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STEVE BIDDULPH'S

RAISING GIRLS



Author of
million copy
bestseller
Raising Boys

*From babyhood to womanhood – helping your daughter
to grow up wise, warm and strong*

Initiation into womanhood

Old societies knew a lot about raising the young. They did things that, only now, our best neuroscience is proving right. For example, they deeply loved and indulged their babies and young children, delighting in them and letting them play unfettered. They expected a lot of their six–twelve-year-olds, giving them jobs and responsibilities. And they always, without exception, put a lot of energy into their mid-adolescence, kick-starting them – exploding them, almost – into adulthood. In our 300 000-year prehistory, there was no room for ‘half-adults’ who couldn’t be counted on, who weren’t strong and clear. *Becoming an adult was never left to chance.*

There has been a lot of interest and activity in recent years around the idea of parents and other caring adults creating adolescent ‘rites of passage’. A rite of passage is a time of intensified activity, teaching, ritual and involvement that says to a girl: we will help you and celebrate you in becoming a woman.

In schools, programs like the Rite Journey and Pathways into Womanhood are becoming widespread. These programs take the girls out of their usual world to a place where they can spend time over several days with older women, including their mothers, women mentors and teachers. They listen to stories about womanhood from these women, and are invited to make declarations of their own identity and values. The adults who know them praise and affirm their positive qualities, what they see in them and invite them to say goodbye (and thank you) to girlhood. And then to step across the threshold of adulthood.



Key to this is a sense of pride and honour in being a woman, a sense that has often disappeared from girls' behaviour and from the way boys treat girls. At the end, the girls re-enter the normal world and, as part of this, their fathers greet them in a ceremony that acknowledges they are now women, not girls.

Whether we participate in a formal program or simply take on the challenge ourselves as the parents and family of a girl, the same elements have to be there. The question we have to challenge our daughters with at this age boils down to this: 'What kind of woman do you want to be?' A girl may answer in many different ways ...

'I am true and trustworthy with my friends.'

'I am in this world to help others.'

'I am a leader, and want to take people to a better world.'

'I am a creator, and want to make beauty.'

'I am proud of being different and unique.'

The dangers of being a woman need to be honestly discussed and put in perspective. Childhood is protected, womanhood is not. As one girl put it to me, 'It's no longer my parents mucking up my life. I am free now to muck up my own life!'

It helps at this time if a girl is doing adult things – working to help pay her keep, learning to get her driver's licence, preparing meals (but no more so than the boys in the family), travelling away from home and keeping herself safe and well.

Rites of passage are very helpful because they are a way in which the larger community gathers around parents and intensifies the importance of what is happening in a way that they cannot do alone. Weddings and funerals are our last rituals – they too bring larger numbers of people to sanctify and underscore the fact that something big is taking place, helping the people at the centre to make the transition. Growing up needs this kind of intensity as well, and re-inventing how to do this is something many people are now investigating.

A girl who has had a 'rite of passage' isn't fully a woman yet. She

is a *beginning woman*. But she has crossed the river, her sights are set on the future, and she is not going back. When she makes choices, she does so with a sense of being accountable, but also proud and strong, different from and more stable and considered than when she was a child.