



**BAN  
BOSSY**

# Leadership Tips for Girls

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& Girl Scouts  
of the USA

When it comes to girls and ambition, the pattern is clear: girls are discouraged from leading. When a little boy asserts himself, he's called a "leader." Yet when a little girl does the same, she risks being branded "bossy"—a precursor to words like "aggressive," "angry," and "too ambitious" that plague strong female leaders. Calling girls bossy is one of many things we do to discourage them from leading. It's no wonder that by middle school, girls are less interested in leadership roles than boys, a trend that continues into adulthood.

LeanIn.Org and Girl Scouts of the USA are kicking off Ban Bossy, a public service campaign to encourage leadership and achievement in girls. With the help of Girls Leadership Institute co-founder Rachel Simmons and the Girl Scout Research Institute, we've developed practical tips to help all young women flex their leadership muscles, in ways big and small.

We know it's not always easy to raise your hand in class, speak up in support of your beliefs, or take the reins on a new project. But the leadership skills you'll gain in the process are the same ones you'll use throughout your life.

The time to start building female leaders is now. We hope you'll join us to Ban Bossy—and tap into your own leadership potential along the way.



By middle school, girls are 25% less likely than boys to say they like taking the lead.<sup>1</sup>

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“ Ten years ago, I co-founded the Girls Leadership Institute, a national nonprofit that helps girls know who they are, what they believe, and how to express it—empowering them with the life skills essential to make change in their world. I began by asking groups of girls to describe how society expected a ‘good girl’ to look and act and began to notice something. Thirteen-year-old Julia played rambunctiously with friends, yet in class, her sentences trailed off. ‘I feel like if I sound stupid or say the wrong thing, people won’t like me,’ she said.

Another girl struggled to complete an exercise in which she was asked to list her talents and strengths to a group. ‘I don’t want people to think I’m conceited,’ she said.

Then, I asked the girls how they felt about leadership. As I ran through a list of skills—public speaking, debating an opinion, interviewing for a job—the girls’ comments remained constant. ‘Getting judged’ was their worst fear. Take a risk and put yourself out there and people might not like you, the girls told me. ‘Someone could shut you down,’ said one.

Nobody wakes up magically knowing how to lead or lean in. Whether it’s learning how to communicate assertively, self-promote, or take risks, it’s important to remember that these skills take practice. Skills are like muscles: use them or lose them. Below are some ways girls and young women can start leaning in now. You’ll see the payoff for years to come. ”

—Rachel Simmons

Co-founder of the Girls Leadership Institute



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**DID YOU KNOW?**

We need you! Women make up just:

**19%** of the U.S. Congress    **5%** of Fortune 1,000 CEOs    **17%** of corporate boards<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Speak Up in Class

Raise your hand, even when you're not sure about the answer. Avoid editing what you want to say in your head, and try not to worry about being wrong. Speaking up isn't about having the perfect answer. It gives you the experience of thinking on your feet, debating with others, and wrestling with an idea—all crucial skills that you'll use in every area of your life.

## 2. Stop Apologizing Before You Speak

Girls often introduce opinions with apologies ("I'm not sure if this is right, but..."). Others use upspeak to make statements sound like questions ("Martin Luther King was a civil rights leader? He believed in peaceful protest?"). Pay attention to the little ways you might be making yourself smaller when you speak up in class, like playing with your hair, saying you "kind of" think something, asking if what you just said "makes sense," or speaking so softly that no one can hear you.



**DID YOU KNOW?**

Girls are typically called on less in class than boys—so it's important to get your hand up and keep it up!<sup>3</sup>

## ACTIVITY

### Use the Buddy System!

Do you apologize before you speak, get quiet at the end of your sentences, or make statements in class that sound like questions? Find a friend and create a secret signal you can use when you catch each other in the act. Tug your ear when your buddy starts a sentence with, "I don't know if this is right, but..." Before you know it, you and your friend will have broken the habits that can make you seem smaller.

## 3. Challenge Yourself

When we worry about failure or criticism, we're more likely to seek out experiences we know we can control. But playing it safe means you'll never have the exhilaration of overcoming an obstacle and proving to yourself (and others) that you're brave enough to try. Push yourself beyond your comfort zone. Take up a sport you've never played. Enroll in a class that no one would expect you to take. Learn how to code. Or take a small risk, like introducing yourself to someone you don't know.

**PUSH  
YOURSELF  
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## ACTIVITY

### Set Small Goals

We get it—you have big dreams. But ambition isn't about doing it the fastest or all at once. The secret to big success is setting small goals. Every day, identify one or two steps you can take to get you closer to your dream. Want to speak up more in class? Start by telling your teachers about your goal and see how they can help, or try writing down what you might say and reading it out loud to yourself. If you think your goals are almost ridiculously small, that's how you know you're doing it right.

## 4. Ask for Help

The most successful people don't make it on their own. Instead, they find advisors along the way: experienced, wiser people who know a lot and help them. Don't be afraid to ask teachers, coaches, or other adults you admire to talk with you about what you're passionate about. Ask them what they wish they'd known when they were your age. Who knows, one day they may even help make your dreams a reality!

## 5. Don't Do Everyone Else's Work

When a group project member doesn't contribute well (or at all), it's easy just to do it yourself—and stay quiet about it. Taking over can give you control in the moment, but it can also leave you feeling resentful, carrying more of the workload, and not getting any of the credit. Address the problem directly by asking your classmate when she thinks she'll finish her tasks. If you don't get a clear response, be more direct about what you need, or ask a teacher for help.



### DID YOU KNOW?

Girls are twice as likely as boys to worry that leadership roles will make them seem “bossy.”<sup>4</sup>

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## 6. Speak Up in Friendship

We've probably all gossiped at one point or another, but if you always talk *about* your friends instead of *to* them, you miss the chance to practice speaking up to the people who matter most. Being able to tell someone how you feel will help you in every area of your life, no matter how you choose to lean in. And you may want to avoid relying on texting or social media to say the tough stuff. It makes communication easier in the moment, but you'll risk paying the price later of not speaking face-to-face now. Being direct is scary, but do it with care and you'll earn the respect and trust of those around you.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Leadership opportunities are everywhere! You can practice important skills through everyday activities like taking care of a pet or someone in need, raising money for a cause—even babysitting.<sup>5</sup>

## 7. Trust Your Inner Voice

We all have a voice playing inside our heads. It might say little things like “I wish the bell would ring” or big things like “I wish my friend would stop asking me about my grades.” That voice is your gut. It's telling you what you genuinely think, need and want. It's easy to stop listening to that voice when you're worried about what people might think. Stay connected to it as much as you can. It's your inner compass. If you can't share that voice now, keep a journal where you can—and keep looking for the people who want to hear it.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Both boys and girls believe it's easier for men to become leaders. Let's not forget to flex our leadership muscles!<sup>6</sup>

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## 8. Change the World

You don't have to run the world to change it. What lights you up inside? What makes you feel outraged? Join a club, plan a flash mob, enter your crazy idea into the science fair. Maybe even vote YOU for class president. Running a campaign gives you amazing practice for speaking and marketing yourself as a leader. Whatever you decide, remember: your voice is like no one else's, but we won't hear it if you don't use it.

## 9. Remember: It's Not Always Easy to Speak Up, but It's Worth It

You're growing up in a world that's still confused about how powerful it wants girls to be. Girls are supposed to be confident but nice, ambitious but not selfish, successful but not conceited. The rules can be confusing and unfair—which means not everyone's going to love it when you speak up. In fact, no matter how nicely you say something, there may be a person who thinks you're being mean. Trust your voice even when it feels like the world doesn't, and stay close to the friends and family members who celebrate your strength.



### **DID YOU KNOW?**

When you participate in extracurricular activities, you gain leadership skills that stay with you for life. Try something new and work to develop those skills!

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## 10. Practice!

You've grown up practicing things like schoolwork, sports, and music. But no one tells you to practice speaking up, taking risks, or saying what you need. What's up with that? There's nothing in life that doesn't require practice, and leaning in is no exception. Work those muscles! It might be scary the first time, but it gets easier.



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### **ACTIVITY**

#### **Do Something That Makes You Nervous Every Day**

There's a famous saying, "Do the one thing every day that scares you." That can sound intimidating (who wants to be scared every day?). But why not do something that makes you a little nervous? Make eye contact with someone you like. Go to a random school event where you don't know anyone. Tell your carpool you want to ride shotgun. If you always let your friends decide what to do on weekends, lean in and say what you want. Being brave is rarely about dramatic moments: it's a muscle you build over time in tiny ways.

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### LeanIn.Org

LeanIn.Org is the nonprofit organization founded by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg to empower all women to achieve their ambitions. LeanIn.Org offers inspiration and support through an online community, free expert lectures, and Lean In Circles, small peer groups who meet regularly to share and learn together.

[leanin.org](http://leanin.org)

### Rachel Simmons

Rachel is co-founder of the Girls Leadership Institute, a national nonprofit that teaches girls the skills to know who they are, what they believe, and how to express it, empowering them to make change in their world. She is the author of two best-selling books, *Odd Girl Out* and *The Curse of the Good Girl*, and develops leadership programs for students at Smith College.

[rachelsimmons.com](http://rachelsimmons.com)

### Girl Scouts

Girl Scouts of the USA gives every girl access to life-changing experiences that inspire and motivate her to do something big for herself, her community, and the world. Visit them online to learn more about how the Girl Scouts are building girls of courage, confidence, and character.

[girlscouts.org](http://girlscouts.org) and  
[girlscouts.org/banbossy](http://girlscouts.org/banbossy)

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Schneider, Sloan Study of Youth and Social Development, 1992–1997, ICPSRO4551-v2, Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/4551/version/2>. When asked whether the statement “I like to take the lead when a group does things together” applied to them, 72 percent of sixth grade boys reported yes, versus 54 percent of sixth grade girls.

<sup>2</sup> Center for American Women and Politics, *Women in the U.S. Congress 2013* (2013), [http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast\\_facts/levels\\_of\\_office/documents/cong.pdf](http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/levels_of_office/documents/cong.pdf); and Catalyst, “U.S. Women in Business” (2014), <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/us-women-business>.

<sup>3</sup> American Association of University Women, *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (1992); Myra Sadker and David M. Sadker, *Failing at Fairness: How America’s Schools Cheat Girls* (New York: Scribner, 1994); and Myra Sadker, David M. Sadker, and Karen R. Zittleman, *Still Failing at Fairness: How Gender Bias Cheats Girls and Boys in School and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Scribner, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Girl Scout Research Institute, *Change It Up: What Girls Say About Redefining Leadership* (2008), [http://www.girlscouts.org/research/pdf/change\\_it\\_up\\_executive\\_summary\\_english.pdf](http://www.girlscouts.org/research/pdf/change_it_up_executive_summary_english.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Girl Scout Research Institute, *Change It Up*.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

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