

MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

60 Masonic St. Northampton, MA 01060 | TEL 800.897.0089 | info@mediaed.org | www.mediaed.org

Girls: Moving Beyond Myth

Transcript

LYNN PHILLIPS: Parents and other family members who want to help girls really need to start by listening closely to what it is that girls have to say. Often adults kind of presume to know what girls need and what they're thinking. The more I interview girls, the more everybody tells me, "if you want to help me, listen to me." So that's the first place that I would start.

CYDNEY PULLMAN: Just to interject here for a second, that's called monitoring, right? And it has positive, it can play a really positive role...

STUDENT 1: But first I heard his voice out of the computer and thought, I must be delirious.

STUDENT 2: Like, there are interesting websites and stuff, but like, I don't want to look at them, because I'm afraid that either there will be pornography or...

STUDENT 3: Because we don't know what these people are like, they could be really mean and be like plotting mean things...

MICHELLE FINE: Girls need places where they can speak the truth and someone is willing to hear it. Whether that means a third grade girl that says, "I hate that the boys are hitting us during us recess," or a seventh grade girl that says, "I don't like that other boys and other girls are talking about my body, or calling me am whore, or saying I'm a prude." Or a ninth grade girl says, "because I'm a lesbian I don't feel like I fit anyplace in this school, and everything's about the prom and about dances, and you can't go alone and you gotta go with a boy, and what's that about?" Or a fourth grade girl who's scared because every time her uncle comes over he touches her in a way that she doesn't like. All of those girls deserve a place where they can talk to an adult.

REBECCA RICHARDSON: It is so critical that in today's world where there are not intergenerational forces at work, and where a girl has a mother or an aunt or a grandmother and a body of people to support her, and where many, many women are back at work – I won't say that the family structure has fallen apart,

its just changed. And I think that its important that we understand that it's the community's responsibility to support that change.

JOAN JACOBS BRUMBERG: I think the critical thing is to get girls talking to sensible women about what it means to come of age in a female body, that can begin in toddler-hood, as you observe mommy without her clothes on, you know, what are breasts for? What are they? Because breasts are obviously not just sexual markers the way a lot of kids grow up to think about them. I think that girls also need to have conversations with their mothers about menarche and menstruation.

CYDNEY PULLMAN: We do a workshop called "Our Changing Bodies" with the girls, and that's because there was such a demand for it, as with all these workshops they kind of have evolved. And we also do a fun thing at the end where the girls get to actually ... They do a movement piece around menstruation, one girl is a vaginal wall, another girl is an egg, and they've got the hypothalamus and the pituitary, and it's a wonderful educational piece that we do with the girls. But the serious part really is these questions that come up. And some of them are basic, you know, how does it work? And we give them the real basics of how menstruation works.

JOAN JACOBS BRUMBERG: One of the reasons that girls today are having some of the difficulties that they are having and why growing up is so much harder now than it was 50 or 75 years ago – or even 100 years ago – has to do with the fact that girls' bodies have actually changed. Now most of us don't think about the body as changing but in fact, it has. I mean, girls get their period, they go through menarche, first period, earlier than in the past. Today the average age is a little over twelve – its not unusual for a girl to get her period at ten or eleven.

CYDNEY PULLMAN: I mean one of the things that the girls say about coming of age, or about menstruation arriving is they're terrified. And on the one hand they're getting the message – in other cultures we celebrate menstruation – but in our culture it also has all these scary, it's scary. The realization that they're becoming women is scary.

REBECCA RICHARDSON: African American girls start even earlier than white girls who start even earlier than Hispanic girls, and so that trend I think is something that we're really looking at, is: how do we get an eight or nine-year old to feel comfortable with the changes that her body is going through when she's not emotionally prepared for the changes that she's going through?

JOAN JACOBS BRUMBERG: They're also having sex earlier, so we've got this new biological and social timetable. I mean there's no demonstration as far as I know, in the developmental psych. field that tells us that girls are more cognitively

or emotionally advanced, even though they're getting their periods earlier. So they look like mini adults at twelve, thirteen, or fourteen, but they're still little girls, and we haven't come up as a society with a way to support them in this very difficult period, when they look mature but they really aren't mature and yet the culture has all this sexual pressure – this unrelenting sexual pressure all the time.

CYDNEY PULLMAN: They are exposed to sexual issues that I think earlier generations were not exposed and its through the media, its through the level of sexuality that's on TV, the level of sexuality that's in the news, the level of sexuality that they sometimes do catch on cable or on television that is quite explicit and I think scary for them.

REBECCA RICHARDSON: So it's not just their bodies that are maturing, but it's their emotional being that we're dealing with maturing, and how do we do that, what messages are they getting from the media, that say that at twelve years old, they are provocative? And they are provocative.

JOAN JACOBS BRUMBERG: I think what's happened is we live in a society where there's an enormous amount of talk about sexuality, a lot of explicit sexuality. I think its unlikely that a little girl can really even be virginal in her mind the way it was possible in the past. I mean if you watch television, you have to see people go to bed together, I mean you probably know something about oral sex much earlier than a lot of women in the past did.

CYDNEY PULLMAN: Nine, ten, and eleven year old girls wanting to know what oral sex was, what masturbation is, they wanted to know, and the fact that they have to grapple with the question like, "what is sex for me?" is so premature.

YOUNG WOMAN 1: I think that sex is about lies because I think that nobody ever knows what really happened and I think that people just make up things. Like people just make up that they had sex with people that they really didn't have sex with. And then, like its cool if a guy has sex, but if a girl has sex...

YOUNG WOMAN 2: -Slut.

YOUNG WOMAN 1: Or even comes close to having sex then they're a slut. And then this guy that had sex with this girl said that she was a slut, and I screamed at him for it because he's the one that had sex with her. So what does that make him if he had sex with her and then he called her the slut?

LAIARA: Some people would say that you're considered a slut – and that's a harsh word, I really don't see that if you're having sex that you're considered a slut. Some people may think of it like that because of what you're doing and how you're doing it, and how many people you're doing it with.

STEPHANIE: That just gets me mad because if a girl gets to be called a slut just because she sleeps with a lot of guys, then you have to call a guy a slut because I don't consider that names should be limited to gender.

ROSALYN: I don't know exactly what guys want, but guys nowadays seem to only want to sleep with girls. That's what it seems like. There are very few guys that you can find that actually are looking at you or wanting to talk to you for who you are.

KAREN: The way guys treat you, it all depends on basically what type of guy it is and how old they are, because the guys mostly like my age, they're really immature, they really don't know how to treat a girl, and they don't know what to kind of say and what not to say, and so they're basically inexperienced. But then the guys older, I mean they know how to treat you and they make you happy for a while, but they basically use you. They only want one thing, as in sex.

KATHERINE: It's kind of difficult for girls these days to build up a great relationship with a guy because they're looking for something into the relationship. Whereas, if its for me, that I'm going out with a person I would want trust in my relationship. Because as my mother tells me, without trust nothing can go, nothing can happen without trust. And the guys – and if you look good, they're like "I bet I could get that." They don't even know how you're thinking.

ESTHER: I want to be in a relationship with somebody to be in love with them, to have that romance, to want to be with them all the time and never leave their side and like truly love them with all of my heart, and yeah, maybe sex will come in that relationship, maybe it won't.

ROSALYN: Once these girls think that its time, that's the right time, you know yeah he's the one, and he's convinced me that he's gonna be there forever for me, then they think its OK. And they may not be seen as them being a slut but the guys tend to say stuff to their friends to make themselves look bigger. So that the other guys see; the girls get the label slut is because they think alright, well she did it with my man, my friend, then obviously I can do it too. So they put it like she's easy.

MARIKA: Guys have so much pressure on them to have sex because "you're not a man unless you're having sex with a girl," but girls are having pressure like not to have sex and then the girl gets with the guy and they do have sex and the guy's considered a hero, and the girl becomes a slut.

LYNN PHILLIPS: Despite the fact that we have much more sexuality education than we ever have before, and we like to think of ourselves as a very sexually

liberated society, we have some very troubling messages that we send to adolescent girls. We still have this good girl/bad girl dichotomy, so that girls who are engaged in any kind of sexual activity are seen as bad girls, and are sort of written off – in fact, they're often seen as the causes of social problems – if only girls weren't being sexual, we wouldn't have teen pregnancy and so forth, rather than looking at the fact that we don't make condoms available to everybody, that we don't make sex education available to everybody. On the other hand, we have good girls, and those are girls who are virgins, meaning they have not had sexual intercourse.

MARIKA: One of my biggest issues that I had to face this summer was a friend of mine lost her virginity. It was just kind of almost a depressing thing, because I was happy for her but I was also just kind of nervous about when it would happen to me, and when would be my turn.

DEBORAH L. TOLMAN: A very powerful and real dichotomy that adolescent girls and the adults who care about them are dealing with as they grow and develop is what girls' sexuality is and what boys' sexuality is. Now we have very powerful ideas and stories in this society about what is normal sexuality for girls, and what is normal sexuality for boys. And I think it's very important to recognize that these are stories, these are ideas. We often understand them as physical realities, and I'm here to tell you that that's a myth. The story that we all know about boys' sexuality is that boys are completely sexual, that they suffer from raging hormones, they cannot be controlled, and they are not held responsible.

ROSALYN: There's no explanation why exactly, who started the whole thing, the whole trend of the guys calling girls sluts or girls having to appear to guys as these big things you know? That's the big issue, is there's no reason, there's no explanation for it, it's just done, and that's what makes it harder for girls. It hasn't changed, and it just keeps going for generation and generation, each girl goes through it.

DAUGHN LEE: The good girl/bad girl stereotype cultural story still lives. And I submit that it lives frighteningly similarly to how its lived for years and years and years. I see that girls that are not even necessarily sexually active, but again are very comfortable with the conversations about their bodies and about sexuality are pegged by both girls and boys as the bad girl, as easy, she's a slut, whatever the words are, however it is that they label her. And it damages everyone.

KAREN: My friends and I, we know what guys want, and stuff, and like I said I have high standards and morals, so I don't really, I mean its hard if you really like a guy and they want to do stuff, but I mean, my friends – I have a few really close friends that don't, that do get pressured in, and that they regret, like if they didn't

do something then they regret it because what if that guy- that guy would probably still like me if I did this or if I did that.

KATHERINE: She's going to think, oh if I don't do this for him, he's going to leave me and I really like him and I don't know if he likes me.

KAREN: It's a big problem and then again I have friends that are pregnant and stuff so, basically ruined their life. There is pressure.

ROSALYN: Girls get put under pressure and there's not even no big explanation for why we go through what we do to try and appear to the world as beautiful or perfect or...that's not even the thing, no one is perfect but it just happens.

DEBORAH L. TOLMAN: The story for adolescent girls as we know is almost non-existent, right? The good normal girl doesn't have sexual feelings, certainly doesn't act on sexual urges, and in fact, it makes sense that she would be the one who would have to control situations that involve adolescent boys since she doesn't really have desires of her own to have to deal with. It's a very convenient story, it places all the responsibility on girls and it denies girls their sexuality.

MARIKA: Teenage girls are more apt to sexual relations because oftentimes we are so self-conscious and if someone comes up and says, gosh you're so beautiful, I just want you to please me, blah blah blah, and all the talk that guys will do to have sex with you, it's a really tempting offer. And for the first time someone sees you as beautiful and so why not go and do that with them. And I think that girls oftentimes may give it up too easily.

DEBORAH L. TOLMAN: One of the important distinctions that we don't offer adolescents is educating them, that there's a difference between what we feel and what we do. Feelings do not necessarily have to translate into behaviors. Because we feel sexual desire does not mean we inevitably have to act on sexual desire.

JOAN JACOBS BRUMBERG: I think we need to talk to girls about sexual ethics in a post-virginal age. And I think that what that means is we've got to help girls find a vocabulary for being sexually active and being healthy and being safe. And to me that means, even though it may sound a little foolish, it means perhaps play-acting with your daughter or helping her find the words to say something like, "well, if I'm going to do it with you, I don't want to do it the first time on a dirty mattress in a garage or at a fraternity party, or in the backseat of a car." Or if we're gonna do it, you have to wear a condom." Now these are tough things for girls to learn how to say, they're tough enough for adult women, but girls need the vocabulary, they need to feel comfortable, they have to learn to ask for what makes them feel safe and comfortable in the realm of the intimate.

CYDNEY PULLMAN: There has to be a social response to the issue of early sexual exploration and the threats that girls face, I think. And the social response is to make sure that girls get educated about sexuality and about their rights, and about themselves. So there's a social obligation I think for the schools and for society to take that responsibility on.

DAUGHN LEE: I think it is part of the conversation now for girls to admit to sexual desire, regardless of what their behavior is, I've seen that more. I've seen girls just talking about things they're curious about, things they'd like to do, things they've tried, their fears and concerns about sex and sexuality. I've seen girls who have parents – moms usually – who are willing to have conversations with them about contraception and their behavior and making those decisions about sex. So it seems to me that more of the conversations are happening now.

LYNN PHILLIPS: What I think is that girls really need to feel entitled to their sexualities, entitled to ask for pleasure, to give themselves pleasure, as long as that is safe and mutual and respectful. Its making sexuality so taboo and therefore not talking about how to protect oneself from victimization, from sexually transmitted infections, from pregnancy and so forth – that's really the problem. Kids are having sex, they just are. And they're gonna have sex whether we help them to protect themselves or not.

DEBORAH L. TOLMAN: Sexuality is our thoughts, our feelings, our behaviors, our relationships. It's a part of who we are. It's our bodily feelings, it's our emotional feelings, it's our sense of identity in part, and it's what we do to express those feelings in different kinds of behaviors and different kinds of relationships.

LYNN PHILLIPS: What often gets lost from these discussions also though is forms of sexual activity that don't involve intercourse. We tend to just think of it as either you've had intercourse or you're sexually active, or you haven't had intercourse so you're a virgin, but lesbian girls' sexualities, girls who choose to have sexual engagements with boys or with girls in ways that don't involve intercourse, they often get completely lost from our discussions on sexual activity.

ESTHER: I think the desires for lesbians, compared to heterosexual women is a lot different, because it gets looked at different. And there's always a standard of well, if you're a lesbian, you're not have sex with like an actual guy with an actual live penis, so people think that if you're a lesbian and you're not having penetrative sex with a penis, then obviously you're still a virgin.

LAIARA: I believe that it is more difficult for a girl, for any female just to say that oh, I want to be sexually active, or I have a desire to be with a partner than for a male to say that.

MARIKA: Girls that want sex, that are just like the guys who feel a need for sex, they're considered even bigger sluts than a girl who totally goes against her belief and just says, "alright I'll make him happy and sleep with him." Girls who are OK with themselves sleeping with guys, they're considered even more slutty than other girls. And really it's just a whole double standard.

ESTHER: I think that it's harder for bisexual girls than straight girls to deal with the rumors that fly around and the stereotypes, and all these things because, they're always thinking somebody's cheating on somebody because you're bisexual, because if you're going out with a guy than you must be cheating on your guy with a girl. It's really weird, but its something you have to deal with and I'm not going to change what I want in my life just because it's harder.

DEBORAH L. TOLMAN: There's been a lot of attention to girls being strong, girls knowing what they want, girls making decisions, girls being effective, girls having self-esteem. Desire fits right in there. We can't ask girls to know what they want in every part of their life besides their sexuality. Sexuality is part of who we are. If we want to tell girls to know what they want and go for it, we want to tell them to know about their own sexual feelings and decide what they want to go for, when, in what situations. To make active choices, so we don't have to hear from girls over and over again like we do now that it just happened. Lets liberate girls from being able to make a choice, and have the fact that she has made that choice be the story of the good girl.

VIRGINIA FIELDS: It is the first girls' conference. We know it will not be the last girls' conference. This is just the beginning, hello there. This is just the beginning, and let me tell you, its really awesome to sit in the audience and to see you and to hear you, it's so terribly inspiring. What is it that will get so many of you young people up out of the bed on a Saturday morning to come here, it must mean something is going on. Something is going on! And the good news is that you are making it happen. You are setting now the stage for what can happen with girls throughout the city, country, and the world. Because this has never happened before, coming together, not only to work among yourselves, but to help us as the older adults to know what it is we should be doing. So often we have conversations about what young people need, but we don't have enough with you.

It's an honor and a privilege on my part to introduce my friend and our distinguished Congresswoman Nydia Margarita Velazquez.

NYDIA MARGARITA VELAZQUEZ: There are a lot of people out there that want to help you, and the fact that we are all here today means that you are not alone. And whenever you feel angry, disappointed, please talk to someone, talk to someone. Don't allow anyone – anyone! – from stopping you from dreaming. But with dreams come responsibility, the responsibility of working hard, studying hard, getting good grades, and pursuing your education or pursuing whatever, whatever you want to be in life, because you can. Thank you very much.

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