

My daughters are not distracting

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A friend of mine recently posed this question on Facebook: Junior high girls braiding each other's hair in church: appropriate or not? Considering this friend has never been a junior-high girl nor parented a junior-high girl, the question seemed sincere and did not bother me.

What did bother me, however, was the frequency with which one particular word kept popping up in the comments: *distracting*. (Well, the comments about people getting their butts whipped at home for not behaving properly in church also bothered me, but let's focus *this* post on *distracting*.) Many people seem to think that girls braiding hair during church is *distracting*.

Studies have shown that we actually retain information better when our hands are occupied. The study I heard about involved doodling, but I imagine braiding hair would have the same effect. So I doubt that the hair braiding is distracting to the girls themselves.

Apparently, then, it is distracting to other people. People who just can't possibly concentrate on the spirit of worship and the holy word of God when there are 12-year-old girls getting their hair braided in the vicinity. Because *their* parents never let *them* braid hair in church? Because of the injunction in 1 Timothy against braided hair? Because the sermon is so boring that they're happy to think about anything else? Because it makes them think about how bad their own hair looks that day?

Who knows why some people find hair-braiding distracting. But the distraction seems to have more to do with the person being *distracted* than it does with the person who is allegedly being *distracting*.

I will not argue that hair-braiding is appropriate in all worship contexts. It would be in mine; it might not be in yours.

But as the mother of two daughters, I would ask that we avoid referring to girls as *distracting*. This is a label that society too often ascribes to girls and women as a

way of shifting responsibility onto them. Women can't breastfeed in public because it is *distracting*. Women can't serve in the military because they will be a *distraction* for the men. Girls' skirts can't be too short because that would be *distracting*.

Again, I am not arguing that all of these actions are appropriate. (Public breastfeeding, yes. Women in the military—well, I wish no one would be in the military. My daughter wearing a skirt that barely covers her butt, not OK.) But when we say that a woman is *distracting*, we make her responsible for the mental state of the people around her. And this is not fair.

As a woman, it is not my responsibility to not distract you. It is your responsibility to focus on what it is you need to focus on.

The other problem with the term *distracting* is that it is belittling. It signifies that something is not significant, not worthy of the attention it is drawing to itself. That a girl is not worthy of the attention that she is drawing to herself.

Seldom (if ever?) do I hear boys or men referred to as distracting. Disrespectful, yes. Annoying, yes. Inappropriate, yes. But not distracting.

There is something about the term *distracting* that simultaneously strips away the power of the one who is the distraction, while also burdening that person with responsibility for the thoughts of the people around them.

So this is a long answer to a friend's simple question: Junior high girls braiding each other's hair in church: appropriate or not? In my church context, I think it's perfectly appropriate. You may find it inappropriate or even disrespectful. But please don't call it *distracting*.

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