

**MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
STUDY GUIDE**

Girls

Moving Beyond Myth

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NOTE TO EDUCATORS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we’ve structured the guide to help you stay close to the video’s main line of argument as it unfolds.

Key Points provide a concise and comprehensive summary of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

Questions for Discussion & Writing encourage students to reflect critically on the video during class discussions, and serve to guide their written reactions before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for “free-writing” or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

Assignments encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Girls: Moving Beyond Myth focuses on the sexual dilemmas and difficult life choices young girls face as they come of age in contemporary American culture. The film draws heavily on the insights and experiences of a diverse range of girls as they navigate an increasingly hyper-sexualized society, in the process challenging some of our most cherished myths about girlhood.

PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What sexual dilemmas do young girls face today? What kinds of life choices? Do you see any connections between any of these dilemmas or life choices and the kinds of messages girls receive from contemporary media culture?
2. What does it mean to be a girl in American society today? What myths have you heard about girlhood? Where do these myths come from? Do you see a disconnect between traditional myths of girlhood and some of the messages girls receive from media today?
3. Do you think there are a lot of sexual images and messages in popular culture targeted at kids? Give some examples. At what ages do kids start to come into contact with these things?

KEY POINTS

- Parents and other family members need to listen closely to what girls have to say. Adults often presume they know exactly what girls need, and what they're thinking, but girls need places where they can communicate what they're thinking and feeling to adults.
- The traditional family structure of past generations has changed as more women are working outside of the home.
- Young girls should talk openly to women about their bodies, so that they aren't as susceptible to myths that objectify them – like the idea that breasts are simply sexual markers.
- Given that most girls get their first period at about 12 years old, young girls should also have conversations with women about menstruation.
- Some cultures celebrate menstruation and girls' transition to adulthood, but American culture sends girls the message that becoming a woman is scary.
- Girls today are having sex earlier than in the past because their bodies are maturing earlier, and because of the culture's unrelenting sexual pressure.
- The media exposes young girls to explicit sexual messages in a way that earlier generations of girls simply did not experience.
- Girls who have sex are commonly called “sluts,” whereas guys who have sex are not.
- Girls who are sexually active are seen as bad girls, and are often blamed for social problems like teen pregnancy. And this message that virgins are good and sexually active girls are bad deflects attention away from the importance of things like birth control and sex education.
- The message girls receive about male sexuality – that boys are naturally over-sexual, that they suffer from raging hormones, that they cannot be controlled, and that they cannot be held responsible – is a myth.
- Girls are sometimes inadvertently coerced into having sex because they're afraid the guy won't like them if they don't.
- Girls are taught that they shouldn't have sexual feelings, and that they definitely shouldn't act on sexual urges. As a result, all the responsibility for sex is placed on girls, even as they are denied their sexuality.
- Adolescents need to be taught that sexual feelings and desires do not have to translate into sexual behaviors.
- Young girls should be taught to feel entitled to ask for pleasure – as long as it is safe, mutual, and respectful.
- Kids will have sex whether or not adults help protect them against victimization, sexually transmitted diseases, or pregnancy.
- Lesbian sexuality often gets completely lost within discussions of female sexuality.
- Girls shouldn't be asked to know what they want in every part of their lives except their sexuality – for the simple reason that sexuality is a vital part of who we are.

POST-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. According to the video, why is it important for adults to actively engage in conversations with young girls? Name as many examples as you can.
2. What messages does American culture send to young girls about female breasts and bodies? About menstruation? About their own sexuality? Where do these messages come from?
3. Why do you think girls are having sex at younger and younger ages? What changes in girls' bodies and in the culture may have influenced this over the years?
4. Why do you think sexually active girls are commonly called "sluts"? What derogatory words are used to describe a sexually active guy? Why do you think this name-calling is gendered? And how do you explain this double standard? Does it suggest that men seem to be afraid of female sexuality and need to control it? What else could explain it?
5. According to the video, what is the difference between a bad girl and a good girl? Do you agree with this dichotomy? Why or why not?
6. What are your thoughts on teen pregnancy? Are the teens solely responsible? How about the parents? Do you think lack of access to sex education and birth control might play any role at all? Why or why not?
7. What are some of the main messages young girls receive about male sexuality? Are these messages physical realities, the product of biological difference? Or do these messages seem to be grounded more in cultural attitudes and myths? Be sure to back up your point of view.
8. Why do you think girls typically don't feel entitled to ask for sexual pleasure? Do you think it's different for boys? Why or why not?
9. Why do you think lesbian sexuality is rarely discussed in larger conversations of female sexuality? What's the film's point of view on this? How does this point about lesbian sexuality relate to the film's larger analysis of girls and sexuality?
10. What does sexuality mean to you? How would you define this term? How does pop culture seem to define sexuality?

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write a story inspired by the following question: What does it mean to be a girl growing up in our culture? The story doesn't have to be based on personal experience (although it can be), but it should be realistic.
2. Read Joyce Carol Oates' short story, "Where are you going? Where have you been?": <http://www.mediaed.org/Handouts/WhereAreYouGoingWhereHaveYouBeen.pdf>
Write a paper exploring any connections you see between the themes of this story and the video.
3. Numerous popular songs have explored what it means to be a girl or a woman in our culture. Find a song, yourself, that you feel does a good job exploring the complexities of girlhood, and write a paper explaining what you think the song is saying. Try to draw on relevant points from the video to support and illustrate your interpretation of the song. Don't forget to submit a copy of the lyrics along with your paper.