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Young Professionals' Board

The Confidence Gap

What is it?

Why does it exist?

How do we address it?

All of these questions will be answered in this resource guide.

What is it?

The Confidence Gap refers to women generally feeling less confident in themselves and their abilities than men. Resulting in fewer chances at success, feelings of imposter syndrome, and playing down their achievements.

A study at Cornell University found that men overestimate their abilities, while women underestimate them. However, their actual performance is equal.

Studies have shown that men are significantly more likely to self-promote than women. This results in higher professional recognition and career progression for men, and is a plausible factor contributing to the gender pay gap and gender gap within leadership.

The gap starts to emerge as early as 8 years old and never closes. Up to this age, boys and girls feel equally confident. So, why does it exist?

There are many reasons why this gap exists. We have grouped some of the reasons into 4 categories: Hormones, Puberty, Sports and Societal Pressures.

Hormones

Men have significantly higher testosterone levels than women, and testosterone is linked to increased risk taking, competitiveness and self-esteem.

In a corporate setting, taking risks can make an individual appear more driven.

Oestrogen and progesterone levels are higher in women than men. Although the effects of oestrogen and progesterone aren't fully understood, it is known that changes in these hormone levels can influence emotions and mood, which can cause low self-esteem, anxiety and depression.

Women are more likely to experience mood swings and low self-esteem. This can negatively impact women's confidence levels at work, and factoring in the impact of men's increased testosterone levels, the confidence gap widens.
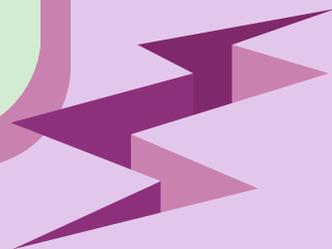
Puberty

Puberty begins between the ages of 8 and 13 in girls and 9 and 14 in boys. Puberty is when the hormonal changes discussed previously start to develop and we see the psychological impact appear.
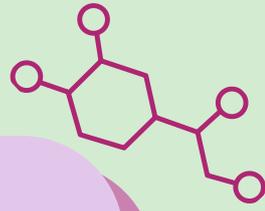
Puberty can impact confidence for girls and boys, but girls experience a much more significant drop.

Between the ages of 8 and 14, girls' confidence levels fall by 30%, and teen girls are 27% less likely than teen boys to feel confident that they can make new friends.

For girls, going through puberty can bring negative thoughts – periods are often kept hidden, as if shameful. This can impact how girls feel during that time, subsequently diminishing their confidence.
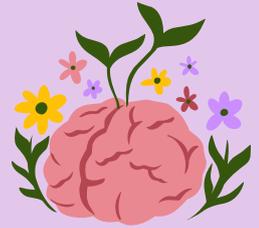
The decrease in confidence for girls is largely linked to a high sense of self-awareness and feeling the pressures of trying to live up to others' expectations. This can cause girls to be more risk-averse, people-pleasing, and to overthink their actions.

Sports

Playing sports is known to have a positive impact on mental health. Evidence has also shown that people who play team sports as children are more likely to be successful as adults.

Sports help with developing skills such as self discipline, determination, making decisions, team building and resilience. All of which are advantageous in the workplace. They help to overcome challenges and bounce back from failure.

Girls tend to drop out of sports around the time puberty begins. 64% of girls will have quit sports by the age of finishing puberty (16-17). Reasons for this include body image and fear of judgement.

Girls leave sports at an alarming rate during puberty, missing opportunities to develop the skills that help them overcome challenges and gain confidence. They are also missing out on the positive impacts (physical and mental) of playing sports.

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Societal Pressures

Traditionally, there has been a stark difference in how boys and girls are brought up. From the way we dress them and the toys we buy them, to the way we socialise and educate them. The result leads to men being more resilient, and a fear of failure in women.

From early on in childhood, boys are encouraged to take risks, be outgoing, assertive and authoritative. Girls, on the other hand, are raised to be caring, nurturing, polite and modest. This is known as the 'Good Girl' syndrome.

These stereotypical expectations of how girls and women should behave causes people-pleasing, perfectionism, fear of judgment, reluctance to speak up and being highly self-critical. This 'Good Girl' paradigm consequently erodes girls' power, growth and potential and causes a psychological glass ceiling.

Added pressures from social media further impact girls' self-esteem, with girls aged between 10 and 14 being the most affected. There are also often negative consequences with being confident. Using terms like 'bossy' when girls show leadership skills further diminishes girls' confidence.

By placing these high expectations on girls to behave a certain way and generally having a more relaxed 'boys will be boys' outlook reinforces gender stereotypes, and as girls grow up, these stereotypes can affect career choice, self-image, mental health and their confidence.

What can we do about it?

As we've discussed, The Confidence Gap refers to women generally feeling less confident in themselves and their abilities than men. There are multiple factors that can impact someone's confidence, making it a complex topic.

The combination of these biological and societal factors may result in women being less resilient and more risk-averse than men. This doesn't mean that men never doubt themselves, but they don't let their doubts hinder them as often as women do.

Ways to address it

- The first step to address the gap is to raise awareness of it. Many people today are not aware of the existence of the confidence gap.
- Take the fear out of failure - women often don't put themselves forward due to a fear of failing or not being perfect. Encourage women to give things a go and take risks, focusing less on the end result.
- Challenge old 'norms' and stereotypes of how women and girls should behave. By not having these expectations for girls to behave/act in a certain way, we remove the glass ceiling holding them back.
- Celebrate and elevate - not everything we celebrate has to be a huge milestone. Celebrating the little wins can help boost confidence incrementally.
- It is important to have a network around you who will advocate for you and build you up, along with having mentors and sponsors to help advance your career and support your development.
- Be intentional with the language used around our sphere of influence.
- Widen perceptions of what we think a leader should look and act like, and value diversity of thought.

Further Reading and Resources!

For more information on the issues discussed, please visit the following sites:

- The Confidence Gap
- How Chronic Self-Views Influence (and Potentially Mislead) Estimates of Performance
- Self-Promotion, Social-Image and Gender Inequality: Aiding Women Break the Shackles of Modesty
- The Gender Gap in Self-Promotion
- Girls as young as five are having their creativity impacted by pressure of perfection and language bias
- More than perfect - Video
- Girls more inclined to doubt their intelligence than boys, study finds
- Brilliance and bias
- The Confidence Code for Girls: The Confidence Collapse and Why It Matters for the Next Gen
- More than half of British girls lack confidence learning maths, poll finds
- The Effects of Estrogen on Women's Emotions and Mood
- Progesterone – Friend or foe?
- Deloitte's New Survey Links Playing Sports To Career Success For Women
- Sport Participation and the Development of Grit
- Millions of girls fall out of love with sports by teens

If you've found The Confidence Gap interesting, below are book recommendations that follow a similar theme:

- Invisible Women - Caroline Criado Perez
- The Authority Gap - Mary Ann Sieghart
- The Confidence Code - Claire Shipman and Katty Kay
- The Confidence Code for Girls - Claire Shipman and Katty Kay
- Work Like a Woman - Mary Portas

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International Day of the Girl, declared by the United Nations, is to recognise the unique challenges girls face around the world. Today's generation of girls is disproportionally affected by global crises of climate, conflict, and poverty, and this day emphasises the importance of addressing gender inequalities, discrimination, and violence against girls.
It is vital that we continue to support, inspire, and empower girls to ensure their futures aren't limited.