

What Can I Do?

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What Utah Mothers Can Do to Strengthen the Impact of Their Daughters

UTAH WOMEN & LEADERSHIP
Project

Utah is full of engaged, passionate individuals who frequently ask the question, “What can I personally and/or professionally do to strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women?” To provide answers to that question, the **Utah Women & Leadership Project** (UWLP) hosted a series of “think tank” gatherings to collect best practices for various stakeholders interested in supporting Utah girls and women.

This idea sheet is based on a 2018 gathering of 25 mothers who are raising school-aged daughters in Utah. With the knowledge that mothers are one of the most powerful influences in a girl’s life, this discussion focused on various topics, including culture, confidence and self-discovery, education, personal and social development, and resilience.

CULTURE

Cultural and social norms—both positive and negative—can play a substantial role in how girls and women develop their own sense of self, as well as their perceived roles in families, communities, and beyond. Mothers can use the following ideas to help girls and young women thrive in Utah’s distinct climate:

- Take part in positive cultural change by speaking out against social norms that limit or devalue girls.
- Ensure daughters have a wide variety of role models demonstrating many different life experiences; refrain from judgment and emphasize that women will use different paths to build meaningful lives.
- Emphasize the inherent value in unpaid care work and create environments where it is shared more equally among women and men, which will reduce the burden and distribute the rewards of such work.
- Become informed about how social media affects girls and young women (including confidence, body image, anxiety, and other mental health concerns); help daughters learn to distinguish between reality and fantasy; encourage positive media use and be willing to reduce and restrict media when necessary.
- Recognize that although Utahns place a high priority on marriage and motherhood for women, changing demographics and economic realities dictate that most young women today will find they need to balance family responsibilities with both paid work and community efforts.
- Help girls to understand that they don’t have to choose between motherhood and other roles (e.g., college student, employee, volunteer); they should plan to fill many roles throughout their lives.
- Examine personal biases, fears, and insecurities to see if mothers’ beliefs are holding back daughters.
- Seek to identify and understand the root causes of barriers facing young women, and then work to eliminate them.
- Model for daughters that mothers have personal interests and passions in addition to family and work responsibilities, and they need space to pursue them.
- Refrain from associating either negative or positive behaviors or traits exclusively with a specific gender.
- Encourage boys and men to foster more inclusive attitudes toward the girls and women in their lives.

CONFIDENCE & SELF-DISCOVERY

Girls are as confident as boys in their early years, yet as young as age eight, this begins to shift as girls' confidence declines. Mothers can play a critical role in helping girls and young women maintain and continue to develop confidence, as well as providing the space for them to discover their own interests and pathways by applying the following:

- Teach girls explicitly to trust, think, and speak up for themselves, and then validate this behavior.
- Model the ability to be assertive, especially in uncomfortable or potentially dangerous situations.
- Listen as daughters share their opinions; allow them the chance to disagree and defend their ideas.
- Give girls and young women the opportunities, skills, and tools to solve their own problems.
- Provide chances for girls to interact with people from many different backgrounds (e.g., racial, cultural, religious, economic, and those with physical or mental challenges); this will help them learn to feel comfortable with people who are different, but it will also prepare them to feel safe and accepted when they are the ones who are different.
- Ask "How did that make you feel?" and "What did you want to do?" after tough experiences to help young women learn how to make better decisions and trust themselves.
- Avoid pushing girls along gendered pathways (traditional or nontraditional); allow them to explore paths that appeal to them as individuals.
- Expose girls to a wide range of ideas, activities, and experiences; give them the chance to discover their own interests and passions; help them learn to prioritize and evaluate their goals and pursuits.

EDUCATION

Education (including higher education) is a key part of a woman's overall wellbeing in many areas and throughout her life. Mothers can support their daughters' educational success by doing the following:

- Nurture girls' educational aspirations at all levels, talk them through a wide variety of options as they discover favorite subjects, and help them see how education relates to and improves daily life.
- Help girls develop broad, transferable skills throughout their school years, including reading, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills.
- Ensure daughters develop financial literacy and understand the importance of preparing to support themselves and their families financially.
- Teach girls that college degrees lead to more options in life, including better-paying flexible jobs.
- Expose young women to various postsecondary options, including technical/professional programs.
- Cultivate a lifelong love for learning and discovery, both inside and outside of the classroom.

PERSONAL & SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

In addition to formal education, there are many chances for girls to grow personally and socially. Mothers can facilitate and support this in various ways:

- Help girls experience the personal satisfaction, skill development, and leadership opportunities that come through service, whether in their families, schools, churches, or communities.
- Teach girls to develop effective communication skills, including being responsible in how they talk about themselves and others (in person and online), and how to treat others with respect and generosity.
- Model the mental health and relationship benefits of practicing gratitude and maintaining an outward-facing perspective.
- Seek out extracurricular growth opportunities, including clubs, the arts, sports, internships, and paid jobs; these experiences allow young women to contribute and learn to develop their own capabilities.
- Help girls learn to set and work toward worthwhile goals; coach them in learning how to find mentors or other supporters who can help guide their efforts.
- Ask "What does success look like to you?" and support daughters as they envision what they want and make deliberate plans for the future.

RESILIENCE

Resilience is a key component in overall life satisfaction and success, yet perfectionism (which is common among women at any age) is a deterrent to developing resilience. Mothers can use the following ideas to support their daughters' efforts to build resilience:

- Model for daughters both confidence and vulnerability so they can see women don't need to get everything right to still be valuable and successful.
- Reject the superwoman myth; help girls to see women don't need to be "all things to all people."
- Encourage girls to step outside their comfort zones and encounter new people and perspectives.
- Help young women recognize their own power and agency in any situation and which factors they can influence and control.
- Teach daughters to pivot and rethink plans and possibilities when roadblocks arise.
- Allow girls to fail and live with the consequences, and praise effort and grit over perfection. Foster a growth mindset and the idea that setbacks often precede the most powerful learning and progress.

CONCLUSION

Utah has the youngest population of any state, and girls and young women are a critical part of Utah's future success. Mothers play a central role in helping daughters become strong, confident, contributing women. As mothers work to support their daughters' growth in a wide variety of areas, it will improve the long-term wellbeing of women, men, and families in communities and in the state as a whole.

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