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The Truth About Teen Girls

By Belinda Luscombe

Unless you're an adolescent male, you have already asked yourself this question, perhaps in the past few days: Is there something wrong with teen girls? Specifically, are they getting too sexy? Barely a week passes without a flash bulletin blinding us with news of another prominent preadult who is in the family way or showing off her underthings. Miley Cyrus, 15, seminaked! Jamie Lynn Spears, 16, pregnant! A bunch of Massachusetts high schoolers all having babies together! It's an epidemic!

Once the idea has taken hold, it's hard to shake off, and the fact that the presidential campaign features a pregnant 17-year-old means that the debate about teenage sexuality is growing only more heated. Girlhood sexiness seems to be everywhere: on TV shows and in movies, in advertising, in teen magazines and all over the Internet. Most disturbingly, it seems to be coming from the girls themselves: the way they dress, the way they text, the way they present themselves on Facebook and, oh, mercy, what they get up to at parties. There are whispers, stories for which the anecdotal evidence--from school counselors and child psychologists and mothers--keeps accumulating like a national pile of unwashed laundry. These suggest teen girls are getting very liberal with sexual favors, especially of the type detailed in the Starr report. In one generation, girls seem to have moved from Easy-Bake to easy virtue.

In the past four months, there have been four weighty books published on the subject, with titles like *Hooked: New Science on How Casual Sex Is Affecting Our Children* and *So Sexy So Soon*. Most of these treatises have a similar thesis: young girls are sexually loose because they're aping behavior they see on TV or read about in magazines. And as if on cue, the media deliver a new 90210 with an oral-sex scene in the first episode; *Gossip Girl* comes back with billboards promoting it as MIND-BLOWINGLY INAPPROPRIATE ... and your daughter starts singing that alarmingly suggestive song about licking a lollipop.

Before we reinstitute the chastity belt, though, we might need to take a breath. There are lots of reasons to worry about adolescent girls having sex too early, ranging from serious health risks to the likelihood that they are seeking it for the wrong reasons to the impact it may have on their ability to maintain healthy future relationships. But is it the sex we're worried about or the sexiness? Is it what they do or how they look? And whose problem is this anyway?

Wasn't It Ever Thus?

Middle school counselor Julia Taylor of North Carolina had a conversation with her sixth-graders last year that worried her. "A lot of them were watching *The O.C.*," she says. "I just remember the show's multiple sexual

partners, the cocaine use, and then at the end, they drink, they drive, they set fires, but all is well! There are never any consequences." Taylor understands the media better than many. Her sister Mary is a producer who has worked on MTV shows including *My Super Sweet 16* and *Spring Break*. "I'm messing them up, and she's fixing them," says Mary jokingly. But Mary also suggests that if nobody were watching the shows or buying the products that are advertised on them, they wouldn't succeed. "We're not *Little House on the Prairie* anymore," she says. "The world is different. If parents said, 'You can't watch this,' and the ratings dropped, maybe we would change things."

Society has always had this Taylor-sisters duality in its attitude toward young women. Like steak-house owners trying to raise vegetarians, we idealize youth and sexiness but recoil if our young want to be sexy. What has complicated things recently is that girls are literally getting older younger. Their bodies are hitting physical maturity sooner, often before they are ready to deal with the issues of sexuality that go along with it. According to Jane Brown, a journalism professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, "Twelve-to-14-year-old girls who start puberty earlier are more interested in sexual content in the media." Brown's studies found that adolescents whose media diet was rich in sexual content were more than twice as likely as others to have had sex by the time they were 16.

And yet. With the pornucopia of media at teens' disposal in the past decade and a half, on cell phones and computers as well as TVs, early-adolescent sex should be having a growth spurt. But the figures don't necessarily support one. Despite a minor increase in 2006, the rate of pregnancies among teen girls has been on a downward trend since 1991. Another indicator, the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, is alarmingly high: nearly 1 in 4 girls ages 14 to 19 and nearly 1 in 2 African-American girls, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But this is the first year such a study has been completed, and the study doesn't separate 14-to-16-year-olds from 17-to-19-year-olds, so it's still unclear which way that trend is heading.

Other studies imply that girls, while not exactly chaste, are not behaving in ways that media reports about the hookup culture might lead us to believe. According to the Guttmacher Institute, one-third of surveyed teenagers 15 to 17 had had oral sex, and most of those were not virgins. Of teens ages 15 to 19 who had had oral sex only, two-thirds reported having had only one partner. There are plenty of people who want their daughters to wait until they get married to get it on. But failing that, many parents would prefer that their daughters have sex for the first time with someone they are in love with. Which is what the studies suggest they may be doing.

The Drip-Drip Effect

It would be naive to believe that the media are having no effect on teens and tweens. But it's much more complicated than *Tracey See, Tracey Do*. In the aftermath of the Gloucester pregnancy spurt, some experts spoke of a Juno effect, girls getting pregnant to emulate that movie's protagonist. Local teens scoffed at this idea. "Pregnant celebrities are no big deal," says Ashley Hill, 16, a (not pregnant) senior at Gloucester High. "Most teenagers aren't dumb. They can tell the difference between fact and fiction." Studies support her: teens are less susceptible to media firestorms that galvanize the grownups, like those set off by a famous pregnant person or a

seminaked tween star. But when most outlets say the same thing, the effect can be overwhelming. "We call this the drip-drip vs. the drench effect," says Brown.

Some insight into how media images are processed into behavior comes from a 2004 Harvard study on the arrival of TV in Western Fiji. The most noticeable change was that Fijian women became dissatisfied with their bodies and tried to lose weight. They didn't necessarily want to be like Europeans; they just wanted to look like them. Is it possible that the situation for teens and tweens is the same? They don't want to be like the characters in *Gossip Girl* (only 16% of whose viewers are actually teen girls) or *America's Next Top Model*; they just want to look like them, to try on that identity. "Nine-year-old girls do not experience dressing up in a sexy way as a sexy thing," says Deborah Tolman, one of the authors of 2007's American Psychological Association (APA) report on the sexuality of teen girls. "They're just wearing clothes and thinking it's cool to look older." School-age girls want to wear thong underwear for the same reason their mothers wanted to wear crocheted bikinis: to drive their parents nuts.

The real problems arise when the media unanimously suggest that hotness is the only identity worth trying on. And when they venerate physical desirability in young women without explaining how to use it responsibly. And when they define desirability in such a narrow fashion that many girls feel they have to amp up their sexual signals to measure up. One of the clear findings last year of the APA task force was that an early emphasis on sexuality stunts girls' development in other areas. "When kids are about defining themselves, if you give them this idea that sexy is the be-all and end-all, they drop other things," says Sharon Maxwell, a psychologist who specializes in adolescent sexuality.

Should girls fear that they don't have the requisite hotness, there's a surefire way to overcome that: find a boy to sleep with. "They're subconsciously looking for love," says Amanda Ireland, another Gloucester teen. "They think, If I have a baby, I'll be someone. It gives them an identity." How can Ireland be so sure? She gave birth to daughter Haley, now 3, when she was 15.

Learning from Lolita

The interplay among teens, the media and sex is a complicated one. As Ireland shrewdly observes, the way a girl sees herself is more powerful than what she sees in magazines. But here's the rub: what she sees in the media does affect that self-image, especially in terms of her body. Some experts recommend media-literacy classes--as early as kindergarten. "Children need to learn how to dissect and understand this pervasive aspect of their environment," says Gigi Durham, author of *The Lolita Effect*, "just as they learn to understand the seasons or Newton's laws of motion."

Durham also suggests, counterintuitively, that kids should have access to more media. But the venues she recommends are those--like girlsinc.org--that are not in a symbiotic relationship with people who want to sell things. And she believes that girls should be encouraged to create their own media, not just to talk back but also to

understand how they work.

Since it's impossible to put the genie back into the bottle, girls also need some straight talk about what to do with all the desirability society is heaping on them. "It's like we've given them the keys to the car," says psychologist Maxwell, "but we haven't taught them how to drive." The APA task force urged more study into how teen girls are affected by seeing people who look just like them heralded as sexual icons as well as research to "identify effective, culturally competent protective factors." Translation: Find something not lame that sends an alternative message. Stephenie Meyer's highly popular Twilight series might be one example.

Most important, say therapists and academics, adults need to look to themselves. "There's a whole other piece that we don't talk about," says Tolman, "which is holding the people who are reacting to these young girls accountable." When tweens see a picture of Cyrus with her back bare and her hair tousled, they don't see her as postcoital. That's an adult interpretation. Cyrus has made it abundantly clear that she hopes to remain a virgin until she's married. "It's this very odd attitude," says Durham, "where at once we want to eroticize [girls like Britney Spears and Cyrus], and then we turn around and condemn them immediately."

Maybe we believe so readily in notions like a plague of teen sex because they titillate us, the grownups. The volume of child-pornography arrests has skyrocketed in the past decade. It's not teens who are using it. And it's mostly not teens who indulge in the voyeuristic obsession with starlets or who use young people to sell products or win votes. It's all of us. Fifty years ago last month, Lolita was published in the U.S. Her name is often invoked to describe today's teens. But what people forget is that in Nabokov's book, Lolita was the victim.

With reporting by With Reporting by Kathleen Kingsbury/Gloucester, Elisabeth Salemme, Tiffany Sharples/New York

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