

Teen Girls and the Culture of Cruelty

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Adolescent girls generally enter the teen years as human beings—giddy, rambunctious, talkative, and interested in just about everything. And then something happens—it’s insidious and you can’t quite put your finger on it as it doesn’t happen over night. But slowly (usually) your best bud, the little girl who loved to be tucked in and tickled may recoil from your touch (especially in public), starts to share her deepest thoughts with her best friend (rather than you), and becomes obsessed with her body, clothing and perhaps boys. She may drop out of soccer or softball, quit the youth group, and declare that the mall is her Mecca. As she begins to menstruate her moods may take the entire family for a ride as she reaches unheard of highs when the phone rings and barely survives an evening just sitting home with the folks. And so you ask yourself, “What have I done to deserve this?” Well, you either gave birth to or adopted her, and most likely that’s about it.

Most adolescent girls face unbelievable pressure on a daily basis. Katie, a fourteen-year-old who was seeing me for depression related how she would leave for school *every school morning* dressed in a Mom-approved outfit, but would change into a skimpy halter top and tight jean shorts as soon as she got to school. She felt guilty going against her mother’s standards, but couldn’t face the ridicule that she believed would ensue if her outfit didn’t fit the girl fashion code. She really was angry at having to do this, but instead of turning the anger outward, it spread within, leading to the depressive symptoms of appetite suppression and sleeplessness. Elizabeth dealt with the girl peer pressure in a different way. Sixteen and convinced that whatever she had to say would be either laughed at or ignored, she spent her junior year in high school eating lunch in the library, every day. Being prone to denial, Elizabeth would kid herself into thinking that *she* was the one rejecting the other kids and that getting her homework completed in school was more important than gossiping or flirting in the cafeteria. Thirteen-year-old Marcella, after having been dumped by her boyfriend of three months, literally took things into her own hands when she felt that she could no longer tolerate the loneliness and humiliation—she started cutting on her thighs and stomach, places she felt were safe from her parents’ inquisitive eyes. Marcella explained, as do so many cutters, that “At least I feel something...it doesn’t really hurt...at least I can feel again.”

Katie, Elizabeth and Marcella are fairly typical teen girls. Certainly not every girl changes clothes just to fit it, or is frightened to eat in the lunchroom in fear of being rejected or uses self-abuse to fight depression or to gain control over her emotions, but many do. Too many. The nine- or ten-year-old who would “tell” on cruel friends now at fourteen may feel that nobody would listen, so she handles it herself. The lucky ones may remember and rely on solid advice from their parents or have an astute friend or teacher who intervenes. But many teen girls do not feel that they have any resources to turn to, even if their parents are willing to be involved and, if given the chance, could be very

helpful. It's as if the trusting little girl has turned into a young lady who is not sure of herself or her parents' intentions or motives.

I hear about this metamorphosis almost daily in my office—distraught parents wondering where their little girl went and how this odd stranger has returned in her place. It's the opposite of the moth turning into a butterfly, in a behavioral and emotional sense. But it is normal, most teen girls evolve through this stage intact, and do emerge as that beautiful butterfly again as they enter adulthood. But it's tough as a parent to have the maturity and patience to deal with the teen girl in an effective manner. It takes parental savvy, communication, asking others for help, and continually working with your kid even if she rebuffs you. And, most of all it takes guts. You must develop a family code of ethics and values to stand by, to serve as a guide for your daughter about what is and isn't accepted in your family.

Since 1977 I've seen kids and their families almost exclusively in my private practice. A lot has changed over the years—many children seem to be moodier, sassier and more disrespectful than in the past two decades. And, these behaviors and attitudes have generalized to adults other than just Mom and Dad. Schools face problems daily, ranging from non-participation and acting-out to downright disobedience and violence.

Dr. William Pollack in his works, "Real Boys" and "Real Boys Voices" eloquently portrays how playful, expressive young boys evolve into displaying the "Boy Code" at ever earlier stages of development—a tough, almost insensitive appearance molded by the holding in of feelings. Letting it out with a good cry just isn't acceptable, and Pollack and others hypothesize that this is why so many males become ill, unhappy or even violent as they mature. Boys, it appears, learn to be unexpressive and to under-react to frustrating, hurtful situations until they no longer can restrain the emotions, and then they blow—either physically or emotionally.

Although teenage girls do not act-out violently with the frequency of boys, they display their own brand of behavior and identity crises, especially as they travel from the preteen through the adolescent years. Whether tolerated, allowed, or encouraged to emote, preschool girls cry much more frequently than do boys. In grade school they whine, complain and cry (again) more, and by middle and high school they run circles around the guys in terms of crying (once again), spreading rumors, and expressing just about every thought that crosses their minds. In short, girls learn to emote and to show and share their frustrations. In the process, though, many parents are held hostage to their whims, moodiness and teenage tantrums.

In 1994 Dr. Mary Pipher's "Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls" hit the stands as well as our hearts. Mary forced us to look at how and why our teenage daughters were so unhappy and unfulfilled. She focused upon the state of the family, peer pressure, lack of values and wondered what had happened to girls since her days of growing up in Lincoln, Nebraska. Nipping at the heels of "Reviving Ophelia" came an upstart 17 year old, Sara Shandler with her book "Ophelia Speaks", which offered the voices of adolescent girls and their responses to Dr. Pipher's concerns—both

contradictory as well as in agreement with. And so the debate begins, and will continue. But one thing is for sure—being a teenage girl is difficult in today’s culture, one that is too often best described as a culture of cruelty in the lunchrooms and classrooms where our adolescent girls spend a great deal of their lives.

Teenage girls populate a good 70% of my practice. Normally these kids come into counseling with a less-than-thrilled attitude, afraid that therapy will result in some form of punishment, or at the least—they will be misunderstood. Just one more adult taking their parents’ point of view. Some, though, especially the angry ones, are glad to have the forum to dump their gripes --they can’t wait to unload their feelings of frustration and anger, how unfair Mom or Dad are, or how tough it is making it socially at school. These girls have little trouble communicating—in fact, sometimes it’s downright difficult for me to get a word in edgewise.

Then there are the depressed girls. I’ve come to the conclusion that along with sensitivity, introspection and the exquisite peer radar that teenage girls are so good at comes the negative aspects of over-reaction, over-sensitivity and extreme self-absorption. The latter takes the form of believing that almost anything that they say or do outside the home (which is a safe place, usually—Mom and Dad have to keep them no matter how they behave) is subject to becoming the center of attention for anyone or everyone. At school a bad hair day can be disastrous—as if the other kids notice. I try to convince my teen girls that others are themselves involved in so much self-absorption and insecurity that they don’t *always* have the time to think of anyone but themselves. Usually it’s like talking to a wall, though, so this tactic is often less than successful in terms of teaching teen girls to be less sensitive about *everything*.

This hypersensitivity puts teen girls at risk for many problems: believing that just about anything that they say will be made fun of, that looking the least bit different will be the topic of the lunchroom for at least a few days, or that appearing too dumb or too smart sets them apart from others. So, they search for conformity. Each teen girl has their own tactic, but the hit list of conformity techniques includes: hiding intellect and ambition, foregoing a skill or gift, settling for a crowd of kids believing or behaving against their basic values, inclusion in a group even though it’s uncomfortable or unsafe, or withdrawing almost completely from the whole social scene.

Yet some girls make it through adolescence in one piece, seemingly unscathed. What are these hardy, almost invulnerable girls or their parents doing that allows or encourages this success? According to Judith Rich Harris, author of “The Nature Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do”, its mostly genetics, a pinch of luck, and a spoonful of involved and insightful parenting. Although I agree with Dr. Harris’ stress upon genetics as an important aspect in how our kids turn out, I’ve seen that smart, gutsy parenting goes a long way in terms of keeping our teen girls on track.

I’ve found that there are many things that parents can do to not only help their girls to better survive adolescence, but that also help parents to come through this period sane and in one piece themselves. In our efforts to help our teen girls we can try to set them

on the course for developing a good self-concept as well as providing discipline so that their behavior remains within reasonable bounds. In setting the stage for good teen self-esteem and behavior, I've found that aside from crossing your fingers and hoping for the best, parents should:

- Pick their battles wisely, letting the little stuff go while digging your heels in on the bigger issues.
- Try to understand how the teen girl feels, perceives and defines her world.
- Endeavor to remember how being 13 was for you (luckily I've kept an old diary and it confirms many of my not so fond memories—mostly of loneliness or feelings of rejection).
- Become informed about today's teen girl culture and issues—fear of AIDS, pressure toward sexual activity (oral or otherwise).
- Understand your daughter's quest to be your own persona, within the constraints of tremendous peer pressure to conform to often arbitrary rules and regulations.
- Learn about and try to understand the dynamics of lunchroom politics that may be downright cruel.
- Realize that thin is in, whether it's healthy or not, even if you disagree.
- Find and retain the guts to parent wisely, even though your teen girl may profess to hate you at the moment.
- Understand the lure of substance use and abuse and find out what you can do to better drug-proof your daughter.
- Learn to listen *effectively* even though the kid is being unreasonable, bull-headed, or just downright selfish.
- Set rules that are fair, clear, and capable of being followed consistently.
- Figure out how to rescue your daughter from the claws of the MTV vulture and culture.
- Promote a sense of spirituality (not necessarily religious, but moral in nature) which will assure her of a lifetime of direction even though there will be lots of curves in the road.
- Implement a family code of values necessitating giving to others, not just taking.
- Instill a desire for involvement—be it in sports, hobbies, academics or volunteering—anything that gets her butt off of the couch and into the minds and hearts of others.

And, most of all, remember that it truly does take a village to raise a child. Get to know your daughter's friends and their parents and to engage in activities together. The better the communication between families, the less chance there will be for the kids to go astray and to become involved in risky or inappropriate behavior. Insist upon communication with the school and her teachers and help her to stay on top of her school work. As a family continue your involvement in volunteer activities and religious groups. Encourage a variety of interests (sports, music, working out at the gym). And, if extended family is available maintain close ties so that she'll have several adults to consult with or cousins to turn to if the going gets rough. It's especially important for adolescent girls to realize that even if their peers seem to turn their backs, that family members will always be there for them.