

Určeno pouze pro studijní účely

Conclusion

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Chapter 24

Welcoming Sex, Power, and Aggression into the Lives of Girls

“The aim of each thing we do is to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible.”

—Audré Lorde

People are always afraid that if you drop the bar a little bit, all hell will break loose. Pandora just took a little peak into the box and, whoa, all the troubles of the world emerged. But this myth, like our current myths, is used to police girls and women.

That is why all “good girls” lead a double life. In public they are sweet, innocent, lovely, and well-behaved. They define their image in opposition to the “bad girl” who is sexual, mean, aggressive, loud, or simply just other by virtue of race or class. In private, these good girls still play sexual games, write angry passages in their diaries, and act out aggressively.

These private acts can be seen as a form of resistance against the pressures of being good; they also can be seen as examples of their real selves erupting beyond their control. Neither and both capture all of what is happening because the differences among girls are vast and irreducible.

When good girls act out sexually, they both conform and resist. We see in the midriffs, the stripteases, and the enactment of rape scenes that girls are picking up a form of adult sexuality that objectifies them and teaches them that in a man’s world they are to be desired, ogled, and ravaged. But as they pursue their own sexual feelings, arrange to play games in which they explore the boundaries of what is right and what is them, they resist

becoming objects and come to understand desire as a rich and possible seed within.

When good girls are aggressive they both conform and resist. Especially for girls of color, when they act out aggressively, they conform to expectations that emanate from a culture more ready to label them violent and dismissable. But they also resist this by proclaiming they are not invisible, that they are strong enough to stand up for themselves. When good girls are aggressive, they conform by calling such aggression other or alien and describe it as coming out of nowhere. They also conform by subscribing to versions of being a girl that mean being catty and mean rather than forming sisterhoods. But they resist such notions if they take on a powerful stance as a girl that incorporates aggression as a form of self-protection, a form of protecting those close to you, or a delightful and appropriate exercise of power, as in sports.

Whether daughters are resisting or conforming, the first step for parents is to recognize that girls do get angry and aggressive, that they do have sexual feelings and interests, and that this is as true for the good girl as it is for the bad. Girls need to acknowledge both of these forces in themselves, and we as a culture need to honor this struggle.

First, girls need to know and understand erotic energy, which can be translated into knowing one's body, understanding the potential for pleasure, seeing oneself as someone with desires and not just desirable. All of these make a girl complete. Many an adult woman I interviewed sighed, as if it were too late to see herself in an erotic way. But these women also claimed that if they could not see themselves in this way, at least they would like to know how to make this a part of their daughters' lives. Erotic feelings are powerful feelings that can sometimes overwhelm, especially when they are experienced as coming from outside oneself, unexpected, and not in one's control. When a girl has control of her body, of her fantasies, of her pleasures, and gives herself some permission to explore, to educate herself, or even to lose control for a bit in a safe place, she will grow up into an adult who has and gives pleasure without shame or fear.

Girls also need to understand themselves as potentially aggressive beings. This realization is also crucial to growing up whole. When a girl gets permission to be angry, she is taught self-respect. When parents address their daughter's aggression, it is important and necessary that they deal not only with feelings such as distress or frustration, but also with anger and the desire for and pleasure in power. Aggression can be harmful, but it can also be the foundation for ambition, for fighting for social justice, and for

acts of creativity. With maturity, girls can begin to use their aggressive potential in creative and socially laudatory ways. Think of the anger and aggression in the work of lawyers who fight in the courts, or in artists who push against social expectations and laws, or even in authors who write with bite. When this aggressive potential is suppressed, there is less chance that it can mature and be shaped in these particularly important ways.

Guilt may be one of the foundations of morality, inspiring us to do good and make amends, but too much guilt is not good. Too much guilt for playing sexual games and for aggressive acts undermines self-confidence, interferes with making reparations, and makes girls restrain themselves in activities in which they need to grow. Giving girls some slack is not the same as making excuses for bad behavior.

Going into the twenty-first century, the two most important prohibitions for girls are against sex and aggression. These differentiate girls from boys most emphatically, and also "good" girls from "bad." Truthfully, problems of sex (such as rape and abuse) and aggression (murder, shootings) abound in our culture, and the control of these two areas is important to our society and to personal development. But repression, denial, and ignorance do not take away the potential for sexuality and aggression in all of us. We deny these feelings in ourselves at our peril. For girls to develop in life-affirming, constructive ways demands that these feelings be invited into childhood, brought out into the open, made unsecret.

To grow up to be healthy sexual adults, able to have and give pleasure, able to be women with desires they are not ashamed of, girls need practice. To grow up to protect themselves against abuse, feel their physical strength, and use this strength wisely, they need practice. To be fully emphatic and fight for fairness, they need their anger. Our girls need to practice these feelings and emotions in spaces where adults acknowledge them and help shape their development. We diminish girls when we restrain them in conventional ways, preserve a fake ideal of goodness, and force them to lead secret lives. We don't want to do that anymore.