

How Girls Get Smart



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Get Smart wasn't just a funny TV show from the 1960s; it is also great advice for young girls.

Anyone can get smart: it might be by rigorous academic study, but it can also be through the fascinating school of life, or from lessons from older women or mentors. Sometimes you have to find the inspiration to learn. But no matter how they get there, smart people are always interesting people.

I have heard hundreds of a real-life stories and I have concluded that around the world there are three common ways that girls get inspired to get ahead.

1 They are told they are smart

This sounds a bit obvious, but how often does it actually happen?

When it does, it is powerful beyond words. The fortunate few who were told they were smart at a young age actually believed it and gained instant self-confidence.

Ester, an executive in the financial sector based in Tel Aviv, was close to her grandfather who always told her she was smart. These words resonated with her, she never questioned them, and she didn't hesitate to study math in school. It wasn't just verbal assurance he provided either: he treated her as though she was a smart person by giving her responsibility for the family finances when she was still in her teens.

Francesca, head of a

London art gallery, talked to me about how her Dad encouraged her intellectual curiosity by reading her bedtime stories like the *Odyssey* at age four or five! He never used a baby voice or tried to simplify things. As a result, she always had the feeling that she could do whatever she put her mind to.

2 They start work young

Marita, a Senior Vice-President at a telecom firm (in Beijing at that time) told me that the best way of teaching our children is to ask them to start work early. They will quickly figure out the link between work and money.

She said "if you stand still for six or eight hours in a kiosk you learn to put up with customers that are slow to make decisions or are in nasty moods. You learn that how well you do at work depends on your own behaviour. If you smile, the customer will smile!"

Shannon, a young woman in Toronto told me that a first paycheque is a great opportunity to learn. Now 19, she quickly figured out that the more she worked the more money she made. On the weeks she worked less, she wasn't able to buy basics like shampoo and makeup. It dawned on her that "Hey...this stuff all adds up!" And she had weeks where she spent everything she had earned — drinking with friends, going to concerts, the things that teenagers do.

Her philosophy now is never to spend more than she makes in a week. Did anyone teach her that? No.

She feels strongly that everyone should "get a job as young as possible so that way you can make all the mistakes for yourself. It doesn't matter — that is how you learn.

"Starting a job young is the



best thing that can happen to you."

3 They find a great teacher

Teachers or role models can be family members, family friends or mentors in the workplace.

A different Shannon, co-founder of a global technology company based in Vancouver, told me that at age seven her Dad taught

her the most important lesson: the power of setting goals and having fun while achieving them. She said "I had just earned my first badge in Brownies and I came home excited to show him my newly awarded 'Pet Keeper' badge. As we celebrated, he asked me what else I was interested in achieving."

Sometimes a traditional teacher can make a huge impact on a young person. I nearly went into shock a couple of weeks ago when another young Toronto

woman I know announced that she had decided to go to summer school to study math.

This had been a sore point for years: Erin had always felt overwhelmed by math and thought she had a block. So what changed? Her guidance counsellor told her that "the teacher you like" is offering the summer course. I asked her why this teacher was so great and she said she always felt comfortable with him, she likes that he asks her if she 'gets it,' and he is never condescending.

And with a good teacher she feels that math will be like anything else in life...she will figure it out. As she said, "Math isn't my passion. In fact I hate it with a passion! But I feel it is essential. I don't want to just marry someone rich. I need to feel comfortable. I want to be financially equipped."

Full disclosure: I am a stepmother (evil of course ☹️) to the two young Toronto women quoted above, and I thank them for sharing their real-life stories for this column.