



THE GROWING BRAIN

EPISODE 15: Understanding Girls

Guest: Tania Loenneker

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What should parents know about how girls operate in the world? How should we prepare for the teen years? What is important to girls? In this episode we dive into all things girls with guest Tania Loenneker.

Welcome to The Growing Brain, a social emotional health podcast. I am Maureen Fernandez with Momentous Institute, a nonprofit in Dallas, Texas, dedicated to all things, social emotional health. Welcome to Season Two, where we're diving deeper into some of the most challenging aspects of parenting - dating, sleep, ADHD, anxiety, and so much more on this season of The Growing Brain. Thank you for joining us.

Maureen Welcome back to The Growing Brain podcast. Our guest today is Tania Loenneker. Tania is the Associate Director of Development for Momentous Institute. She helps us raise the very important money that we need to operate and do our work with kids and families. And she is both personally and professionally, very connected to the topic of gender, specifically around girls and women, in her previous work experience with the Girl Scouts of Northeast Texas, and with women in the criminal justice system and as a mom to two teenagers, one girl and one boy. And she is here today to talk more about girls in a follow-up to our, our conversation here about boys and girls. So thank you so much for being here, Tania.

Tania Thank you for having me.

Maureen In our last episode was about boys. And we talked a lot about how, of course there are... every boy's different and every child is different. And of course the same is true for girls. There's no way to say this is true for all girls, but what we're talking about here are common trends among girls, things that are true for many girls, certainly not all.

Um, and I just want to talk a little bit to the parents of girls here and just give some insight into what are some things that are important to many or most girls and sort of what should parents of girls be thinking about on this parenting journey?

Tania Yeah, fascinating. So I want to start off by saying that, um, many commonalities among girls I think are more attributed to, uh, current cultural expectations than maybe, um, how girls naturally are. Uh, nonetheless, they are, of course, uh, really important to kind of look at.

Um, one of the things that we frequently talk about is that girls value relationships deeply, um, that they have this sense of a connection with others and especially other girls, um, over time, that, um, set them up to, at once, uh, feel really deeply about others. Um, but then as we often see in the teenage years, um, create some

complications in their relationships. But in growing up, um, I would say that, uh, what is overriding really is that, uh, girls learn collaboratively, um, and really liked to solve problems in a collaborative way. Uh, that they've work better in teams. Um, and then at the same time, while each girl's voice wants to be heard, um, they are really focused on including others. Um, and I think as parents in particular, uh, this is a great opportunity for us to really shape, um, their, uh, way of relating to others and really kind of honoring that inclusiveness, um, while, you know, seeing differences and, uh, honoring diversity.

Maureen That relationship piece is so interesting, it makes me think of a research article I read a couple of years ago about how we commonly talk about this fight or flight response to stress. And that often that uh, is a male trait and that women often have a different stress response, which they called tend and befriend, which is when you either attend to the problem or when you befriend other women who can help you through the problem. And when I read that it was a big aha for me, like that is how I operate as a woman. And how I operated as a girl and teenager is surrounding myself with other girls and women. I thought that was really interesting.

Tania Yeah. And while I think there's so many different opinions about that in our society, uh, do, uh, personally, and of course in, uh, the research, uh, see that, uh, women tend to, and girls for that matter tend to really strive for that connection. And, um, maybe for a historical perspective, that makes sense, in terms of, uh, women, oftentimes we're the ones holding the community together. Um, and it may also reflect this really, um, strong sense of, uh, sensitivity towards others. Uh, the compassion that women oftentimes have and again, boys, uh, can build that same compassion, but I think it is a, uh, um, more valued trait among girls and therefore, um, really kind of stands out to me.

Maureen Yeah. That, that one makes a lot of sense. Um, so besides the, the collaboration and the relationships, what are some other things, uh, that you notice in girls?

Tania Um, I do see that, um, as girls grow, um, they're really seeking to identify themselves. Um, and I think that happens more, of course it would be, they become teenagers. You know, it may be because of their, uh, greater ability to express... express emotions, not their ability, but, uh, in the society definitely, um, uh, expects them to be more emotional. Um, but I think there's a really strong sense of self that develops, uh, and kind of really in trying to figure out the world around them in a very deep way. And, um, as we know, that can become a fairly challenging, um, in this kind of, um, you know, forming identity and individuation process because on the one hand, um, really the connections to their peers become stronger, but it also means that oftentimes, parents, uh, get more easily rejected and closed off. Um, but I see that more so in girls than I, I see that in boys.

Maureen I want to come back to that idea of how, uh, especially adolescent teenage girls and their parents interact. Cause I know there's, that's a whole conversation we can have. Um, but I think what you're saying is really important, this idea of relationships and community while still, uh, fighting for individuality. It's such a complex dynamic happening with girls.

- Tania Yes. And, you know, I think, um, you know, in 2020 we have certainly come a long way in terms of, um, opening the doors to girls and, uh, you know, constantly telling them you can be anything you, you, you want to be, dream big. Um, when that obviously is the better way of looking at the world, um, nonetheless, it is, um, also bringing its own complexities, um, because that can get very confusing for girls very quickly. Um, whereas I think from a boy perspective, it's, there's more pragmatism. Um, I think girls, um, tend to really, um, maybe sometimes get lost at all the possibilities out there and really, uh, you know, somewhat confused on who they are, um, and who they are and what everyone else expects of them to become. Um, and certainly I think in the framework of parenting, um, you know, it becomes, um, you know, on the one hand, a really great opportunity to support your child, but also can become difficult because she will reject most of what you have to say. Um, at some point, uh, even if it is just, uh, to make the point that she is, you know, finding herself and growing up completely, um, aside from who you are.
- Maureen Yeah. Yeah. So that what you mentioned there about boys, it being more pragmatic and girls being a little more abstract makes sense if you think about the messages we send to girls, you can be anything you want. And then, you know, if a girl says I want to be a pilot or an engineer or something, and then there aren't a lot of women pilots or engineers or different things, so it's harder. I can see how that messaging is confusing. I think that's what you're trying to say.
- Tania Yes. And, um, you know, for girls who change drastically, um, especially if there are surroundings, um, give messages that, uh, come puberty, they need to fit more of a stereotypical image of a girl, a woman, young woman, um, I think it can, it can become very confusing. Um, because if you think about, you know, professions, certainly like pilots or engineers, you know, traditionally male roles, um, you will oftentimes have girls who think that in order to be that, they have to be more like boys and that conflicts then with, uh, oftentimes, you know, our, uh, adult, um, views of how young women's, a young woman should show up.
- Maureen Um, yeah, so you're kind of rejecting some of those feminine traits in a sense, and that's just part of who you are.
- Tania Yes, and I think that is changing. But we are not there yet. So yeah, because hopefully, um, you know, uh, in the coming decades, we will have, uh, very accomplished women all over the place that are, um, really showing up with feminine traits because we certainly need that in leadership, right. Again, that diversity of perspective. Um, but, uh, from my viewpoint, we haven't gotten there yet. We are still kind of, I think oftentimes thinking that if a woman is successful, she must be more like a man or showing the assertive masculine traits, um, rather than warmth and this, you know, um, relationship focused kind of way of being.
- Maureen It sounds like adolescence is where a lot of those thoughts and behaviors shift. I know my five-year-old daughter thinks that she's an expert on everything and she's very confident. She told me yesterday, I'm an expert on animals and I'm an expert on dinosaurs and she's an expert on all animals. So, um, uh, when you're five, you know, you can walk into a room and think you're an expert on all animals. And certainly most

teenagers start to lose some of that confidence and some of that, um, you know, value in their own abilities.

Tania Yeah. And you know, I think part of this has always happened. Um, but I think in the age of social media, in particular, it's kind of on steroids right now, because again, uh, the typical images of popular girls are still the most feminine ones, right. It's focused on appearance and you know, how your hair looks and what you're wearing, and you know how cute you are. Um, and I think in that process, not for all girls, but for some, there's all of a sudden the mounting pressure to basically fit into that view.

Um, and you know, when we think about bullying among girls, I think that is where that kind of comes out, um, you know, the, the peer pressure and wanting to belong, again I think with, with girls that is so strong that in some ways they are much more vulnerable to that peer pressure and, um, adhering to a standard that, um, somebody sets, you know, not them and know whether it's culture or corporations, um, it appears, it doesn't really matter.

Maureen Right. And on the last episode, we talked about messages that boys hear, you know, this idea of be strong and be a man. Um, you're, you're touching on it here with the appearance and all that, but I'm wondering if we can talk a little bit about the messages that girls are hearing and what impact those are having.

Tania Yeah. So we've talked about appearance, I think, coupled with that, um, and again, I, um, I'm feeling like there is a trend that we're moving out of that. Um, however, um, many girls still receive messages of having to act nice and polite and kind towards others, which obviously are all great qualities and ways of being, but in comparison to what boys hear, I think it is much stronger still. And, um, it really kind of takes away for some girls, uh, the ability to be authentic, to be in a, you know, to develop their authentic self. So when I think about my daughter, um, she, um, It has a much more stern, uh, posture and she's sarcastic. And, um, you know, especially during the deeper, uh, years of adolescence was not smiling regularly, uh, and would be reserved and shy. And, um, so often times I, as a mom would be slightly mortified, honestly, to think, what do people think of her when they see her? But I knew that, you know, obviously knowing her, there was a really soft peace in her. And that this was more the social anxiety that happens.

Um, but certainly, uh, I'm sure she was surrounded by the same views of others as I was kind of having on my mind about her. Right. That she does not show up that way. And then, you know, she still shows up a little or maybe rude...

Maureen Yeah, exactly. And people probably tell her to smile more...

Tania Yes. Yeah. Or, what's wrong, you know?

Maureen And certainly a girl, like your daughter should be allowed to be serious if she wants to, like you said, it, it robs kids of their authenticity. She shouldn't have to smile for people all the time if she doesn't... if that's not her temperament.

Tania Yes, exactly. So the other piece, I think that, um, girls hear and I alluded to this earlier in terms of, uh, professional pathways, it's, uh, you know, when girls are assertive, um, the assertiveness is viewed in a negative light still, uh, when they stand up for themselves. And I think, again, I think the, the good news is, is that we see a lot of girls kind of taking on this identity of being an activist and speaking out on issues more so now than ever.

Um, yet I think, uh, the way the world views them oftentimes is, um, as, you know, troublemakers and, uh, having, you know, being a loud mouth, um, and, um, you know, just kind of having the negative connotation. And I think when we think about that showing up in the classroom, you know, when girls are, uh, continuing to say, especially in the teenage years that they are an expert or something, or they have a really strong opinion I had, whether it's animals or the environment, or, you know, any other, uh, maybe more controversial topic. Um, I think oftentimes there is a tendency to quiet them. Um, and, uh, again, to kind of, um, view them as maybe more threatening than, um, kind of celebrating that they're voicing their opinions, whether they are right or wrong. Right. But that they feel like they can show up authentically and kind of developing their voice in this, that they're the right, you know, they have the right to have.

Maureen And it certainly seems that girls are held to that standard in a way that boys are not.

Tania Yes, absolutely. Because I think boys over time always have been encouraged to voice their opinions and form their opinions and engage in debates and raise their hands. Right. Um, and I think girls, again, I think we have come a long way, but, uh, there are still so many underlying messages that it is not as okay for girls to be that way and they feel it. They hear it.

Maureen Yeah. Let's take a quick break and then we'll come back.

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Thank you for listening to Momentous Institute's podcast. Momentous Institute is celebrating 100 years this year of working with kids and families in the field of social emotional health. Over the last 100 years, we have learned a lot and a big part of our agency is sharing what we learn with others. If you visit our blog, we have tons of content on there - articles, strategies you can use, videos, book reviews. There's so much on there. So I'd love to have you visit there. You can get lots of resources, things you can use with your kids to help build their social emotional health and your family's social emotional health. You can check it out at momentousinstitute.org/blog.

Maureen Okay. We are back and I said earlier, I want to put a pin in something and come back to it. I want to revisit a comment you made at the beginning of the show about parents of teenage girls and especially moms of girls and some of the conflict I know and the tension that kind of comes at that age. I am thinking of an episode of the TV show, Modern Family, where the mom made a comment about being a parent of a teenage daughter is sort of like being, uh, on the sun. Or being on earth as the sun orbits around, you just kind of go into darkness for a while and then you know, that the light will come back around. Um, so I, I felt that actually makes a lot of sense. There's sort of

does seem to be a dark period for a lot of moms of girls, but I think there's probably things we can be thinking about it other than just riding it out and waiting for the sun to come back around for them to grow out of it. Um, so what are some of your thoughts about parenting teenage girls?

Tania Yeah. I love that analogy. And, uh, I certainly have just come through and back around with my daughter. Um, and I have to say that it really is about having that faith, um, that truly, um, they will come around or we will come around, uh, however you want to look at it. Um, and I don't know that I had that faith, uh, at the outset. Um, I, uh, definitely tried really hard to lay the foundation. Um, and I think that's the piece that I, uh, think is important, especially when I talk about my really good parent friends of, uh, uh, daughters of the same age that my, that I'm, that is my daughter. Um, laying the foundation early with, you know, being present and connecting with them so that when this dark period arrives, because it will very likely arrive sooner this year, these days than later, uh, I would say really around 11, uh, we would be there, um, again, uh, not all girls are there. Um, you know, and I think, um, you know, everything with the development, they're late bloomers and, um, you know, early ones. Um, but I think 11 is a fairly central age where you can see the kind of, um, disconnection happening, uh, where all of a sudden you are no longer kind of really in that orbit, um, and, um, the center of their attention and, you know, really being prepared for many, many, many, many phases of silence where, you know, you have to kind of hold onto this faith, um, that, um, at some point, there was something of a connection and it's going to come back. Right.

Um, and I think the other piece, of course, then that, uh, arises oftentimes it's that conflict, right? So there is a lot of silence and not sharing what's really on their minds. Maybe they lie to you because they really don't feel like you understand their world, which oftentimes it's actually true. Right. Um, And then really kind of, um, this very sensitive way of, it's almost like a nitpicking of who you are as a parent.

Um, and very clearly, maybe not stating, but making it very clear that they are not you. They do not want to be like you and therefore really rejecting you. And of course, being really embarrassed by, um, you know, being a parent in public. Um, I think my children knew from the get go that I was not going to do the embarrassment thing. I was going to completely override whatever, um, they were afraid of, um, by saying I'm going to be embarrassing, you know, for you, um, just get ready for it. So we kind of started really joking about it oftentimes. Uh, I think humor is really important. Um, and my kids actually are, my daughter really has very different humor than, than I, so I had to figure out a way to kind of match that for sarcasm. You know, that's not necessarily my way of operating. But really understanding that her reaction, her, her rejection of you, it's not about you. It's about their very complicated way of figuring out who they are.

Maureen That's so important. And it's so easy to say here, and it's so hard when you feel like someone is rejecting who you are, and especially when it's your child who you've poured everything into.

Tania Who you love deeply, yes. Yes, but I think, you know, I think it goes with so many things, um, in our adult life to not take things so personally, right. I mean, yes, this is

very personal, obviously, but just kind of trying to take a step back and really thinking about what is their context, what, uh, of what is their reality, like, you know, what are the constant challenges that they're facing or, um, you know, the goodness in their lives, even if you feel like we have provided everything for this child, and she is still ugly and angry and, you know, um, just not fun to be around. Um, uh, I think, you know, all the goodness in, in her life that we've provided will be the thing that's going to carry us through, um, for the most part, right. Um, and again, to kind of honor the struggle that they are in and also take it seriously. I mean, if there's a serious struggle that you perceive your child to be in, you need to respond, you know, I'm not saying, uh, let it all just kind of happen. Uh, I think you want to try to stay connected. You want to try to understand her reality, even though she may not give you a whole lot of information, but you do in the end, you are the monitor, you know, monitor her social media. Um, you know, obviously that's one of the biggest, dangerous, and, um, and opportunities, but really also biggest dangers that, uh, our kids face. Um, and, um, while you don't necessarily, I personally think you don't have to know everything, I do think it's worthwhile understanding, uh, um, more about that kind of world they're in and, um, being upfront with you checking on them and wanting to understand what they're facing and that they are not necessarily capable handling all of the problems. You know, I think especially girls with their, um, you know, strong, a need to connect, um, you know, they will very likely have an experience with a strong friend who may make an outcry to them about uh, really serious, um, worries and struggles and, you know, talking to them about what it means to keep a secret, you know, and really, um, walking through that. And I still do. Um, but even more so a couple of years ago with my daughter have had many, many monologues where I would just kind of say what I needed to say, uh, oftentimes in the car, it's a great way of kind of having their attention. Um, but I would hold monologues and, um, make them listen, you know, knowing that they may tune me out, but at least I, um, have said what I needed to say from my vantage point in terms of who I am as a parent and what they need to expect from me. And, um, you know, I, I think it stuck to a certain degree, right.

I think they do hear you. I think they do want to hear that, um, they may make it very clear that they don't, but I really think that that's super important. Um, while you honor... honor, you know how she's growing up and how she presents and you know, again, I mean, you wanna, you wanna shape them, but. Yeah, so kind of help them find themselves.

Maureen You know, I think what you're talking about is so important. I'm thinking, you know, with little kids, if they ran the world, they would get to eat everything. They want to stay up as late as they want. And that's our job as parents to say, no, you can't have 10 cupcakes and you have to go to bed. Um, and with older kids, as much as they pushed back, they're pushing, they're pushing, it's our job as parents to say, you know, here's what's allowed and here's what's not, and here's my monologue that I'm going to give to you about what we believe in this family.

And they may make it sound like they don't want to hear you, or they may tell you that they don't want to hear you, but it's still our job as parents to hold those boundaries and to set those limits and that ultimately they do need that and even appreciate it, even though they tell you they don't.

Tania Yeah. And at the same time, letting them know that their voice counts right. That I... if you, you know, share with me, um, even at a high level, kind of what's going on in your world, I believe you, you know, I, I don't know what your reality is. You know, number one, I grew up, you know, I was a teenager 30 years ago, over 30 years ago. So my world was completely different, even if I had grown up in the same, very same place. Right. And I really, you know, I don't walk in your shoes every day. I don't know what it's like to be in a large school or small school, or, you know, um, so, um, I want to honor what your experience and not be dismissive because it doesn't fit into my frame of reference.

Maureen That's such a good point too, because sometimes it's easy to think like, oh, okay. They're just complaining about these silly problems that aren't important. And if they had my perspective, they know that, you know, whatever food they don't like in the cafeteria is not a problem. Um, but if it's a problem for them, it's a problem for them.

Tania Yeah. What I've read too, and I talk again to my lovely friends, peer and friends about this often is, um, you know, what's important and parent, and I think in general, but especially being a mom to a girl, uh, is that you really know what your own baggage is. Um, so when it comes to, you know, body image, for example, you know, how do you show up as a mom? Because she's watching you, you know, from little on, you know, and especially in teenage years, you know, are you unhappy with how you look, are you insecure and, you know, sometimes you can't help that, but really kind of being very, um, attuned to what you model for her. Um, because again, you are at least in the beginning of her life, the first, um, you know, imprint of what it means to be a woman. Um, and, um, you know, when, when it comes to friendships, for example, you know, the struggles that arise with friends, um, and you know, you know, inclusion and exclusion and rumors and all of that kind of thing. Um, you know, we all have had experiences like that for the most part, I would think at least, and I really have to be clear about what that means to me and kind of some of the hurt feelings I may still have.

Um, and you know, honestly also my mother's voice, right? My own mother's voice who may have put down my friends when I was upset with them. But knowing that that is not helpful, you know, that only pushes me further away and not sharing what's going on for fear of that. My mother, especially, or my father may have a negative opinion about this person that's really dear to me in the end. Right. So really checking kind of what is the residue of our own teenage... or childhood or teenage years and how do we help we come to terms with them?

Maureen That's big. That's huge. And so we're, we're running out on time here. So as we close out, I was wondering if you would share sort of, what is your biggest advice for parents of girls and you've shared so many nuggets. So if you just summarized sort of, or gave us your big takeaway, what, what would you tell to a parent of a daughter?

Tania Yeah, so be available. Honor her reality, um, you know, don't, um, don't form opinions, um, you know, before you really know exactly what her world looks like. Um, honor her struggles, um, and you know, pay attention to, when you think things are getting alarming, you know, get help from either other professionals or from good friends who can serve better as a mentor than you can. Um, there may be, you know, a, another

parent that, or an aunt or uncle that they feel a strong affinity with. They might be more inclined to kind of really share and build that relationship.

So don't take things personally, um, have faith that they will come back around, um, hopefully at age 15, 16 right. Keep confidential what you need to keep confidential around what she does share with you and, um, you know, model for her, uh, an image of a self-confident and um, wholesome woman, right.

But you want her to become whatever that means, you know, that self-respect, that you want to uh, have her develop. And then apologize, you know, things will go wrong. You will say things you will get hurt and, uh, upset. Um, you know, that's just life and relationships, but be willing to apologize and, um, you know, do things differently and say I was wrong on that. I should not have shown up like that. You know, um, this is, you know, how I want to be for you, um, you know, in the end.

Maureen That's great. Some of the biggest things that I heard you say that are really sticking with me are the modeling, how you talk about yourself, how you interact with other women, how you interact with people in the world. That's so huge.

And then that thing about, you know, knowing that they'll come back around and giving yourself grace during that period and uh, and sort of being available and not taking it personally when she's in that, you know, on the other side, in the dark. Um, so that's so huge. I think that's really helpful perspective. And I know when you're in the thick of it, it's hard to pull up and have that perspective, so...

Tania And we're all emotional, right? Like girls and women, we all tend to be emotional and it's okay. We all are as human beings and, you know, again, honoring those feelings instead of brushing them away.

Maureen Exactly. Yes. So thank you so much, Tania. This was a great conversation. I really enjoyed talking with you.

Tania It was fun. Thank you so much.

Thank you for listening to The Growing Brain, a social emotional health podcast. We hope you have enjoyed this conversation. Don't miss an episode, be sure to subscribe so that you're notified when new episodes are released. And for more content, including articles, videos, and much more, please visit us online at momentousinstitute.org.