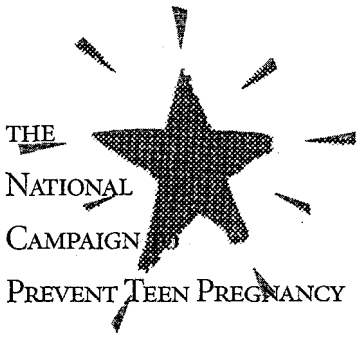

Goodbye to Girlhood:

What's Troubling Girls and What We Can Do About It

by Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and
Theodora Ooms

A REPORT FROM THE NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY

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Theodora Ooms would like to thank Diane Dodson, family policy consultant, who designed and coordinated the roundtable and wrote the comprehensive background paper for the meeting.

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Foreword

As the mother of three teenage daughters, I know that being a teen girl can be tough in our society. The passage to adulthood is challenging enough for any adolescent, but teen girls face a culture that offers conflicting — and often negative — messages about the value of being a girl and becoming a woman. Research suggests that a disturbing number of teen girls struggle with emotional distress, eating disorders, sexual harrassment, anxiety about their bodies, and drug and alcohol abuse. Many of these problems are associated with increased risk of teen pregnancy, In addition, girls are maturing physically earlier, well ahead of their social and emotional ability to deal with the consequent responsibilities and risks.

To better understand the particular challenges faced by teen girls today, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy and the Family Impact Seminar convened a roundtable meeting, "The Culture of Girlhood and the Passage to Womanhood," in late 1997. Researchers, policy experts, editors of girls' magazines, and leaders of youth development and advocacy groups examined what problems girls confront, how the media, schools, and other social institutions contribute to these problems, and what can be done to create a more "girl-friendly" culture (see the appendices for the meeting agenda and participant list). This report — Goodbye to Girlhood: *What's Troubling Girls and* What *We Can Do About It* — is an authored reflection based, in part, on the roundtable meeting.

The National Campaign would like to thank Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, author, co-director of the National Marriage Project, and member of the Campaign's Task Force on Religion and Public Values, and Theodora Ooms, executive director of the Family Impact Seminar, for their provocative and insightful report. We would also like to acknowledge the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation for supporting the National Campaign's series of roundtable meetings on special issues in teen pregnancy prevention. The first report fi-om the roundtable series was *Not Just For Girls: The Roles of Boys and Men in Teen Pregnancy Prevention* (*see* p. 44 for more information).

The 1990s have brought some good news: teen pregnancy and birth rates have started to decline after, peaking in 1991. Teen sexual activity rates have leveled off and teens' use of contraception has improved. But the United States still has by far the highest teen pregnancy and birth rates among industrialized nations. To build on recent positive trends, we must assist teen girls (as well as boys) develop a positive sense of their futures, so that they make healthy choices and avoid teen pregnancy. Helping them deal with the cultural pressures they face is a critical step.

Sarah Brown
Director
National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

November 1998

"More than any other group in the population, girls and their bodies have borne the brunt of twentieth-century social change, and we ignore the fact at our peril. It is time for us to talk — squarely and fairly — about the ways in which American girlhood has changed and what girls must have to ensure a safe and creative future."

Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project*

Introduction: Why Are We Concerned About Girlhood?

Until recently, public concern about teenage girls focused mostly on problems associated with teenage pregnancy and childbearing. But several new books and studies suggest that teen pregnancy is just one part of a larger pattern of troubling problems among adolescent girls. Girls are struggling with emotional distress, eating disorders, depression, and anxiety about their bodies. A disturbingly high percentage of teenage girls are victims of sexual abuse, rape, and unwanted sex. And girls are drinking and smoking more today than in the past.

Perhaps no single work has done more to create popular awareness of these problems than therapist Mary Pipher's-best-selling book, Reviving *Ophelia*. Pipher paints a portrait of once happy, energetic girls who become listless, depressed, suicidal, self-mutilating, and self-hating once they hit adolescence. Although Pipher's book is based largely on girls she met in her practice as a clinical psychologist, surveys point to similar patterns of behavior among a large and nonclinical population of girls. Some of these troubling behaviors are correlated with higher risks of teenage pregnancy,

Taken together, these studies raise questions about the state of contemporary girlhood. Every society has the task of helping girls make a safe and successful transition into adult womanhood. Are we failing at the task? And if the answer is "yes," what are the forces contributing to this failure?

To better understand the changing nature of adolescent girlhood and its implications for preventing teenage pregnancy, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy and the Family Impact Seminar cosponsored a roundtable meeting, "The Culture of Girlhood and the Passage to Womanhood," in 1997. Participants included scholars, foundation officers, editors of girls' magazines, and leaders of youth development organizations and girls' advocacy groups.

The roundtable set out to explore a set of questions: Is there a crisis in girlhood? If there is, what is the evidence of it? How do family, race, class, and ethnicity affect girls' coming-of-age? What is the influence of the marketplace, media, and other elements of the cultural environment? And, most important, what can be done to help girls successfully negotiate the prolonged and often perilous passage into independent adulthood?

Roundtable participants paid special attention to the differences between the experiences of adolescent girls and boys. In this age of gender wars, it is possible to exaggerate gender differences. Adolescent boys encounter many of the same problems and pressures as adolescent girls. Nonetheless, the evidence strongly suggests that boys and girls respond to these pressures in different ways. Generally speaking, boys act out and girls turn inward. Thus, girls are more often "quietly disturbed" and, for that reason, their distress often goes unnoticed. Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to express their problems by acts of aggression towards others — acts that then get them a lot of attention, albeit negative.

On the other hand, it is girls who get pregnant and who disproportionately bear the risks and costs of early sexual involvement, and the cultural meaning of adolescent milestones clearly differs for girls and boys. For example, the normal weight gains of puberty tend to have positive meaning for boys — "he's getting big" — and negative meaning for girls — "she's getting fat." These cultural differences help explain why boys gain self-confidence and social status with pubertal weight gains and why girls often lose confidence and status. Consequently, understanding gender differences in adolescence helps us understand the distinctive nature of the problems many girls face today.

The need to address these problems is urgent because increasing numbers of our young girls and women are at risk. The absolute number of adolescents in the population is rising, and teens form a growing proportion of the population as a whole. Rates of suicide, depression, smoking, and alcohol use are rising among teen girls. While rates of teen pregnancy and childbearing have begun to decline slightly in recent years, they remain unacceptably high, particularly because the vast majority of teen childbearing is now outside of marriage.

Our hope is that this report contributes to a more complex and comprehensive understanding of the nature and causes of the "crisis" of girlhood. By highlighting innovative efforts to help girls, we hope to encourage various sectors of society — parents, educators, the media, community and youth leaders, and others — to assist girls and young women cope better with societal pressures. In addition, the report identifies gaps in current knowledge about girls, their behavior, and ways to help them make a safe and successful transition to womanhood.

This report draws upon papers presented at the meeting, a background paper commissioned for the roundtable, and recent literature on adolescent girls and contemporary American girlhood. It is divided into several sections. Part One highlights evidence of a crisis in girlhood. Part Two offers a broader historical consideration of how biology, society, and culture have changed the timing and course of the passage from girlhood to womanhood. Part Three examines the impact of family, race, class, and ethnicity on adolescent girls. Part Four offers conclusions from the roundtable and suggestions on how to build a more "girl-friendly culture." Part Five underscores why we must address the crisis in girlhood now.

I. Evidence of a Crisis of Girlhood

Research Highlights

Recent studies detail the nature and scope of the problems among adolescent girls. These problems include emotional distress, depression, and suicide; body image and eating disorders; substance use and abuse; sexual abuse and victimization; unwanted sex, and negative media messages. Many of these problems have become more prevalent in recent decades. Highlights from the research, much of which was presented at the roundtable meeting, are outlined here:

Emotional distress, depression, suicide

- One in five girls reports experiencing emotional distress, a rate one-third higher than for boys (Blum & Rinehart, 1997).
- By age 14- 15, girls are twice as likely as boys to suffer from depression, a gender difference that persists into adulthood (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995).
- Girls are more than twice as likely as boys to have attempted suicide (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1998).
- The rate of completed suicide more than tripled among white girls ages 10- 14 (0.3 to 1.1 percent) and doubled among black girls (0.2 to 0.4 percent) between 1980 and 1992. However, boys are still more likely to commit suicide (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1998).

Body image and eating disorders

- Girls are much more concerned about their physical appearance than boys. One in three expresses a high degree of concern compared with one in nine males. Anxiety over appearance and negative bodyimage worsens with age — but only for girls (Blum, 1997).
- Moreover, compared with high school boys, high school girls are more than twice as likely to have dieted (58 percent vs. 25 percent) or to think they are overweight (33 percent vs. 16 percent) (Commonwealth Fund, 1997).

Substance use and abuse

- Nearly one-fourth of eighth-grade girls say they consumed alcohol at least once in the past month (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1998).
- Girls are more likely to smoke than boys in every grade after seventh, but slightly less likely than boys to smoke heavily (Blum, 1997). Compared to boys, girls are more likely to say they smoke to control weight (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1998).

Sexual abuse *and victimization*

- Approximately 50 percent of female rape victims are between 10- and 19-years-old, and half of this group is under sixteen. (Brumberg, 1997)
- High school girls surveyed are more than twice as likely as boys to report sexual abuse (12 percent compared with 5 percent in grades 9-12) (Commonwealth Fund, 1997).

- Family disruption is associated with non-voluntary sexual intercourse. Among girls ages 15-19, 11.8 percent of those who grew up in a single-parent household from birth, 10.3 percent who lived. in a family with a step-parent, and 5.8 percent who lived in a divorced family say they have been forced to have sexual intercourse before age 15, compared to 4 percent of girls who lived with both parents since birth (Newcomer, 1997).

- Abused girls and girls with depressive symptoms are at triple the risk for eating disorders and double the risk for drinking, smoking, or recent drug use (Commonwealth Fund, '1997).

Unwanted sexual experience

- Young women who describe their first sexual intercourse as voluntary nonetheless vary in their opinions about how much they wanted to have intercourse. One-quarter of women aged 15-24 who described their first intercourse as voluntary gave it low ratings on a scale of how much they wanted it to happen (Abma, Driscoll, & Moore, 1997).

- Girls who have had unwanted sexual experiences have increased likelihood of having many sexual partners and greater vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases and early pregnancy (Abma, Driscoll, & Moore, 1997).

Teen pregnancy and parenthood

- While teen pregnancy and birth rates in the U.S. have declined slightly in the 1990s, every year almost a million teenagers become pregnant and close to half a million teenagers give birth (Donovan, 1998).

- About 40 percent of pregnant teens are 17-years-old or younger (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 1997).

- Approximately 4 in 10 girls become pregnant at least once before age 20 (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 1997).

- Fully 76 percent of births to teenage mothers are out-of-wedlock (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 1997).

- In some cities across the nation, the percentage of teen births that occur out-of-wedlock is more than 95 percent (Moore, Romano, Gitelson, & Connon, 1997).

Negative media images and messages

- Media portrayals of women emphasize thinness and sexiness. In television programs, 46 percent of the women are thin or very thin compared to only 16 percent of men. Women are much more likely than men in most media to appear partially clothed or wearing underwear. In music videos, 57 percent of women were partially clothed compared to 28 percent of men (Children Now & the Kaiser Family Foundation, 1997a).

- In most media, men are portrayed working and women dating. Women are more likely than men to use flirting, crying, and the promise of sex to achieve their goals (Children Now & the Kaiser Family Foundation, 1997a).

- Seven of the ten television characters girls most admire are male (Children Now & the Kaiser Family Foundation, 1997b).

- Teenage viewers are exposed to an average of 2,969 incidents of sexual behavior per year on afternoon television and 7,438 per year during prime time (Greenberg, Brown, & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1993).

Defining Features of the Girlhood Crisis

Most girls are successful in meeting the challenges of adolescence. Nonetheless, the research findings suggest cause for concern. A significant percentage of teenage girls are experiencing problem behaviors that may threaten healthy development and future life chances. Some of these behaviors emerge in late childhood or early teen years when girls are still emotionally, morally, and cognitively immature and often unguided and unprotected.

"Levels of happiness among high school senior girls have plummeted since the mid-1970s."

The roundtable meeting identified four key characteristics of the girlhood crisis: (1) problem behaviors of "quiet disturbance," (2) anxieties about body image and disordered eating and exercising behaviors, (3) unwanted sexual attentions and sexual experiences, and (4) early sexual involvement, pregnancy, and unwed childbearing.

Quiet disturbance. Girls are suffering from problems of "quiet disturbance," which include suicidal thinking, depression, and substance abuse. Compared to adolescent boys, adolescent girls report higher levels of emotional distress and depression.[1] And their overall happiness is declining. Reported levels of happiness among high school senior girls have plummeted since the mid-1970s but have slightly increased for high school senior boys over the same time period.[2]

The problems of quiet disturbance may be indirectly linked to other problem behaviors that are becoming more prevalent among adolescent girls. Girls' tendency to internalize distress may also lead to efforts to numb and narcotize that distress with alcohol, drugs, or promiscuous sex For example, depressed girls are twice as likely to drink and use drugs than girls who do not suffer from depression (Commonwealth Fund Survey, 1997). Engaging in one problem behavior, such as excessive drinking, may also bring girls into contact with peer groups where other problem behaviors are involved. Binge drinking on college campuses is strongly associated with a frat party culture where teenagers get blindly drunk and then engage in casual sex.

In several key areas, historic gender gaps between boys and girls are narrowing. Girls used to be less likely than boys to smoke, take drugs, and use alcohol. Now their behavior is becoming more like boys. The gender gap is also closing in the timing of sexual debut. For men who came of age in the 1950s and 1960s, 35 percent had had intercourse by age 16 compared

1. As defined in the Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls, depressive symptoms include: feeling like crying often, thinking about or planning suicide, feeling as though nothing will work out, feeling sad most of the time, hating oneself, feeling alone, not having any fun, not feeling loved, and not feeling as good as others.

2. These trends are based on special tabulations of the national "Monitoring the Future" data done by Norval Glenn of the University of Texas. See Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "The Girls of Gen X," *The American Enterprise* (January-February,, 1998).

"Round shoulders had Jo, big hands and feet, a flyaway look to her clothes, and the uncomfortable appearance of a girl who was rapidly shooting up into a woman and didn't like it."

Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*

"Dear Beth:
I'm 13 and in the 8th grade. I need help. My thighs are so fat it's pitiful . . . Please help me get thinner thighs.

FLABBY IN NEW BEDFORD"

"Ask Beth," *Boston Globe*, Feb. 24, 1998

to only 19 percent of women in that cohort, a 16-point difference. For those who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s, 48 percent of the men had had sexual intercourse by age 16 compared to 37 percent of women, an 11-point gap. In 1995, 45 percent of 16-year-old males have had intercourse compared to 39 percent of 16-year-old females, a mere six-point difference (Laumann et al., 1994). The goal, of course, is not to restore a double standard but rather to help both boys and girls postpone first intercourse.

Girls are anxious and unhappy with their changing bodies. Like *Little Women's* 15-year-old Jo March, today's 12-year-old girls must adjust to their changing bodies. Pubertal weight gains and the accumulation of weight in breasts, hips, and thighs represent a significant change in self and self-image, and it is not new or surprising that teenage girls should experience some measure of dis-ease and discontent with their bodies. Nonetheless, coming to terms with indeed, liking and trusting — one's womanly body is part of a successful transition to adulthood. But this task is becoming far more difficult and anxiety-provoking for a significant percentage of girls today.

Teenage girls begin to worry about their body shape and size at younger ages than in the past. Even before the onset of puberty, some girls suffer an anticipatory dread of "fatness" and begin to complain about the size of their stomachs and thighs. The discontent with body image is not transient; it persists and often worsens over the course of adolescence.

As girls experience anxiety and discontent over their maturing bodies, some engage in a strenuous effort to ward off or control the normal weight gains of puberty. They do so with a combination of excessive exercising and rigid control of their eating. Girls may jog for miles and then limit themselves to one salad a day. Or they may exercise, overeat, and then vomit. In a study of Minnesota school girls, one-third reported episodes of binging and purging (Blum, 1997). The carefree and unselfconscious enjoyment of food often ends in late childhood for girls as they awaken to the knowledge of calories. The advent of the nutritional label on food products has been a boon for many adults, but it may contribute to some girls' obsessive

preoccupation with food and eating. Many teenage girls now scrutinize nutritional labels for fat as well as calorie information; some refuse to eat any food that contains more than two grams of fat per serving. Body image problems are especially prevalent among white teenagers.

Some studies suggest that African-American teens show greater resilience to cultural pressures to conform to an unrealistic body image. Although African-American teens tend to be taller, heavier, and more physically mature than their same-aged white peers, they are more 'confident about their bodies at every stage in adolescence. However, these attitudes may be a matter of economic status rather than racial or cultural differences. The magazines and other media catering to middle-class African-American women feature stories on eating disorders, body sculpting, breast implants, and fitness, suggesting that these unrealistic standards may become more pervasive among women of color as affluence increases (Brumberg, 1997).

Girls experience unwanted sexual attentions. Sexual abuse and victimization occur among a significant percentage of teenage girls. Among girls in grades nine through twelve, 12 percent reported sexual abuse and eight percent reported that they had been forced to have sex against their will by a boyfriend (Commonwealth Fund, 1997). Girls who grow up in single-mother or step-parent households, who are poor and grow up in resource-poor neighborhoods and communities, or who are born to teen mothers face increased risks of sexual abuse and unwanted sex (Musick, 1993).

Earlier. than average pubertal development also places some girls at risk. In crude sociobiological terms, the early development of breasts seems to signal to predatory males that a young girl is "in play." Girls who develop breasts earlier than their peers are likely to experience teasing, taunting, and unwanted sexual attention from boys and older men (Udry & Campbell, 1994). Sexual teasing and harassment often takes place in school where teachers may overlook or dismiss it (Thorne, 1993; Sadker, 1994). Girls who are unprotected in school may become disconnected from school or they may gravitate to an older peer group. In either case, this may increase their risks for early sexual involvement and other unhealthy behaviors such as drinking or experimenting with drugs.

Early developing girls' are more likely to have a poor body image, low self-esteem, and symptoms of emotional distress compared to other same-aged girls (Brooks-Gunn & Reiter, 1990; Blum & Rinehart, 1997). They are also more likely to have earlier first intercourse and first pregnancy than later maturing girls (Stattin & Magnusson, 1990).

Girls are having sex at younger ages than in the past. Teenage girls are more likely to have sexual intercourse today than in the past. In 1970, only 29 percent of teen females aged 15-19 had ever had sex compared to 50 percent in 1995 (Moore, Driscoll, & Lindberg, 1998). And the age of first sexual intercourse has declined over the past thirty years to the modal age of about 17 (Laumann et al., 1994). Although the historical decline in the age of first intercourse has been gradual, a decline of one or two years is significant from a developmental perspective. Younger teens are less likely to be cognitively or emotionally ready to have sex or to fully engage in consent, choice, and contraception.

Given this pattern, it is not surprising that teenage girls are also preoccupied with sex. They have to think about sex and worry about sex at younger ages than in the past. They are vulnerable to the disappointments and emotional distress associated with early sexual activity. Many girls suffer unanticipated feelings of emptiness, loss, and resentment after their first

3. Early development is defined as onset of menses at age eleven or younger,

sexual intercourse, even when they fully consent (Thompson, 1995; Brumberg, 1997, Laumann et al., 1994, Wolf, 1997).

Both research studies and personal accounts consistently show that girls want sexual intercourse to "mean" something (Thompson, 1995; Laumann et al., 1994; Brumberg, 1997; Anderson, 1990). In virtually every culture, first sexual intercourse is a milestone event in a young woman's life, surrounded by symbolic and emotional significance about love, commitment, marriage, and having children. Today, as in the past, teenage girls bring certain expectations and desires to their first sexual intercourse. In general, girls tend to link sexual intimacy with emotional intimacy and mutual commitment. More than boys, girls also seek to incorporate sexual relationships into a social network of friends and family. For girls, sexual coupling is connected to social "couplehood." All these factors influence the timing of sexual intercourse and the selection of partners as well as the degree of consent and the likelihood of using contraception.

Early sexual involvement can interfere with healthy psychological development. Girls' bodies mature faster than their heads or their hearts. Some 13-year-old girls may look like grown women, but they are not. Many are still working through the developmental tasks of late childhood. Late childhood is a time when girls acquire a sense of industry and gain skills and competencies in school and social life. The successful completion of these tasks builds inner resources that are important to adolescent development. Precocious sexual interest or involvement can disrupt or delay this developmental process (Musick, 1993).

"The friends I had who weren't virgins any more at thirteen were larger breasted. Because their bodies developed at a younger age, they got hit on younger."

"Sandy" in Naomi Wolf, *Promiscuities*

II. How Girlhood Has Changed

To better understand the crisis in contemporary girlhood, the roundtable examined the broader historical context of girls' coming-of-age. Girlhood is not fixed or static. It is defined by the complex interplay of biology, society, and culture. Biology sets the course and timing of girls' physical maturation. Society establishes the milestones of adulthood. And culture shapes the climate of opinion, thought, and belief governing these maturational milestones. The three forces are dynamic. They change over time, though at markedly different rates. In modern times, social and technological change has moved at lightning speed compared to biological change. Moreover, as the historical evidence suggests, these forces do not move in the same direction. Indeed, the timetables of biological and social maturity are moving in opposite directions. And the culture is contributing to the pace of change by "hurrying" girls into a precocious preoccupation with sex and sexiness.

Changing Timetables of Biological and Social Development

Girls reach biological maturity earlier — and social maturity later — than in the past. Pediatric researchers believe that the onset of puberty has declined by six months to a year in recent decades. The mean age of onset of breast development — the outwardly visible biological marker of female puberty — is 8.87 years for African-American girls and 9.96 for white girls. By age **12,** slightly more than 62 percent of African-American girls and 35 percent of white girls have begun menstruating (Herman-Giddens et al., 1997).

Girls begin to develop about two years earlier than boys, as anyone who has visited an eighth-grade classroom can see. And girls' early pubertal development is viewed in less culturally positive ways than boys' development: "she's getting too fat" or "she's ready to have sex." Earlier puberty is complicated by another change in girls' coming-of-age. As noted earlier, girls are engaging in sexual intercourse at younger ages than in the past, and those who are sexually active are exposed to the risks of sexual involvement for a prolonged period during adolescence.

"The timetables of biological and social maturity are moving in opposite directions."

In traditional societies, puberty often closely coincides with the achievement of womanhood. But in modern societies, puberty occurs long before adulthood is achieved. Moreover, in contemporary American society, the span of time between biological maturity and social maturity is growing longer. At the turn of the last century, a middle-class girl began menstruating at age 15 or 16, finished formal schooling at about the same age, and might be married at age 22 or 23 (Brumberg, 1997; Model1 & Goodman, 1990). But today, girls menstruate at age 12 and finish high school at age 18. Since 70 percent of today's female high school graduates enter college, many young women may not complete their formal schooling until they are in their early or even mid-twenties. Marriage, a traditional milestone of social maturity, occurs later as well. The median age of first marriage for women has now risen to 24.8, the highest level in the 20th century.

The increased time span between biological and social maturity creates new perils and problems for girls. The longer span of time between biological and social maturity makes the passage to adulthood more perilous. For one thing, pregnancy and unwed parenthood can occur at younger ages, and early teen childbearing carries serious risks fofboth mother and child. Unwed parenthood often disrupts, delays, or ends schooling. Less than one-third of teens who begin families before age 18 ever finish high school (National Campaign, 1997). An early exit from school carries more serious costs and consequences in today's post-industrial economy than it did in an earlier industrial or agrarian economy. Today's job market requires much higher levels of education and skills, and most women expect to be wage earners for most of their lives.

Finally, nowadays teenage pregnancy and childbearing are very likely to occur outside of marriage. In the past, the timing of first intercourse and marriage coincided or occurred close together. In the 1950s and 1960s, teen girls had sex and many of them got pregnant, but they typically married shortly before or after the baby was born. Some unwed teenage mothers surrendered their babies for adoption. Today, as a result of earlier sexual activity and later marriage, teenage girls are sexually active for seven years on average before marriage and thus exposed to the risks of unwed pregnancy and motherhood for a prolonged period. The average time between first intercourse and first marriage is even longer for African-American youth — 12 years for women and 19 years for men (National Campaign, 1997). Moreover, when teenagers give birth today —

managing their own sexuality. The new thinking held that girls could make reasoned choices and informed decisions about sex if they had access to information and contraception. Since the medical profession was the gatekeeper of contraceptive information and technology, cultural authority over girls' sexuality passed to doctors and other health professionals, who were committed to promoting sexual health without moral judgments.

A corresponding shift from parental supervision to girl empowerment occurred in the law. Health care professionals argued that common law doctrines of parental consent were major barriers to adolescents who needed advice and treatment for sexuality-related health problems. In 1976, *Missouri* vs. *Danforth* affirmed the right for minors to have abortions without parental consent. After the 1970s, states passed laws allowing minors to seek abortions or contraception without parental notification. Confidentiality rules for professionals involved in adolescent health and counseling also contributed to the shift away from parental oversight and responsibility for daughters' sexuality.

No public consensus exists on the larger significance of these changes. Some deplore the "demoralization" of girlhood as evidence of social decline while others applaud it as social progress. Some believe that laws providing for abortions without parental notification seriously undermine parental authority and responsibility while others believe that such laws offer necessary protections against the arbitrary and punitive exercise of parental authority. Nonetheless, most thoughtful observers agree that the combination of a hypersexualized media culture and the weakening of adult supervision and protection increase the pressures for early sexual involvement among teenage girls today. And there is growing recognition across the ideological spectrum that today's sexual culture is geared more to satisfying adult men's fantasies than to fulfilling the dreams of teenage girls.

The "demoralization" of adolescent girlhood. Until recent decades, puberty was considered a moral as well as a biological event. It was linked to beliefs and norms of sexual innocence, modesty, and purity. Similarly, virginity was a moral as well as physical status, closely identified with feminine virtue, good character, and marital eligibility. Consequently, parents, clergy, and other adults saw adolescence as a time of moral as well as sexual vulnerability.

The family's supervision of adolescent girls was part of its socially defined role as moral teacher. Parents were often clumsy, embarrassed, or silent when it came to communicating about sexual matters, but they played a central role in overseeing adolescent girls' physical, moral, and social development. Mothers set the timetables for first bras and first lipsticks and imposed standards of modesty in dress and conduct. They enforced rules on socializing and dating. Many fathers protected their daughters' virginity by holding suitors responsible for their daughters' virtue, sometimes with threats of physical violence. More broadly, families adhered to the Victorian double standard of sexual conduct. Girls were expected to stay innocent of sexual knowledge and experience until their wedding night and to cultivate certain wifely virtues, such as nurturing and serving others. Boys were expected to sow their wild oats before settling down.

"The combination of a hypersexualized media culture and the weakening of adult supervision and protection increase the pressures for early sexual involvement."

The sexual revolution, with its new technology of birth control and its ideology of sexual freedom and equality, challenged the Victorian double standard and the cultural rationale for it. With access to contraception, women could take control of their bodies and manage their fertility in ways earlier generations of women could not even imagine. Importantly, too, the sexual revolution called for greater openness and frankness about sexuality in everything from language to specific practices. A single standard of sexuality, one, shared by both men and women, emphasizing equality and rights and self-expression, supplanted the old double standard — at least in theory, if not in practice. Though the sexual revolution was led by adults for adults, its values spread rapidly through youth culture. Boundaries that once demarcated an "adults-only" sexual world became increasingly blurred and indistinct in the aftermath of the sexual revolution.

In the new climate of sexual openness and freedom, parents' moral strictures and social supervision seemed increasingly ineffective and outmoded, as evidenced by the sharp increase in teen pregnancy and unwed childbearing beginning in the 1970s and continuing for the next two decades. Moreover, the old Victorian double standard proved inconsistent with feminist aspirations as well as with the changing demographics of family life and the female life course. Divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing rose sharply between the 1960s and the 1990s. Girls growing up in an era of family upheaval could no longer depend on marriage as a lifelong economic and childrearing partnership. The cultural message was that girls had to prepare for economically self-sufficient lives. To accomplish this goal, girls had to have more schooling, postpone marriage longer than--their own mothers had, and anticipate longer periods of singlehood during the roughly eighty years of their lives.

From parental protection to girl empowerment. According to Brumberg, the demoralization of girls' coming-of-age was accompanied by a change in the cultural authority overseeing girls' sexuality. According to the new model, girls themselves were responsible for

when there is much less stigma attached to out-of-wedlock childbearing — they are much more likely to decide to raise their child as single mothers rather than marry or give the child up for adoption. Unwed teen mothers and their children are more likely to end up on welfare and to experience persistent poverty and economic insecurity than women who give birth after their teens.

A Hypersexualized Media and Marketplace Culture

Cultural conditions have changed, making the world less safe for young women. Girls are growing up in a popular culture that compounds the risks and perils associated with a prolonged adolescence. What's more, girls are exposed to the toxic influences of the culture at younger ages and with fewer buffers and protections than before. In the past, there were guardrails along the road to adolescence; now these guardrails have come down. As historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg (1997) explains:

> We have backed away from traditional supervision and guidance of adolescent girls, yet we sustain a popular culture that is permeated by sexual imagery, so, much so that many young women regard their bodies and sexual allure as the primary currency of the realm (200).

As a result, girlhood is cut short, and teen girls are plunged prematurely into adulthood as sexual beings, long before they are socially or emotionally ready for adult responsibilities.

Teenage girls are targets of an aggressive media and marketplace culture bent on selling sex and sexiness. Both teenage boys and girls are exposed to sexual images and messages in the media, but girls are more susceptible to its appeals. More than boys, girls consult the media for advice on health, fashion, diet, and relationships, and they are the target of advertising by the huge fashion, cosmetics, health, and beauty industries.

The market exploits girls' anxieties about their appearance and social desirability. Distilled to its essence, the market message is: "You are a mess. You need to buy products to improve your image." And marketplace culture is not content to focus on teenagers; it is reaching downward to cultivate sexiness among preteens. The fashion industry designs and sells sexy swimsuits, cut high to reveal thighs and buttocks, to seven- and eight-year-old girls. Little girls make up the target market for "workout Barbies" and spandex exercise outfits "just like Mommy's" Even birthday cards for little girls focus on glamour, sexiness, and buying things. A card for a ten-year-old girl includes this message: "Wake up to a perfect hair day. Go shopping with unlimited budget..." A card for a six-year-old reads: "Imagine yourself as the star of the show, as glamorous as can be. Imagine yourself at the masquerade ball dancing the night away...':

Unlike boys, girls face extraordinary cultural pressures to conform to an unrealistic and unachievable body ideal. Music television and fashion advertising feature images of super skinny, sexy, and sometimes headless women's bodies. These Barbie bodies bear no resemblance to girls' developing bodies or to a mature woman's body. (In fashion advertising, the average model is 5'9" and weighs 110 pounds while the average American woman is 5'4" and weighs 142 pounds.) Even more commonly, fashion and advertising dissect women's bodies into "boobs, buns, and abs." To the degree that body image is connected to female identity, this identity now consists of fragmented body parts, like a cut-up chicken.

Perversely, at the same time that it creates impossible womanly body ideals, the media also idolize the prepubescent body that girls are shedding. Model Kate Moss and figure skater Tara Lipinski are admired for their tiny, undeveloped bodies. In sports entertainment, the media focus on SO-pound skaters and gymnasts and their spills and tears, rather than on larger-sized

basketball and soccer players and their assists and goals. Sports stories profiling superstar teen figure skaters describe the career setbacks caused by developing breasts and hips. Such cultural pressure puts girls at war with their own developing bodies. As they look into the mirror, they hate what they see. They complain to their mothers: "I look gross" and "I have thunder thighs."

But the media's influence extends beyond images and messages about sex and body image. More than any other single cultural force, the media cultivate and exploit adolescent girls' dreams and desires. For teenage girls, sexual experience is embedded in a larger life narrative about love, intimacy, and commitment. The entertainment media offer a story line about sex and romantic relationships that deeply engages girls' imaginations and emotions. This is why teenage girls are among the most ardent fans of soap operas, television programs that specialize in narratives of sex and romance, and why some teenage mothers name their new babies after soap opera characters.

Partly in response to the hypersexualized culture, many teenage girls are direct and sophisticated about matters that would have made earlier generations of teenage girls blush. As Brumberg (1997) observes, today's adolescents are less bound by traditional norms of girlhood modesty than their mothers or grandmothers. They speak openly and frankly about sex. They may use four-letter words as casually as their male peers. They may seem tough and worldly with their kool-aid-dyed hair and their pierced noses and navels.

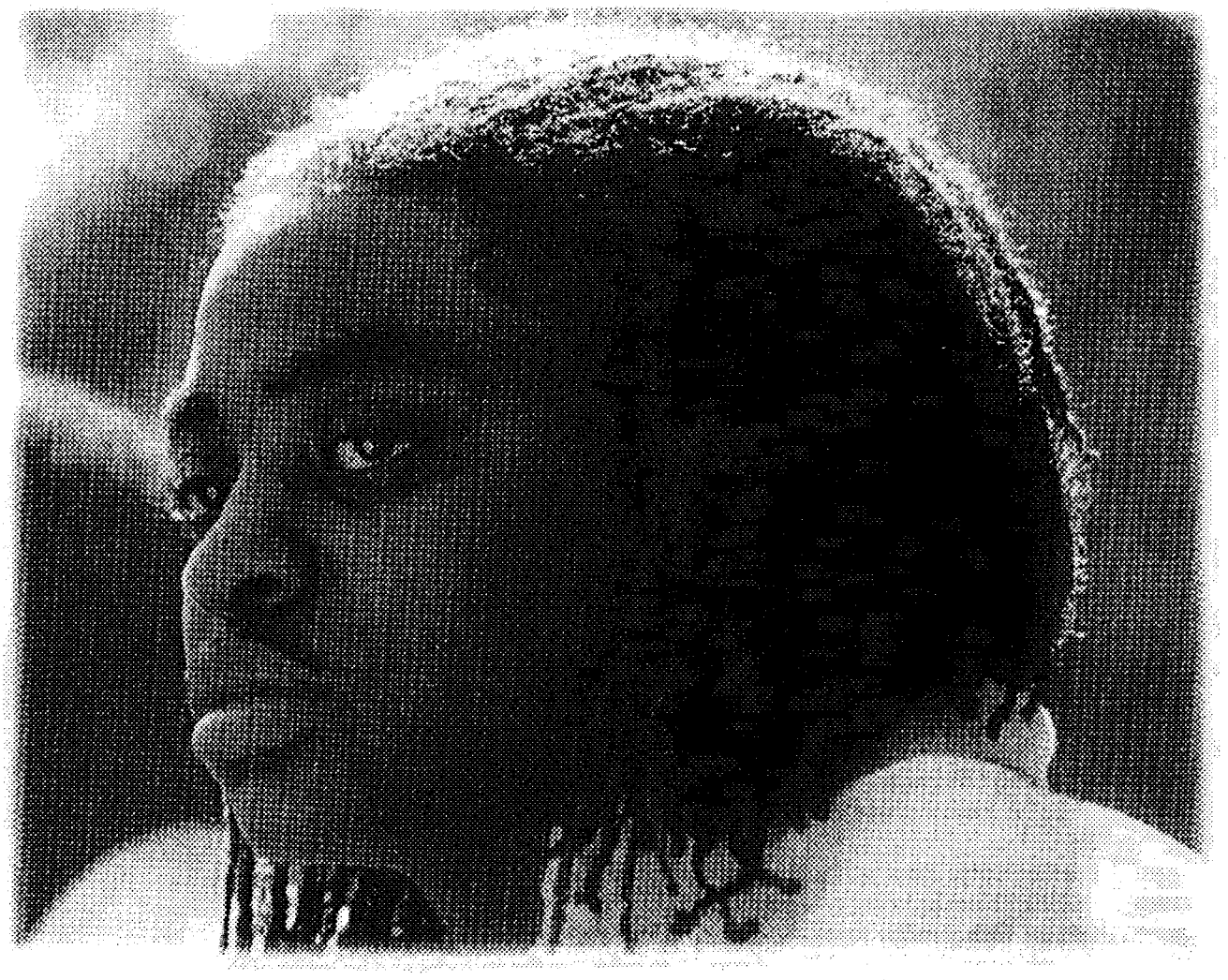
But girls' greater sexual frankness and sophistication can be misleading. In many ways, young teens are still children, yearning for nurture, comfort, and guidance. Girls' letters to teen magazines reflect this combination of precocity and innocence. In a single advice column in the magazine *YM* (1998), for example, one teenager asks how to feel good about her naked body when she has sex while another teen asks how to stop thumb-sucking.

"Girls' greater sexual frankness and sophistication can be misleading. In many ways, young teens are still children, yearning for nurture, comfort, and guidance."

From Social Protections to Self-Protection

The cultural history of girlhood is, in part, a record of the changing messages and meaning assigned to girls' sexual coming-of-age. In The *Body* Project, Joan Jacobs Brumberg points to two important changes in cultural attitudes about girls' sexuality. The first is what she calls the "demoralization" of adolescent sexuality. By this she means the shift from value-laden moral norms of sexuality to value-neutral health norms. The second is the shift in the locus of authority over adolescent sexuality from family, clergy, and other moral educators to girls themselves, health professionals, and the law. According to Brumberg, these cultural changes have both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, today's girls are less likely to remain ignorant and frightened about matters of sexuality and pregnancy than girls of earlier generations. On the other hand, adolescent girls are less likely to find special guidance and support from adults, and especially adult women, during this passage. She writes:

> The umbrella of protection created by the Victorians to shelter sexually maturing girls had many problems, to be sure, but it eased the rite of passage in ways that adolescents today greatly need — and rarely receive (25).



III. How Family, Race, Class, and Ethnicity Shape Girlhood

American girlhood is not, and never has been, monolithic. Coming-of-age memoirs as well as ethnographic, historical, and sociological studies of adolescent girls describe the rich variety of girlhood experience across time, class, and ethnic culture. Family, race, ethnicity, and class factors also influence patterns of adolescent sexuality, although we need to learn a lot more about how these factors interact with girls' biological and psychosocial development.

Family

Parents are the most influential figures in their daughters' lives, but they may be absent, unavailable, disengaged, or just plain confused. According to one study, one in three parents in America is seriously disengaged from his or her teenager's life (Steinberg, 1997). Parents today spend less time with their teenagers than a generation ago. Since the 1960s, parental time with children has declined by 10-12 hours per week (Blum & Rinehart, 1997). More parents are working long hours outside the home, and they are often isolated from each other and the larger community. They may not know their daughter's friends or the parents of those friends.

Many mothers and fathers are raising daughters as single parents or step-parents, and their time, supervision, and discipline of children are split between separate households. As a consequence of persistently high levels of divorce and unwed childbearing, many fathers are

"In trying to meet and master the developmental tasks of adolescence, girls who are growing up poor in our country today face many more obstacles and have far fewer resources than their more advantaged counterparts ... because of this, they sometimes accomplish these tasks in ways that appear not to make sense to us but make sense to them."

Judith Musick, psychologist, roundtable participant, and author of *Young, Poor, and Pregnant: The Psychology of Teenage Motherhood*

absent from their daughters' households and, in all too many cases, missing from their daughters' lives as well. Family structure also plays a part in the likelihood of teenage pregnancy and childbearing. Teens who come from intact, two-parent families (whether biological or adoptive) are less likely to give birth by any age than teens from other family backgrounds (Moore, Driscoll, & Lindberg, 1998). Family structure also plays a role in the timing of first sexual intercourse. Only 22 percent of teens from intact families have had sex by age 16 compared to 44 percent of girls from other family structures (Moore, Driscoll, & Lindberg, 1998). Teens from disrupted families are also at higher risk of sexual abuse and victimization.

The demographic clout and political influence of parents are weaker than a generation ago. Families with children at home represent a shrinking percentage of American households. Within living memory, such families represented roughly one-half of the nation's households. Today, they make up roughly one-third. The ability of parents to influence the attitudes and behavior of the larger society has declined accordingly Parents cannot assume an identity of interests with other voting adults. And parenthood itself is culturally devalued as a worthy adult vocation. Raising children is often regarded as something working adults do "on the side" in their spare time. This cultural devaluation of parenthood contributes to the sense of isolation and powerlessness among parents.

Finally, parents encounter contradictory and confusing messages about their roles and responsibilities in raising teenage daughters. The cultural and peer environment their teenagers are exposed to is so different from what they experienced themselves. Parents are worried about teenage sexuality activity and other high-risk behaviors, such as alcohol and other drug use, but they are also confused about what they can or should do. Some experts warn of the health risks of teenage sex and the need to encourage abstinence; other experts emphasize the healthy normality and inevitability of teenage sex and the need to encourage contraception. The law sends confusing messages as well: some laws prevent parents from gaining access to information about their daughters' health while other laws hold parents responsible for their daughters' health and conduct.

Race, Ethnicity, and Class

There are significant racial and ethnic differences in girls' sexual behavior and rates of teen pregnancy and unwed childbearing. African-American and Hispanic girls are more likely to have sexual intercourse at younger ages and more likely to become pregnant as teenagers compared to white teenagers. African-American teens are much more likely to grow up in single-mother households than white teens, and girls who grow up in disrupted families are at higher risk of early sexual involvement. About one-third of both African-American and

Hispanic 15-year-old girls have had sex compared to one-quarter of white 15-year-olds. Over the past decade, however, birth rates for African-American teens have been declining more sharply than for whites and Hispanics (Donovan, 1998).

Much of the recent research on the culture of girlhood focuses on the lives of middle-class, college-bound girls and neglects the lives of low-income, immigrant, and minority girls. This bias further distorts the picture. Middle-class girls are represented in the literature as multi-dimensional, with complex inner and outer lives, while low-income and minority girls are portrayed as statistical stick figures, without any psychological, moral, or spiritual dimension. As a result, the public tends to regard poor and minority teenage girls as nothing more than pregnancies waiting to happen.

Income and class may be more important than race and ethnicity in shaping adolescent experience. Girls growing up in resource-poor environments — whether urban or rural — have many fewer educational, recreational, and athletic opportunities than girls in resource-rich environments. They may not have the opportunity to participate in sports or other after-school activities, get part-time jobs, go on vacations, take music lessons, or have home computers, all experiences that many middle-class girls take for granted. Their families are fragile, stressed, and often troubled. Many grow up in households without fathers, and their single mothers typically have disappointing and highly conflictual relationships with men. And low-income girls are often unprotected from the sexual attentions or abuse of their mothers' boyfriends or other male relatives and acquaintances. They are significantly more likely to be physically or sexually abused as children than more economically privileged girls.

In her study of low-income teenage girls, both minority and white, developmental psychologist Judith Musick (1993) describes the interplay between these girls' family and social environments and their psychological development. Teenage girls of all backgrounds must accomplish certain developmental tasks in order to make the transition to independent adulthood, she observes. In late childhood, girls must establish a sense of industry and acquire a set of skills and competencies. These accomplishments build girls' inner resources and contribute to their sense that they are capable and problem-solving individuals. In early adolescence, teenage girls do not entirely abandon this task; they build upon earlier developmental accomplishments by continuing to gain competence and mastery in their school and social lives. This cumulative experience of mastery gives girls the inner strength to form an independent identity.

Girls whose families are poor and often disrupted, whose schooling is inadequate, and whose neighborhoods are isolated and dangerous face extraordinary obstacles in accomplishing these developmental tasks. They 'lack the family and social "buffers" and safety nets that protect middle-class teenage girls from serious harm during the prolonged passage through adolescence. Above all, girls growing up in poor environments lack a sense of hope in the future. They may have known few women with satisfying jobs; they have little expectation of a fulfilling career. It is no wonder that so many find the "career" of being a mother an attractive option — perhaps the only option.

Sometimes, disadvantaged girls carry the burden of adult responsibilities: nurturing a despondent or addicted mother, caring for younger siblings, or running the household. Girls who face these obstacles may not accomplish the developmental tasks of early adolescence. Their progress may be delayed or arrested at an earlier developmental stage.

Paradoxically, the problems of poor girls are less likely to be addressed than those of middle-class girls, but they are more likely to get public attention and be deplored. If a middle-dass girl

becomes pregnant, has an eating disorder, or is emotionally troubled, her parents will take her quietly to a private doctor, send her to a therapist or a school counselor, or enroll her in a special summer camp; her problems may not come to the notice of others. If a poor girl has troubles — whether she lives in the inner city or a poor rural area — she often goes it alone. Only the most obviously distressed girls may get help or attention. The quietly disturbed go unnoticed. But while poor girls may be less likely to get the help they need, when they do get assistance it is provided in very public settings — publicly funded health clinics, welfare and teen mother programs, and so forth — paid for by taxpayers. For these reasons, the public tends to see teen pregnancy as a moral and social problem only when it occurs among low-income girls.

Musick's psychosocial perspective provides a broader context for understanding sexual and reproductive behavior of disadvantaged girls. To become truly independent, a teenage girl has to find an identity and a vision of her future that is separate from her mother's. Tragically, for girls who have unmet childhood needs for nurture, separation from their mothers is too emotionally threatening; instead, many of these girls achieve pseudo-independence through pregnancy and unwed mbtherhood. In psychological terms, if not in social or economic terms, this makes sense. It confers adult status on the teen mother and, at the same time, maintains, and even strengthens, her emotional dependency and attachment to her own mother.

Although the research literature clearly shows the significance of racial, class, and family factors in patterns of sexual behavior among teens, it does not tell us how these factors influence the attitudes, values, and beliefs of adolescent girls or their parents. Nor do the statistics on risk factors shed any light on how girls at higher risk of teen pregnancy think about their sexual and romantic lives or why higher risk teens get pregnant when they do. Moreover, a broader historical and cultural perspective is often missing in the portrait of adolescent girls of color. For example, historian Gail Wyatt (1997) argues that we cannot fully understand the contemporary culture of African-American girlhood until we understand the distinctive legacy of stereotypes, fears, and expectations that grew out of the historical experience of slavery and that still shape African-American parents' approaches to their daughters' sexuality.

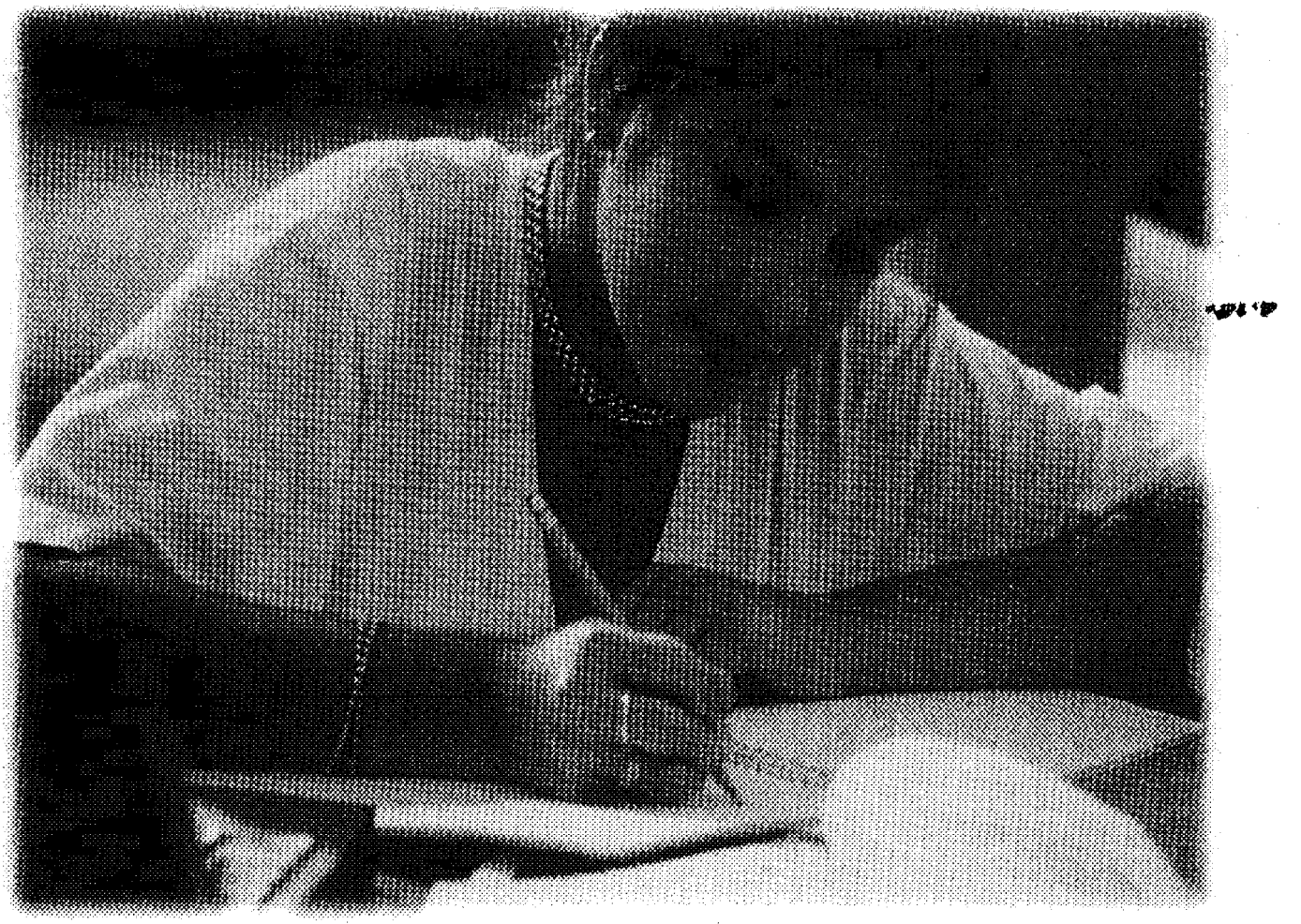
Recent immigrants. Girls from immigrant families confront particular challenges, although their families also have unique strengths. Asians and Latinas make up the two largest groups of immigrant girls. Although these girls are diverse and dissimilar in many ways, they share one common experience: they are indoctrinated into American popular culture faster than their parents. Even more than most teenagers, they may see their parents as embarrassingly out of touch with the "real world." This disrupts traditional patterns of parental authority and child deference, especially important in many immigrant families, and makes it hard for parents and teens to talk with each other.

On matters affecting sexual behavior, the gap between the generations can be profound. Many immigrant parents do not speak about sex with their daughters, and they often adhere to a rigid double standard, embedded in the traditional values they bring with them from their native countries. Girls are expected to remain virginal and innocent of sexual experience until marriage, while boys are encouraged to have sex at an early age to show their manhood. Yet the daughters of immigrants are coming of age in a media and marketplace culture where they are encouraged to imitate celebrity superstars, to reject traditional norms of chastity and modesty, and to enjoy sex as a normal part of being an American teenager. This clash of values makes it even harder for immigrant families to handle the challenges of adolescence — which is only compounded by the language barriers immigrant parents face when they try to approach teachers or health care professionals with their concerns.

"Love does not always equal communication... [Immigrant] parents love their children very much, yet they cannot communicate."

Ruth Zambrana, family scholar, roundtable participant, and editor of *Understanding Latino Families*

However, immigrant parents and their daughters also have certain distinctive strengths. , More than other parents, immigrant parents communicate the importance of doing well in school. A survey of more than 20,000 teenagers from nine high schools shows that teens from recently arrived immigrant families spend more time on homework, are more attentive in class, are more oriented to doing well in school, and are more likely to have friends who think academic success is important (Steinberg, 1997). However, the same study found that this achievement-oriented school behavior declined and school problems increased as the teenagers become more Americanized. The longer a teenager's family has lived in this country, the worse the youngster's school performance and mental health. Americanized ethnic minority teens — Asians and Latinas alike — spend significantly more time hanging out with friends, partying, dating, and spending time with peers who value socializing over academics. The authors of the study attribute this decline to the adolescent peer culture and its scorn for academic work and achievement. An adolescent "party" culture may contribute to engagement in unhealthy or risky behavior, such as smoking, drinking, and having sex.



IV. Building a Girl-Friendly Culture: Connections and Protections

Having reviewed the current state of girlhood in this country, as portrayed by the research and the experts, the roundtable participants concluded that the crisis of girlhood could be summarized this way:

- *Contemporary American girlhood is a prolonged and increasingly perilous life stage for many girls.* Today's girls are entering puberty and becoming physically mature at younger ages than in the past, and they are expected to postpone sex or to avoid the risks of sexual activity during the prolonged period of adolescence. Yet they are growing up in the midst of a media and marketplace culture that portrays sex and "sexiness" as the core of female identity and success.

- *The culture of girlhood is becoming degraded and unhealthy.* Too many girls are growing up in an unfriendly environment where they have little supervision and support from parents or other responsible, caring adults and where they are overexposed at young ages to the exploitative sexual images and pressures of the media and marketplace. Too many girls from low-income families, poor neighborhoods, and bad schools have dreams for success in life but no real-life pathway to pursue them. Asking girls to avoid sex, get straight As, and win scholarships to college without providing the support and stepping stones to do so is like asking fledgling chicks to flap their wings hard and fly to the moon.

In thinking about practical ways to build a more girl-friendly social and cultural environment, roundtable participants looked at several sources of connections and protections, beginning with the "close-in" relationships in girls' lives — families, neighborhoods, and schools. Improving the environment of girlhood, therefore, depends on improving the quality and strength of these connections. First and foremost, this means supporting and strengthening parent-daughter connections. Parents whose guidance is warm and firm can help protect their adolescent daughters from the harms and hazards of adolescent life today (Miller, 1998). Their supervisory presence also buffers and minimizes the worst influences of the peer and media culture. Parents also have the incentive and desire to contribute to their daughters' well-being. Consequently, successful efforts to strengthen parent-child connections are likely to have the greatest pay-off in improving the overall health and well-being of teenage girls.

"Across all of the health outcomes examined, the results point to the importance of the family and home environment in protecting adolescents from harm. What emerges most consistently as protective is the teenager's feeling of connectedness with parents and family."

Robert Blum and Peggy Rinehart,

Reducing the Risk: Connections That Make A Difference in the Lives of Youth

But parents and daughters, however warmly and closely attached, do not thrive in conditions of social isolation and neglect. According to a Carnegie Council report (1995), young adolescents from all economic strata often find themselves alone with few adults to turn to and no safe places to go. Thus, schools, faith communities, and youth development organizations play an important role in building a girl-friendly environment.

Finally, though family and community represent local influences, they are increasingly forced to compete against larger influences in the culture. The media and marketplace 'play an increasingly dominant role in the culture of adolescence. The commercial culture is both pervasive and diffuse; it appeals to children and teenagers over the heads of parents, teachers, and clergy. Parents often find themselves competing with the media for the hearts and minds of their daughters; while they are trying to develop their daughters' capacity for work, discipline, and deferred gratification, the media and marketplace are cultivating and courting girls' appetites, wants, and desires. Consequently, if the effort at improving the social environment is to be successful, it must engage the participation and support of those who work in the entertainment media and advertising.

But how do we actually do all this? The following section offers guidance for parents, families, schools, faith communities, youth development organizations, and the media.

What Can Mothers, Fathers, and Other Family Members Do?

Given the influential role of parents on adolescent well-being, how can we strengthen the connections between parents and daughters? The following suggestions grew out of the roundtable discussions and supporting research literature. They are not intended to be comprehensive but rather to supplement other sources of advice to parents, such as the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy's (1998) *Ten Tips for Parents to Help Their Children Avoid Teen* Pregnancy. These suggestions focus on mother-daughter and father-

daughter relationships because these are primary adult-child relationships in most adolescent girls' lives. However, for some girls, other responsible and caring adults, such as a step-parent, grandparent, or close family friend, play the primary parental role.

The mother-daughter connection. The mother-daughter relationship remains one of the most important, if sometimes trying, family connections during adolescence. Since many daughters today grow up without the responsible involvement of a father in their lives, the mother-daughter bond may not only be the primary but also the sole parent-child connection. (p Because mothers tend to be the parent who talks to both sons and daughters about sex, they play a key role in shaping their daughters' attitudes toward sexuality. They also shape daughters' attitudes toward body image,, marriage, and male-female relationships in general (Rodin, 1992; Thornton & Axinn, 1996). There is also some evidence indicating a strong relationship between a mother's own sexual experience as a teenager and that of her teenage daughter (Katchadourian, 1990). Here are a few ways to make good use of the mother-daughter connection:

- Model healthy eating and attitudes toward food and body image. Because feeding is so closely associated with maternal nurture and because food is so deeply woven into women's cultural traditions, maternal attitudes toward food, eating, and body image may be passed on to daughters. Mothers who are excessively preoccupied with their own weight and eating or are obsessed with fitness may communicate these unhealthy attitudes to their daughters. According to psychologist Judith Rodin (1992), the more a mother is preoccupied with her own weight, the more her child is at risk for body image problems. Mothers who express anxiety or alarm over weight gains during puberty may contribute to their daughters' discontent with body image.

- Protect daughters from unwanted sexual attentions. Mothers (and fathers) should be vigilant about protecting daughters from teasing, harassment, and the unwanted sexual attentions of boys and especially older men. Parents should be particularly protective of daughters who enter puberty early and who look physically mature, since these girls are at higher risk of being teased, harassed, and pursued by older men than other same-aged girls. Moreover, mothers can make sure daughters are protected from unwanted attentions from male partners, male relatives, or male friends who try to kiss, snuggle, fondle, or engage in other forms of inappropriate physical contact. Unlike boys, girls are often expected to be physically affectionate with friends and relatives. Adults should never pressure girls into showing affection when the girls do not want to.

- Organize activities linking daughters to women relatives or friends. Mother-daughter book clubs are spreading around the country. They provide intergenerational connections as well as opportunities for groups of mothers and daughters to socialize together. Some families foster intergenerational connections with "women-only" family traditions. For example, one extended family of Irish women holds regular meetings of "Club," where the older women give advice to the younger women on work, love, marriage, children, and family life.

The father-daughter connection. A father is the first man in a girl's life, and the father-daughter relationship is often the earliest model for male-female relationships. Through the experience of being admired and cherished by her father, a daughter gains a sense of her value and worthiness as a female. She learns what it is to be faithfully loved by a man in ways that do not depend on her sexuality, and this experience translates into trust and security. The presence and involvement of a responsible father protects daughters from early sexual involvement and

pregnancy (Musick, 1994). Fathers may size up and implicitly intimidate younger males who are romantically interested in their daughters. Sociologist Elijah Anderson (1990) writes of the role African-American fathers play in pressuring young males to "do right" by their daughters: "When a couple first begins to date, some fathers will 'sit the boy down' and have a ritual talk . . . The boy knows in advance that he will have to answer to the girl's father and the family unit more generally. If the girl becomes pregnant, he will be less likely to summarily leave her" **(122).**

- Fathers should remain responsibly involved in teenage daughters' lives whatever the status of their relationship to their daughters' mothers. Nonresidential divorced or unwed fathers are more likely than married fathers to become disengaged or absent entirely. These fathers must make special efforts to remain part of their teenage daughters' lives. Nonresidential fathers can build connections with their teenage daughters in a number of ways, ranging from spending time together to coaching their daughters in academics and sports to helping their daughters develop and pursue special aptitudes and interests. It is also important for nonresidential fathers to financially support daughters' post-secondary education, wherever possible. Many divorced and unwed fathers stop contributing financially to their daughters' educations once legal child support obligations end, at age 18 in many states. This can limit educational aspirations and opportunities.

The parent-to-parent connection. Too often parents feel powerless to counteract the destructive influence of the hypersexualized peer and media culture. Yet there is a lot they can do to create a more protective and wholesome enviroment around their daughters. A first step is to get to know the parents of their pre-teenagers' friends by planning joint activities, such as haunted houses as an alternative to the sixth- or seventh-grade dance, or family barbecues, picnics, or softball games. Parents can then band together in the high school years to agree upon expectations and rules regarding dating, driving, curfews, and supervised, alcohol-free parties.

Finally, all parents should discuss with their teens their own values and standards of behavior with respect to sexual activity and other high-risk behaviors. In addition to what they say and the rules they establish, parents convey their attitudes indirectly by their own behavior — for example, by their own sexual behavior and how they treat each other — and by their comments on advertisements, sexual situations depicted in the media, and the behavior of their friends or public figures.

"There is a connection between the academic activities in school and what goes on in a girl's life outside the classroom. If she has the confidence to talk in class, she'll have the confidence to say 'no' in the bedroom."

David Sadker, roundtable participant and co-author of *Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls*

What Can Schools Do?

Strong connections to school are important in protecting adolescents from unhealthy behavior. Girls who feel that they are treated fairly in the school environment, are close to others, and are getting along with teachers are less likely to experience emotional distress, suicidal thinking, or early sexual intercourse than girls who experience unfair treatment or

prejudice, according to research based on the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Blum & Rinehart, 1997). Two adolescent experiences pose a threat to this sense of connection to school and thus may place girls at higher risk for other problems. One is sexual harassment in school. Girls who are sexually teased, taunted, or assaulted are not likely to feel they are treated fairly, especially if the school does not recognize or punish this misconduct. Another is excessive employment during the school year. Girls who work more than 20 hours a week have diminished commitment to school, higher levels of emotional distress and substance use, and earlier ages at first sexual intercourse than girls who do not work such excessive hours (Blum, 1997; Steinberg, 1997).

Schools can make a real difference for girls in many ways, including:

- Enforce **a school policy of zero tolerance for sexual harassment.** Girls who are teased or harassed feel unsafe and unprotected in school. This may lead to disengagement from school or even dropping-out. Teachers and school administrators should dedicate themselves to preventing sexual teasing and harassment. Teachers should learn to recognize taunting and harassing behavior, and administrators should develop and enforce policies and procedures designed to discipline those who engage in such behavior.

- **Create a parent-friendly school culture. School administrators and teachers** bemoan the lack of parental interest and involvement in daughters' school lives, but too often parents are treated like unwelcome visitors when they seek contact with their children's schools or teachers. This breakdown between parent and school seems to occur particularly often during the transition from small, neighborhood elementary schools to larger, regional junior high schools or middle schools. Teachers see students for one class period, and these classes may not meet on a daily basis. In junior high, teachers may not get to know individual students well. With more fragmented teacher-student relationships, parents find it difficult to gather information about their teenagers or to find teachers who have an overall sense of their daughters' school life. Other school professionals who are likely to see the larger picture — guidance counselors, school nurses, and health educators — often place greater importance on protecting the privacy and confidentiality of their students than in finding ways to involve parents in helping solve the problems they detect. Teachers, counselors, and health professionals should explore ways to respect student confidences without keeping parents entirely in the dark about serious problems in their teens' lives.

- **Increase parental effectiveness through school- and community-sponsored parent education clinics and workshops.** According to researcher Laurence Steinberg (1997), we now know enough about the fundamentals of good parenting to mount a systematic effort to educate parents in effective techniques. Such a parent education effort should not be limited to parents of infants and young children but should continue through the childrearing years. Programs for parents of adolescents are especially important and often neglected. Schools can play a leadership role by sponsoring parent education workshops, seminars, and discussions.

What Can Faith Communities Do?

Public attention typically focuses on the dark side of adolescence: its problems and pathologies. Far less attention is devoted to the bright side of adolescence: its ideals and aspirations. Yet teenagers are deeply engaged in the search for larger purposes and meaning. Faith communities provide an anchor of belief and a sense of transcendent purpose.

"We have three parts — a soul, a spirit, and a body. We talk about the body, about the media, about how we dress, but what about the spiritual needs of these children?"

Yolanda Brewster, nurse, health educator, and roundtable participant

Importantly, too, faith communities connect teenagers with other religiously committed teens and with adults who support their spiritual development. There are many ways for faith communities to support teens (see the National Campaign's *Nine Tips to Help Faith Leaders and Their Communities Address Teen Pregnancy);* here are two:

- **Support teenagers' religious education and participation in faith-based youth service and volunteer programs.** Faith organizations are able to nurture teenagers' idealism and commitment in a, variety of ways: through religious teachings and observance, spiritual discipline, and social, activism. Churches, synagogues, and mosques engage teenagers in projects to help others. Serving others enhances self-respect and contributes to a sense of purpose, solidarity, and usefulness. According to research studies, teenagers who feel religion and prayer are important in their lives are also less likely to smoke tobacco, use marijuana, or drink alcohol and more likely to delay sexual activity (Blum & Rinehart, **1997).**

- **Celebrate teenage girls' coming-of-age with rituals.** Faith communities are able to provide ceremonial recognition of girls' (and boys') spiritual passages. For example, Hispanic girls and their families mark the fifteenth birthday with Quincenearas in their churches. Bat' Mitzvahs are the traditional coming-of-age ritual for Jewish girls, while confirmation admits girls into the adult community of believers in many Christian churches. Some church-based youth programs also create coming-of-age rites and rituals devoted to nurturing ideals and standards of responsible manhood and womanhood.

What Can Youth Development Organizations Do?

Resistant to easy definition or categorization, youth development programs generally build on the positive aspects in girls' lives and help foster connections to the larger community by improving life skills and options, bolstering self-esteem, and giving young people the chance to achieve. For example, Girls Inc. offers leadership development and peer support for girls as well as projects to enhance mother-daughter communication. Other suggestions on promising approaches to building assets and connections include:

- **Encourage girls' participation in both competitive and recreational sports. Girls gain** self-confidence, a sense of individual mastery, and overall physical and mental well-being through participation in sports. According to some studies, sports participation is also associated with a lower risk of pregnancy. For example, preliminary findings from a large-scale study by the Women's Sports Foundation indicate that compared to female non-athletes, female athletes remained virgins longer, had fewer sexual partners, engaged in intercourse less often, and were at lower risk for unwanted pregnancy (Sabo, Miller, Farrell, Barnes, & Melnick, 1998).

- **Create secular rituals as part of youth development and leadership programs for teenage girls.** Youth development programs and some abstinence-based sex education programs

recognize what gangs have long understood: teenagers find identity and solidarity by participating in peer group rituals. Some youth development programs foster group identity and solidarity with T-shirts, hats, jackets, or "recognition" jewelry. True Love Waits gives 13-year-olds a ring to symbolize their commitment to virginity. In addition to creating group support for positive behaviors, secular rituals appeal to teenage girls' love of beauty and ceremony. Best Friends, a youth development program for girls, holds an elegant recognition banquet for girls and their parents each year.

- **Wherever** appropriate, **create formal occasions for girls to make pledges/promises to be guided by a set of shared beliefs and values.** Public pledges can support commitment to positive practices and behaviors. For example, when teenagers report that they have taken a public pledge to remain a virgin until marriage, they are more likely to delay intercourse (Blum, 1997). The public witnessing of a vow to be abstinent or to avoid unprotected sex may also provide an important source of community support and connection to teens. By witnessing the pledge, parents, teachers, and youth organization leaders 'share the responsibility of supporting and helping teenagers achieve their stated goals. In some instances, parents or other committed adults may want to take a reciprocal pledge to support their teenagers.

What Can the Media Do?

Although there is growing willingness among some popular media to promote more positive and healthy images for girls, the pressures of the marketplace often can make this extremely difficult. Roundtable participants heard from representatives of the media about a number of ongoing initiatives to change the media image of girls. For example, leaders of girls' organizations can work with magazine editors or television producers and writers to develop story ideas with positive messages or identify girls who might be subjects of profiles. Girls' organizations can also develop advisory partnerships with computer software developers to create software that will appeal to girls and foster their computer skills and related competencies. Youth development organizations can recognize and reward positive contributions by the media. Parents, teachers, and others who work with girls could also teach media criticism and literacy skills. Other suggestions included:

- **Develop media features and forums on issues that concern teenagers.** In partnership with the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, *Teen People* conducted an on-line survey on teen relationships and teen pregnancy. The editors published a teen panel discussion of the survey in their May 1998 issue, as part of their recognition of May as Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month.

- **Present media images that more accurately reflect the racial and ethnic diversity as well as the variety of sizes and shapes among adolescent girls.** *Jump (For Girls Who Dare To Be Real),* a new magazine, strives to portray girls of all colors, sizes, and shapes and to encourage interest in sports and other achievements.

- **Present features or storylines that clearly communicate the risks and problems that teen pregnancy and childbearing pose as well as ways to avoid teen pregnancy.** Teens pay attention to media messages about the serious consequences of teen pregancy, especially when they are cast in the language of teens themselves. They also respond to clear messages about the only two ways available to avoid pregnancy: abstinence or the careful, consistent use of

contraception. *YM* magazine recently featured a comprehensive story on the variety of contraceptive methods available.

- Focus on girls' achievements that have nothing to do with weight loss, fashion, diet, or "makeovers." Editors and writers for teen magazines can contribute to a more representative and positive portrait of teen life by including regular stories on girls' achievements in academics, sports, entrepreneurship, the arts, and community service. Advertising, business, and publishing organizations might institute editorial and writing awards recognizing magazines that do the best job of reporting on girls' achievements and leadership activities.

- Identify and exploit market "niches" for girl-friendly products and services. The financial success of the American Girls doll collection, a line of historical dolls, books, and accessories created by a teacher, suggests that there is money to be made with positive and educational toys for girls. Entrepreneurs and investors should be encouraged to explore and develop other potential market niches for girl-friendly products and services.

What More Do We Need to Know?

While we have learned a lot about the culture in which girls grow up and about ways to make their transition to adulthood easier, there is still much that we don't know. Roundtable participants pinpointed four major gaps in the current discussion about girls that need further study and debate:

- Religious values and adolescent development. Research and policy initiatives are now heralding the positive role of religion in everything from crime prevention to disease prevention. Religious values and faith can be important factors in teen pregnancy prevention as well, but research on the role of religion in the lives of adolescence is thin. This is a serious and puzzling oversight, since religion is an important part of the lives of many American teenagers, a source of values, spiritual strength, and resilience. The neglect of religion in the study of adolescence may reflect an overall neglect of religion in the social sciences, or it may be part of the current focus on adolescent health risks, problems, and pathologies. Yet without some attention to religious faith and practice, our understanding of adolescence is incomplete.

- Changes in laws and legal norms governing adolescence. The law plays an important role in defining the status of teenage girls, the rights and responsibilities of parents, and boundaries of adolescence itself, yet it is often overlooked in discussions of healthy adolescent development. To be sure, controversy surrounds the laws of parental consent and notification for health and reproductive matters as well as parental responsibilities for curfew violations, truancy, and vandalism. But controversy should not stand in the way of serious consideration of the confusing and contradictory pattern of laws governing adolescence. Indeed, without an appreciation for the changing legal environment, it is hard to grasp the nature, scope, or social significance of contemporary changes in adolescence.

- The new economic facts of life for girls. Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the demographic changes in women's life course and the economic implications of these changes for girls. Compared to their grandmothers and even their mothers, today's girls are likely to

face significantly longer periods of singlehood during the course of their lives as a result of later marriage, high rates of divorce, declining rates of remarriage for women, and increasing longevity. If current trends in divorce and unwed childbearing continue, a significant percentage of women are also likely to spend some time as single mothers. And most single mothers will hold paid jobs outside of the home. In addition, in most two-parent homes, the wife's earnings are considered essential to support the family's standard of living. Given these realities, how do we teach girls the economic facts of life? How do we prepare them for lives as earners as well as consumers and nurturers? How do we get girls to think practically and realistically about saving and investing? What are the cultural and social forces shaping girls' economic expectations and aspirations? With only a few notable exceptions, such as the economic literacy program sponsored by Girls Inc., these issues have not yet been adequately addressed or explored.

- Female-male relationships. Most researchers have studied girls and boys separately, ignoring the context of their relationships with each other. The patterns of teen boy/girl interaction, friendship, dating, courtship, and sexual relationships have changed a great deal over the years. For instance, if we had better information about how teen girls and boys communicate and negotiate differences, particularly in terms of sexual behavior, we could better help them develop positive and healthy relationships, protect them against destructive behaviors, and, perhaps, help them have more successful marriages as adults. Fortunately, several new curricula on relationships education are now being used in many high schools and youth programs. Examples include: "Connections, Relationships and Marriage," a curriculum that will be used in every high school in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties in California; "Loving Well," a character education program exploring love, commitment, and loss currently used in several Massachusetts middle and high schools; and "Partners," a ten-week curriculum on mate selection, communication and negotiation skills, and managing stress in relationships.

V. Reclaiming Girlhood: A Call To Action

Girlhood, as a life stage offering sanctuary from the responsibilities of adult sexuality, is slipping away from many girls today. For the youngest victims of sexual abuse and assault, there is no girlhood at all. For other girls, sexual pressures and perils can emerge in late childhood, long before they are cognitively or emotionally prepared to successfully manage them. And even more fortunate girls, who avoid serious problems during adolescence, are struggling to find physically and morally healthy pathways to adulthood.

In the coming decades, the crisis of girlhood could deepen. Between 1995 and 2010, the number of girls aged 15-19 will increase by 2.2 million. If current fertility rates among teens remain the same, we will see a 26 percent increase in the number of 'pregnancies and births among teens (National Campaign, 1997). It is probably reasonable to anticipate increases in the incidence of other problems contributing to the crisis in girlhood as well.

The growing population of teenage girls lends urgency to the effort to create healthy and successful pathways through adolescence. But there is another dimension to the challenge. In American society, each generation is born anew, as Alexis de Tocqueville reminded us more than a century ago. This means that our energies and commitment and social imagination must be summoned again and again, as each new generation approaches the threshold of adolescence.

There are reasons to believe that we can be successful. Only a few years ago, the upward trends in teenage pregnancy and childbearing seemed unstoppable. Yet we have seen a decline in the rate of teen pregnancy and childbearing. Although experts continue to speculate about the reasons for the decline, one thing seems clear: trend lines are not set in concrete. They can change in a positive direction once people decide to work together toward a common goal. The same lessons apply to the cultural trends threatening girlhood. If we summon our resolve and devote our resources and energies toward the common goal of creating a healthy girlhood, we can change today's troubling trends and improve the lives of girls tomorrow.

Appendix I

The Culture of Girlhood and Passage to Womanhood: Implications for Teen Pregnancy

Agenda

Wednesday, December 3, 1997

10:30 a.m.-12:15 **p.m.**

Welcome and Overview: Why Are We Concerned About Girls?

Theodora Ooms, Family Impact Seminar, and Sarah Brown, National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

Panel 1: Historic and Contemporary Challenges of Girlhood: Pathways to Becoming an Adult and a Sexual Woman

This panel will discuss the stages and tasks of adolescence, "relational" versus autonomy models for mature adulthood, sexual socialization of girls, and passages that mark the transition from girlhood to womanhood and how these have changed over time.

- Elizabeth Debold, psychologist and consultant to the Ms. Foundation
- Judith Musick, author, Young, *Poor, and* Pregnant: The *Psychology of Teenage Motherhood*

Moderator: Renee Jenkins, Howard University

12:15-1:15 **p.m.** Lunch

1:15-2:45 **p.m.**

Panel 2: The Popular Culture of Girlhood/The Inner Culture of Girlhood

What is the popular culture of girlhood as represented in the media and popular music, and what does it teach girls about becoming a woman? How does this culture affect early sexual activity/early pregnancy? How can the media be encouraged to promote more constructive messages?

- Jane Brown, Department of Journalism & Mass Communications, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
- Meeghan Prunty, Children & the Media Program, Children Now
- Jewel Love, Motivational Educational Entertainment
- Malissa Thompson, *Jump* magazine

Moderator: Sarah Brown

2:45-3:00 **p.m.** Break

3:00-4:30 p.m.

Panel 3: The Culture of Schools

This panel will examine the culture of schools, including the extent of sexual harassment and the differential treatment of girls with respect to academics. Panelists will also discuss possible remedies.

- Bernice Sandler, National Association of Women in Education
- David Sadker, American University, and author, *Failing at Fairness*
- Verna Williams, National Women's Law Center

Moderator: Diane Dodson, Consultant, Family Impact Seminar

4:30-4:45 p.m. Break

4:45-6:00 p.m.

Panel 4: Culture of Communities

What do we know about the culture of girlhood and the pathways to womanhood in various disadvantaged communities? What are the particular challenges of growing up female in poor African-American or Latino communities that may push girls toward early sexual activity and motherhood?

- Gail Elizabeth Wyatt, author, *Stolen Women: Reclaiming Our Sexuality, Taking Back Our Lives*
- Yolanda Brewster, R.N., Providence Hospital

Discussant: Ruth Zambrana, Social Work Program, George Mason University, and editor, *Understanding Latino Families*

Thursday, December 4, I997

9:00-10:30 a.m.

Panel 5: The Relationship Between the Culture of Girlhood and Teen pregnancy

What does research show about the nature of the crisis and its relationship to teen pregnancy, early sexual activity, or contraceptive practices? What do studies show about the relationship between child sexual abuse and teen pregnancy?

- Robert Blum, M.D., University of Minnesota, and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health
- Susan Newcomer, National Institute for Child Health and Human Development
- Joan Leiman, Commonwealth Fund

Moderator: Sarah Brown

10:30-10:45 Break

10:45 a.m.-12:OO p.m.

Panel 6: Strategies to Provide Positive Alternatives

Youth development programs and other approaches work with girls to expand their life options, plan

careers, acquire social skills, cope with their sexual feelings, build resilience, and provide a supportive context.

- Bernice Humphrey, Girls Inc.
- Don Dinkmeyer, Jr., Western Kentucky University, and author, Parenting Teenagers
- Leslie Kantor, Planned Parenthood of New York City
- Elayne Bennett and Angela Rice, Best Friends

Moderator: Marisa Nightingale, National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

12:00-12:45 p.m. Lunch

12:45-2:30 p.m.

Panel 7: The Messages We Give Girls About What Women Can Be

Where does the issue of adolescent pregnancy tit in the women's movement? What messages should we be offering to girls and young women?

- Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, author, The *Divorce Culture*
- Brigette Rouson, Girls, Young Women and Leadership, Ms. Foundation for Women
- Nadia Mortiz, Young Women's Project
- Marjorie Snyder, Foundation for Women's Sports
- Diana Zuckerman, Institute for Women's Policy Research

2:30-2:45 p.m. Break

2:45-4:00 p.m.

New Insights, New Directions

Sarah Brown will lead a discussion about new insights and strategies that have emerged at this meeting.

Appendix II

Attendees at "The Culture of Girlhood" Roundtable Meeting

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Publications Available from the National Campaign

Nine Tips to Help Faith Leaders and Their Communities Address Teen Pregnancy offers faith leaders and other adults concrete tips to effectively address important issues like sex and pregnancy with young people. This eight-page pamphlet was compiled by the National Campaign's Task Force on Religion and Public Values and includes a varied list of faith-based resources. 1998. (First 5 copies: free, $1.00 per copy for orders up to 100, 70 cents per copy for orders over 100.)

Ten Tips For Parents To Help Their Children Avoid Teen Pregnancy.
A research-based list of practical tips for parents and adults to help the young people in their lives avoid pregnancy and pass safely through adolescence. 1998. (First 5 copies: free, $1.00 per copy for orders up to 100, 70 cents per copy for orders over 100.)

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Evaluating Abstinence-Only Interventions contains two parts: (1) a set of recommendations by the Campaign's Task Force on Effective Programs and Research to the federal government about how to conduct the national evaluation of abstinence-only programs funded by provisions in the welfare reform act, and (2) a summary of a meeting of experts about some of the special methodological and political challenges involved in evaluating abstinence-only programs in general. 1998. ($10.00)

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This report by Brent C. Miller, Ph.D., Head of the Department of Family and Human Development at Utah State University, synthesizes 20 years of research on the relationship between parent/adult actions and sexual risk-taking among teenagers. 1998. ($15.00)

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