Denver Post*, November 11, 2002, 1F.

⁴ Angela Cortez, "Pave the way for our daughters," Editorial, *The Denver Post*, June 13, 2000.

⁵ Jenny Deam, "The clique that never grows up," "The Scene," *The Denver Post*, April 18, 2006, 3F.

⁶ David Hawkins, M.D., Ph.D., *Truth vs Falsehood: how to tell the difference* (Ontario, Canada: Axial Publishing Canada, 2005), 174-175.