

On Educating Girls: The Connected Girl Episode 1

Title: Forging Powerful Relationships, with Dr. Tori Cordiano

[00:00:00] **Trudy Hall:** Tweets, soundbites, texts, emojis. In our modern world, that's how we connect. But in a world where we are supposedly more connected than ever, why are so many young people, and girls in particular, feeling more disconnected from themselves? At the International Coalition of Girl Schools, we're invested in ensuring that girls are whole, healthy, and well. We believe keeping them connected to their voices and their confidence is the key to keeping them so.

[00:00:35] **Voice Notes:** Like a gentle wind chime, my voice knows music happens. When connection begins. My voice, my voice, my voice synthesizes with my friends and teachers. Allows other voices to complement mine. Harmonizing and mixing as one. My voice leaps across the hallway to say hello to my classmate who's having a bad day. Our voices speak of powerful magic. Tell a story that will unfold long into the future. Together. Together. Together. Together. We make history every day. Together. We are instruments of change.

[00:01:06] **Trudy Hall:** Connection often begins with an invitation. The Connected Girl, a podcast series curated by the International Coalition of Girl Schools, is an invitation to those who know, love and believe in empowering girls to engage with the experts we have gathered to understand the power and possibility of the many connections in the lives of girls.

[00:01:30] **MUSIC INTERLUDE**

[00:01:46] **Trudy Hall:** It did not surprise me in the least when millions of girls started making and sharing friendship bracelets at Taylor Swift's concerts this year. I've been involved with the education of girls for over four decades. And there is one thing I know for sure, girls are all about relationships.

[00:02:04] **MUSIC INTERLUDE**

[00:02:18] **Student voice note:** For me, the definition of connection is just mainly supported by a community.

[00:02:23] **Student voice note:** At first when I hear the word connection, I immediately think of relationships and how you're interacting with like your friends, family, teachers, coaches, peers, all of that, and how everybody in your community kind of supports each other and builds each other up.

[00:02:35] **Student voice note:** Um, a lot of the talk around Culver has been how to connect more with the people around you. Um, and get away from your connection to your phone.

[00:02:44] **Student voice note:** In order to be connected with other people, you need that community atmosphere to be there. Um, and it's something that I like to think that I do have in my life.

[00:02:56] **Trudy Hall:** Connections in both real and symbolic ways with the world and everything in it. Girls have relationships with peers, with food, with their bodies, with nature, with music, with exercise, with their social media. For girls, the proactive management of all these connections is critical to their sense of well-being. It is through healthy relationships that girls feel connected to all that makes them whole. As importantly, the reverse of this is also true. When girls are disconnected from their peers, from their bodies, from caring adults, from nature, from sleep, they feel afloat, untethered, vulnerable, less than.

[00:03:38] **Trudy Hall:** I'm Trudy Hall, your host for On Educating Girls, a podcast produced by the International Coalition of Girls Schools, and I'm excited to introduce the first in a series of podcasts devoted to the critical. Connections in Girls Lives. While each episode this season will be its own listen, each will also be part of a whole. The series provides a unique moment to convene experts to explore how to keep girls holistically healthy, through being proactive about keeping them connected. Our goal is to create a space for meaningful conversations that may help you better understand the power of connection in the lives of the girls you know. While we intend to embrace the reality of what girls are experiencing, we hope you find inspiration and hope in the wisdom our guests will share and the voices of girls themselves. To launch this journey, I've invited Dr. Tori Cordiano, a consulting psychologist and the director of research at Laurel Schools Center for Research on Girls in Shaker Heights, Ohio, to be my guest. I know she will help us unpack a few critical terms and demystify the language of connection and disconnection. I am so excited to have you launch this ah podcast series Dr. Correano, if I may call you Tori and welcome.

[00:04:59] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** Thank you. I'm excited to be here.

[00:05:01] **Trudy Hall:** Um, I know you've got a lot to share on the topic of girls and their relationship. I've heard you speak and I've been impressed by the ways in which you frame, um, this important topic in the lives of girls. So as we search for a good starting point, perhaps some research findings might be important. What do we know about the power of relationships in the lives of girls and how do we know it?

[00:05:23] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** So if we think about the power of relationships, this is an area where there is ample research across all ages and developmental levels. And it is one of those research findings that tends to stay consistent over time. And the takeaway is that strong, powerful relationships with trusted adults are a protective factor for children and for girls at all levels of development. And what we are talking about here are strong relationships with parents and caregivers, but it doesn't end there. We can also look at the value of relationships with teachers and coaches and

other trusted adults in a child's life, and all of them have a strong protective factor for children of all ages.

[00:06:11] **Trudy Hall:** I like that phrase, strong protective factor, um, it doesn't imply that we can avoid it but it does imply that we can be proactive and I think that's what this series, um, is all about. So, when you consider the various relationships that girls have, what do you include in that realm and what are the sorts of relationships that the adults in girls' lives should be mindful of?

[00:06:34] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** Of course, the relationship between a parent and a child is going to be different than the relationship between that child and other trusted adults. But the great news is there's room for all sorts of powerful relationships, and those can look different ways because adults can serve different purposes in a girl's life. So with a parent or a caregiver, of course, we're talking about that close family relationship. And then we think about outside of the home, uh, individuals like teachers and coaches and other mentors or past teachers who have seen this girl at different places of, in her life and throughout her development and know her in different and unique ways. And all of those can be places where a girl feels known and comfortable and seen.

[00:07:22] **Trudy Hall:** So I heard you just say that, uh, um, it's important that a girl feels known, uh, because we're trying to give our listeners a sense of definitions here. What does it mean to feel known from a girl's perspective?

[00:07:34] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** That's a great question. Yeah. To me, uh, what I think about there is that a girl feels that she can be fully and authentically herself. And she can show up and be confident or less confident certain days, she can be vulnerable, she can be uncertain, and she can know that she can bring that to the relationship without fear of judgment or reproach and she is accepted for who she truly is.

[00:08:03] **Trudy Hall:** So, I'm believing that our listeners most likely know or work with or are in relationship with girls of all ages. Ah, can you help us understand how you think about the role that age of a girl plays in how you share your wisdom with parents?

[00:08:20] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** Sure. So if we think about very young children, we know that there is so much power and relationships in the early childhood. So zero to six range. And this looks very, very different than when ah children are a little bit older. It's obviously for anyone who has A child who's raised a child that age who's taught children that age, it's very physically demanding. It's cognitively exhausting because they're full of questions. It requires so much of your attention and your effort. And then as children shift into middle childhood, so that kind of six to 12-year age range. It involves much more of transitioning from more of the physically demanding pieces to more being present. They're still answering a lot of questions that girls have, um, but just being part of their daily life, being able to navigate some tougher conversations with them, introduce them to different subjects. And then when we

think about adolescence, that sort of twelve to twenty-ish age range, what we're thinking about there is what adult presence in a teenager's life ideally looks like, and it involves being able to be present, even as their moods are going up and down. It involves not holding a grudge because they can be pretty salty at times. Um, sometimes it just involves your physical presence without a lot of talking, just them knowing that you are there and available.

[00:09:41] **Trudy Hall:** So that last phase sounds almost as complicated as the first phase. Um, well, the first one could be, you know, physically, uh, exhausting and cognitively exhausting. This last one is, must be on, parents must be on sort of uneven turf for, for most of that. So as we think about that twelve through twenty range, I'm curious. Does a parent have to change the way they work with their child in that time frame? What does that look like?

[00:10:10] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** Yeah. I think some of the, the core tenets of the relationship remain unchanged. That when you are with the teenager, that you are giving them your, your physical and your emotional presence, that you're truly being present together, that you are willing to listen to them with curiosity and not judgment. I mean, all of those things remain the same, whether they're six or sixteen. I think what does change is meeting them where they are developmentally as an adolescent. So they may be less interested in doing the same activities with you or having the same sorts of conversations with you or sharing quite as much with you. And so then our job as adults uh, is to show up and be ready for what they are willing to share on that day and continue to be that supportive presence, even if it looks a little different from day to day

[00:10:56] **Trudy Hall:** Wise advice. You made it sound easy and it's probably a little bit more complicated than it sounds.

[00:11:03] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** Certainly not!

[00:11:05] **Trudy Hall:** As you, as, as, um, as you work with girls and young women, what are they looking for? What are they hoping for in a relationship with a trusted adult during those years?

[00:11:16] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** So much of, um, kids and teenagers lives is being told what to do, being given advice, being told these are the things you have to accomplish today, this is what's expected of you, and that's just reality, right? That's going through school and, and contributing to the chores in your family or whatever else is going on. But if we think about the power of those relationships, it can be a place where they just want to know that somebody gets them, somebody has their back. Somebody is willing to listen to what they have to say and do a lot more listening than jumping in with, with advice or guidance. Sometimes that's what they're looking for, but often they just want to be heard and they can use those relationships with trusted adults as sort of a sounding board or a place to bounce around ideas um, and that's a very helpful aspect of the relationship.

[00:12:07] **Student voice note:** Um, when seeking out an adult, whether that be for help or support, uh, my number one thing that I for is someone who is going to welcome you with open arms. And, uh, for me, it's about being transparent. So I'm relaying the message to somebody of like what I'm struggling with or what I'm looking for I, um, hope that they're going to tell me an honest answer, whether that be something that I want to hear or not. And thus far it's helped me grow a lot more. I think when hearing honesty, it can kind of trigger us to turn away um, initially, but really like taking that in and thinking about it and then reframing your thinking about the situation and controlling the controllables is really important, so that's something that I look for.

[00:12:51] **Student voice note:** If I'm having more of an emotional kind of issue, I'll definitely look for just an adult that I have a close connection with who I trust not to like put me down or make me feel worse. I think, um, nobody ever really intends to do that, but sometimes like different people have different methods for kind of helping others and depending on what you like, everybody's a little different. So you can be trying to help somebody in one way, and it's actually making them feel worse. So like there are certain people who I know are gonna respond in a way that like helps me personally, if that makes sense. Yeah.

[00:13:23] **Student voice note:** Parents are my first port of call because I'm very connected with them and I'm very lucky to have that connection. But I think aside from that, I actually don't really have that many resources and maybe that's somewhere that I maybe need to look at improving but I think sometimes it's very easy to get isolated and how you break out of that, sometimes can be really hard to do alone and it requires a lot of bravery as well and I don't think I always have that.

[00:13:53] **Trudy Hall:** As we think about then connecting because that's sort of what we're talking about in this episode and it seems as if it's a bit of a moving target because you're trying to assess at any moment what that young one may need or want or need you to be for her. Are there some basics? Are there some simple things that adults can do as we head into that particular phase of a child's life?

[00:14:20] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** I think if we have good habits in place of spending time together. So I think about like low-hanging fruit here. We're not talking about full-day excursions or special days. We're just talking about we're having a meal together where everyone's devices are put away. And this might be ten or fifteen minutes, even on a busy night, we're talking about having car rides where we're actually leaving space for talking together. Even things like watching a show together, even if it's not your favorite show, if it's a place where you feel like you can connect with your teenager or your pre-teenager or your younger child, uh, that can be a good space. Play as we move into, um, you know, through early childhood and into middle childhood, leaving space to see what your child is interested in, with regard to play and creativity and, you know, giving them access to those things with you together, there's less of that that will happen as they move toward adolescence, but we're providing a strong foundation as we move toward those older years.

[00:15:19] **Trudy Hall:** You've also mentioned that it's important that we show up to listen, that sometimes deep listening is the best thing that we can do, but after that we have to move into action. Is there a role for questions, um, and good questions and what type of questions might open a door?

[00:15:36] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** So I think about the advice that we often give as, you know, psychologists or people working with teenagers and then what I often do as a parent, which we know that if, uh, if questions are more direct, if they are more nuanced, if they signal that, hey, I remember that you, you know, we're doing this thing at school today and I'm following up to ask you about it. That's great. And questions like, how is your day? Often fall flat. I will say as a parent, there's plenty of times where the words, how was your day have come out of my mouth and it is okay. Right. But if we're thinking about how best to get good information and um ongoing conversation with kids. It can be topics that are a little less emotionally charged. So if they're hopping in the car and the first thing we're saying was, how was that hard math test? You know, that might feel like, oof, what have I walked into? But if we can say something like, so how was lunch today? Or what did you guys end up doing in gym today? Something that lets them know we're interested, but we're not immediately gonna to pick on the hard stuff or the stuff they may not want to talk about. We definitely want to leave space for those hard conversations and in room for them. And when they are ready, we can talk about those things with them. But if we're thinking about how to get them to open up, we want to start with places that are maybe a little bit more neutral or welcoming for them

[00:16:53] **Trudy Hall:** So let's move our conversation then into a really hard terrain, which is ah, you as a parent or you as a trusted adult in a, in a girl's life. You have a sense that she's disconnected or she gives you the sense that she's disconnected from some important part of herself or a relationship that you think is important. What does that look like for the girls and what does it look like for the adult involved? And maybe take that in two parts.

[00:17:20] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** So I think anytime we're seeing a big shift in a girl and that shift is sticking around for more than a couple of weeks, you know, we all have our ups and downs and teenagers have more intense ups and downs than, than most of us, but if we're seeing things like they're just more shut off, um, from the things that they're interested in, if they're spending more time holed up in their room, if they're more irritable than usual, if their sleeping patterns have changed, their grades are dropping, you know, things that would signal to us that maybe something is amiss, those might be signs that ah they might, you know, something might be bothering them or they might be disconnected from an important part. And I think we can raise that from the you know, I, I'm seeing you a little grumpier than usual, or I'm noticing you're in your room with your door closed a little more often. What's going on? And there's a big difference between that sort of question and why are you in your room with the door closed all the time? We're trying to get the same information, but if we come in hot and we come in looking for a fight, that's what we're going to get.

[00:18:22] **Trudy Hall:** Makes sense. And I think it's particularly important now as we think about what, what the news media is telling us about how much more frequently we see, uh, girls who may be connected for any number of good reasons and just need to be coached to be back on track. They don't need a significant nudge. Um, they just need a helpful coaxing. As you think about the ways in which they talk about being disconnected. Are there themes, are there things that nudge girls in the direction of disconnection that parents might be aware of?

[00:18:53] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** Well, one thing I think that is maybe counterintuitive is I see a lot of high achieving girls in middle school and high school who hold themselves to very high expectations. They're taking advanced classes. They're involved in a lot of clubs and sports and volunteering, and they truly care about all of these things. But their schedules are maxed out. So on the surface, it looks like, well, of course, they have all these great connections. They're involved in all these different areas. And that is true. And also, if they have no time for downtime, no time for rest, no time for spontaneous connection with their family or with their friends, they're, they're missing something important. So it's helpful to think about that level of balance. Of course, that can go in the other direction too. There's plenty of teenagers who lack those connections because they are not involved in anything outside of school. And we worry about those kids too, they, they don't have any connections, whether it's with friends or some sort of structured organization or with their family. We're looking for that sweet spot of connections and also time that they have that is unclaimed, that is their own.

[00:20:04] **Voice Note:** Connection isn't always a bad thing. No, that's true. I think that sometimes, like, being disconnected from a person or a thing that isn't serving you isn't a bad thing. Sometimes it can have a positive and beneficial outcome, even if you don't see it in the moment, because you just think on my god, like, I'm not with this person anymore, or I'm not friends with this person anymore. But like a couple of months later, you realize, you know what? It was probably because of that safety mechanism, and you just put yourself first. Yeah, the connection with yourself is the most important thing. Oh yeah. Sometimes I feel like when you feel disconnected, sometimes that can be something that you completely put upon yourself. I think sometimes it's very easy to feel disconnected with even someone like yourself who you're sort of expected to know. Like, you're supposed to know yourself in so much detail. I think it's really easy to sometimes feel disconnected from who you are. Like, it's very easy to sort of listen to peer pressure and what, like, society expects you to be and not see yourself as that person. And in those instances, it could be a really disconnecting and scary experience. And it's the connections that I do have in my life, like my parents, that I sort of need to be there to help ground me and sort of, you know, connect me back with myself.

[00:21:24] **Trudy Hall:** Just yesterday I saw the movie, Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret, a wonderful sort of coming-of-age story. How accurate did you find that to be as someone who works with girls all the time, even though it was about the seventies, it just struck me that, um, it might be still relevant.

[00:21:43] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** Oh, absolutely. And I will say this is one of those books from my childhood that really stuck with me. And interestingly, my daughter who is 10, my middle child just finished reading this book last week. It got sort of this reboot because of the movie. We haven't seen the movie yet. We're gonna to watch it together. But what was interesting to me, because I had the same question. This book took place a long time ago. I wondered if my ten year old daughter who was born in 2013 would relate to it, and she gobbled it up. And I think what Judy Blume does so brilliantly is she is able to put her finger on the pulse of what it means to be a pre-teen, what it means to be twelve years old, and how that feels. And that has, largely remained unchanged at its core, right? That sort of uncertainty and searching for identity and wondering if you fit in, how you fit in, who your people are. That is sort of a hallmark of early adolescence.

[00:22:37] **Trudy Hall:** I asked that question because I thought it was particularly good role modelling on the part of the mom. Ah, the mom was put in some very challenging situations and given what we're talking about here, I thought the mom did a lovely job, at least according to the film. Ah, she did a lovely job and she actually, she actually is doing many of the things that she are advising our listeners to do. So all good. So parents can find, you know, so many, many reasons to be worried these days. Is there anything you would tell them they don't have to worry about?

[00:23:05] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** You're right. Parents have many good reasons to be worried. If we turn on the news and scroll through our phone, there's plenty of headlines that make us worried about our children now and what their future may look like. It's also important to remember that all of the good things about childhood and adolescence that have been there for generations are still there. Kids are curious. Kids are hardwired for connection. They want that. They want to be in connection with other people, their own age, and with adults that know them well, and we can use those things to enrich their lives to help set them up for success. And the balance of what we see in the news and what we know to be true in our own home or in our classroom. Sometimes that matches up, and sometimes it doesn't. So I think as adults, if we find ourselves kind of doom scrolling on all the things that can go wrong for kids or feeling overwhelmed by that, it can be helpful to take a step back and really think about what about the child in front of me? What about the girl that I know? What are her strengths? What are the areas where I know she needs a little bit more support? But I, I think when we can zoom in to a really micro level, it helps us to recognize the good things that are also present in addition to the worries that we have about, about kids and teenagers.

[00:24:25] **Trudy Hall:** Thanks for sharing that because I do think sometimes we get all caught up in thinking about all the teenage girls in the whole world and assume that our teenage girl is precisely like that. In actual fact, she's her own distinctive human being, isn't she?

[00:24:39] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** Absolutely.

[00:24:39] **Trudy Hall:** What one to three pieces of wisdom would you like to have our listeners walk away from this conversation with? What are the kinds of things that you want to have them humming in their ears as they think back about this conversation?

[00:24:56] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** I think two things come to mind and they go hand in hand. And the first is going back to that idea of connection that it can be helpful to remember that no amount of connection is too small. It can feel overwhelming because we have busy schedules. Girls have busy schedules, to think about how do we fit connection into our lives. And if we can remember that it's not about adding something on, but it's actually just capitalizing on the moments of the day. So for example, like we said, having a meal together, you're both sitting and eating anyways, but if we're putting our phones away and we're talking about the day or we're playing a game or we're watching a show together, or we're taking advantage of those twenty minutes in the car. It's not hard to find some of those pockets that we can use for connection. The second thing I would, I would think about is this idea of repair and that as parents or as teachers, as adults in girls' lives, we are not always going to get it right. We are going to step in it plenty of times and just as we hope that our girls will attempt to repair if they've made some sort of mistake, we want to model that we want to be able to come back and say, I've been thinking about that conversation we had, and I'm not happy with how I handled it. And I want to say I'm sorry. Here's what I wish I would have done instead. This is so incredibly powerful for, for girls of all ages, because it says to them that the adults don't always get it right, and that the relationship is worth going back and repairing.

[00:26:31] **Trudy Hall:** The relationship is worth it. You're saying it without saying it. In other words, this relationship is so important to me, that I do want to take the time to repair it. And I think again, you've hit on that notion of modelling. Whatever we do is watched so closely by the girls in our lives. And if, it's very important that we model what we want them to be doing with their lives as well. So as I try to sum up the important information that you've left us with today, I'm, I'm left with a couple of points and I want to try and remake them and then have you correct me where I or I missed something important that you think is vital. Connection is about those small moments. You know, not trying to make magical moments occur, uh, somehow where they don't exist, but to take advantage of what's already built into the day. And to start with listening, of course, and just being present. But also not be afraid to sensitively ask thoughtful questions about what's going on in her life without coming at it from a, an anxious perspective so as to add to her anxiety. And I love ending with what you ended with the power of repair the power of repair at so many levels whether it's for the adult need to make sure that she was heard appropriately or the child's need to feel that she was known and seen by the adult. How did we do? How does that sound? What did we miss that we need to be putting in this conversation?

[00:27:54] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** I think you distilled that really beautifully. I think it's easy to get overwhelmed and inundated by the research and the bad news and the headlines and it's helpful if we can bring it down to the ground with a couple of ideas that are practical, and doable on a day-to-day basis and connection and repair as two

anchors of those relationship qualities that we're looking for. It doesn't get much, ah, much more important and also much simpler than that.

[00:28:25] **Trudy Hall:** I want to take us right back to the very beginning when you said that strong relationships can really be the protective factor in a girl's life. And so I want to sum up by saying what you started with is these are the protective factors and they're worth spending some time on. So thank you for spending some time with us Tori. I really appreciate it. Thank you so very much

[00:28:54] **Dr. Tori Cordiano:** Thank you for having me

[00:28:25] **Trudy Hall:** You've been listening to the first episode of the connected girl a specially curated series produced by the International Coalition of Girls Schools For its on educating girls podcast. This episode is the first of six podcasts engaging listeners to think about the many ways that the connections in girls lives keep them whole and healthy. The International Coalition of Girls Schools created this series in true partnership with Two Stories. Audio editing, engineering, and sound design were done by Kozi Mzimela and Jordyn Toohey. Thanks to the girls of Wickham High School in Wickham, England, and Culver Girls Academy in Culver, Indiana, for the audio clips of girls voices used in the Connected Girls series. This story of the poem, Tell Our Story, used in the intro, can be found on the ICGS website. For more information, please refer to the show notes. Thanks for listening. It's important to the girls in your lives that you do.