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## Raising Anxiety? Supporting Girls to Be the Best Version of Themselves

As rising rates of anxiety continue to affect the lives of many children and young people, there are increasing pressures on schools to support their students as they navigate the stressors of school and life. According to Mission Australia's 2024 Youth Survey more than one in five young adults aged 15-19 have high psychological distress and report suffering from stress, anxiety, depression and low self-esteem, with females reporting higher levels of psychological distress and lower general wellbeing compared to their male counterparts.

Those parenting, teaching and living alongside girls and young women are faced with the major question of how to help them achieve their full potential while holistically supporting their wellbeing. Dr Judith Locke and Dr Danielle Einstein have tackled this question in their book, *Raising Anxiety*, and given some practical strategies that families can use to help girls grow into strong, resilient young women.

Children will face both challenges and successes throughout their schooling. As parents and educators, we want to provide the best support possible to help girls learn how to navigate the highs and lows of life while gaining the best possible outcomes from their childhood and adolescence. Understanding wellbeing is central to these efforts. Even more important is knowing how the rise of technology and social media plays a key part in helping girls learn to journey through their emotions and discern how to respond to the challenges they face in life.

For adolescents aged 13-15 years, this is especially crucial. It is during this time that they learn how to manage themselves and how to deal with emotions such as boredom, nervousness and anxiety. This is a key age of development where all adolescents will make mistakes. Yet with the overwhelming presence of social media, what may have once been a mistake on the soccer field, an error in a maths class, or a slip up in the orchestra rehearsal is now amplified across social media. This means the impact of the normal learning and development process is magnified far more than it has been in the past. Dr Locke and Dr Einstein have developed strategies to help give girls the tools to manage these challenges.

The book *Raising Anxiety* outlines what Locke and Einstein call the "5 Rs" of resilience, self-regulation, resourcefulness, respect and responsibility. These are five key traits that girls can learn that will help them navigate feelings of anxiety and worry, particularly with the intrusions of social media. This includes knowing how to experience feelings (even when they are uncomfortable), having respect for others and themselves, and being resourceful and knowing how to approach solving a problem. There is growing pressure for children to always be happy and successful. Yet we know this will not always be the case. Sometimes girls will face unfairness or an unsuccessful outcome. These skills will support girls to navigate these challenges, know how to respond and resolve the situation, and maintain ongoing, healthy emotional development.

How can parents and schools work together to help teach girls these values? Modelling the responsible and appropriate use of technology is critical. There is also a key balance of providing support but stepping back enough to give girls the space to learn how to work through these challenges themselves. It is important that

girls know and understand that sometimes participation in an event will be simply that – participation. Not every event will end in huge successes. Winning and losing are both just as important, as is being part of the overall school community and experience. Awareness of the risks of cyberbullying are also essential, because this is increasingly occurring within peer groups and can affect a school environment even when the bullying occurs outside of school grounds and time.

Notwithstanding situations where mental health concerns have been identified and are being addressed, Locke and Einstein note that it is important for girls to learn that we all worry. At times we all face fear and uncertainty. The challenge is in how we tackle these emotions. Too much discussion about feelings is not helpful for anyone, and can unintentionally encourage children to over think their emotions. It is important for children to learn that there is a purpose for all emotions – even fear. Fear can be helpful in the lead up to an important event, and even show that an upcoming event or milestone is important. Yet, technology can have a significant impact on this and can interfere with good, effective interventions that can help girls learn how to process these emotions.

How can families help girls move from focussing on something as “unbearable” or “fearful” to being an opportunity? One of the first steps is to listen and be present. This might mean shifting the conversation to a time and place where you can listen. It is important to show enough empathy to be supportive while remaining the adult in the conversation. This is a balancing act, and enough support is indeed supportive, but at the same time does not reinforce negative perceptions of events. Families can then normalise these emotions and help girls understand that at times, these feelings are normal. From there, the next step is to teach girls how to accept the situation, change the situation, or prepare for the situation (if the anxiety is focussed around a future scenario). In this way, families can empower girls by helping them through the discomfort of these emotions and giving them the tools to navigate this journey rather than removing the source of the anxiety.

Ultimately, this will help girls understand uncertainty, what it can do to you, and what it can do to your mind. It is important to also remember where technology fits into this picture. Technology has rapidly become embedded in our lives, and it is easy to become distracted by the constant rotation of content available via devices. While this journey is not a rapid one, it will support girls to become resilient and take on the challenges they may face with a full toolkit of skills that will enable them to face both the bad days and the good days – including the many emotions that make us all human.

## References

Locke, J., and Einstein D. (2024). *Raising anxiety: Why our good intentions are backfiring on children (and how to fix it)*. Judith Locke and Danielle Einstein.

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