MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

TRANSCRIPT

mef Challenging media

REVIVING OPHELIA

SAVING THE SELVES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS

REVIVING OPHELIA
Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls

Producer: **Susan Ericsson**
Editors: **Susan Ericsson & Sut Jhally**
Executive Producers: **Tom Gardner & Sut Jhally**

Featuring an interview with **Mary Pipher**, clinical psychologist and best-selling author of *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*.

Media Education Foundation © MEF 1998

INTRODUCTION

[Young People's Voiceovers]

I feel like my whole world would be ok if I looked like Kate Moss

Sometimes I'm not really sure who I am.

I don't want to date a girl if she's not pretty.

When I'm down I like to go shopping.

My coach told me I had to lose weight.

The other day my math teacher told me how pretty I am, but he's never told me how smart I am.

Sometimes I drink myself into oblivion.

I think our class president is so smart, I don't know how to tell her. Instead I just wind up teasing her.

People pick on me and my best friend and call us dykes.

What if I'm not a good kisser?

Most days I try not to eat till dinner but sometimes I'm just too hungry.

My brother's rough with his girlfriend, I guess that's what girls like.

I don't know what to do when someone touches me more than I want them to.

Almost every girl I know feels like she has something major wrong with her body.

MARY PIPHER: I'm Mary Pipher, I'm the author of *Reviving Ophelia*. I wrote that book about five years ago because I was real concerned about the girls I was seeing in my private practice in Nebraska. I had a period of time when I was swamped with teenagers, mostly twelve, thirteen year old girls who had a lot of serious problems, things like depression, eating disorder, refusing to go to school, some sexual problems, and the theories at the current time in psychology about why they were having problems just didn't seem adequate to me to explain what I was seeing. So I got interested in thinking through the issues of why are girls having so much trouble? The conclusion I came to, in brief, is it's not so much because of dysfunctional families, as a dysfunctional culture. Girls are coming of age in a very poisonous, girl-hurting culture. And *Reviving Ophelia* is my attempt to talk about the developmental issues of girls this age, the culture

they live in, the needs they have at this age that are and are not being met by American culture.

TEEN PRESSURES

MARY PIPHER: Girls this age have a very complicated set of needs. One way to think about it is the culture's changed a lot, but the needs of children haven't changed very much. And girls need what they've always needed but some of those things are harder to get in this culture. For example they need physical safety, they need psychological safety – and by that I mean they need a sense that they can think clearly, feel what they feel without being punished or teased or hurt in any way by a sort of free exercise of their being. They also need love of their parents, they need friends, they need useful work, they need skills, they need an opportunity to grow and develop into total human beings. They need at this point in time, I think, some self-defense training; they need good habits for coping with stress. There's so much stress in the nineties and one of the things that happens to kids this age is they experience a lot more stress than they have internal resources to handle. And when that happens to anybody, they're overwhelmed – I had a girl in therapy one time, her parents were with her – she asked her parents in the therapy session, "can I have your permission to smoke cigarettes?" She said "I don't really want to smoke but there's this group of kids that I want to hang out with and they will not let me in if I don't smoke a cigarette now and then." When you think about that, that's a very odd kind of place for a teenager to be, and yet its real common of the kind issues that come up. Teenagers are encouraged to distance from their parents. So the people who love them most, who are the most plugged in to them, and eager to be helpful to them, often times are sort of cut off from them. What they do is they look to peers, they look to their friends, and they look to media to give them some ideas about how to be. Actually it's easier to be an adult than a teenager, in terms of the social milieu that teenagers are living in.

[Movie: Clueless]
Ladies, we have a new student with us. This is Tai Frasier.
-- Tai, you don't have time to change, but you could hit a few balls in those clothes.
*   -- She could be a farmer in those clothes. (Laughter)*

MARY PIPHER: Another story I've been telling lately is about a girl I worked with, poor mother – she told her mother before school started – single parent mother works at a factory – "I can't afford designer jeans, you can't afford designer jeans, we don't need 'em. I'll just buy cheap jeans, go to school in them." Two weeks into the school year, she goes back to her mother and says, "I know these jeans are fine, I know you can't afford designer jeans, but I am getting teased so badly that I really think we should invest some money in a pair of designer jeans just so I can make it through the day without all this abuse."

Those are the kind of issues that the average seventh grader runs into. When you think about, we adults generally don't have that complicated of decisions day

by day about how to manage our impressions of other people, how to manage relationships and so on.

MEDIA PRESSURES

MARY PIPHER: There's a lot of messages that girls get, and again, some of them are almost on a level of osmosis. In other words, they're not real direct messages. The most important thing is that girls are seeing, really from the time they are much younger than teenagers, they're seeing over and over, the same kinds of images of women that are considered beautiful. Those women tend to be thin, they tend to be very unnatural looking, they tend to often be very sexualized images of women. So that image is internalized, and what happens when that image is internalized, is virtually all girls and women end up feeling inadequate. They end up feeling, I'm not pretty enough, I'm not thin enough, my skin isn't clear enough and so on and so on.

Another thing they feel about that is that this stuff is very important. I mean it's not a sort of irrelevant thing. It's very important. So for example, one sex difference I noticed years ago as a therapist before I was even thinking about this stuff, is if you ask a man how he feels about his body, he might be realistic about it, he might go, well I'm not that good looking a guy, but he's not likely to have real intense reactions to that question. Women often have very intense reactions. Girls often have very intense, almost like a repulsion or a self-loathing. And that comes I think from internalizing pictures of women as beautiful, that are so different from what they actually are.

Over the last twenty years, models have gotten thinner and thinner and thinner, and so the average height of a model is 5'10", 5'11", their weight's about a 110 pounds. They will get no thinner; the height/weight of models has leveled out. Not for any positive reason, but because if they get any thinner they can't be healthy enough to show up for photo shoots and work. So they have gotten thinner and thinner, meanwhile the weight of real women has increased. So the disparity between how our culture defines beautiful, and how real women look, has gotten greater.

When we define beauty in such an unnatural way, young girls do very unnatural things to be thin. There's a real correlation by now in this country between young women's desires to be thin and to be beautiful and the fact that so many young women really become victims of eating disorders.

TV Guide asked me to do an article about all the shows with adolescent girls, and what I found was first of all, there was one look. All the stars looked essentially, totally interchangeable. About 5'10", 5'11", thin, maybe 110, 115 pounds, they all wore designer clothes, perfect teeth, perfect hair – long straight blond hair. And these girls were all big consumers; they were all very interested in boys. And sexualized in a way that most girls that age are not.

[TV: Buffy the Vampire Slayer] Alone at last. C'mon, it's your party. Aren't you gonna open your present?

MARY PIPHER: There's a kind of fashion trend to use adult women, dressed in young girls' clothes, to have children dressed in adult sexy clothes. I think this is very dangerous. It blurs the boundaries between children and adults. It educates all of us to see children in a more sexualized way than at least I think most of us would naturally. And it also infantilizes women, and makes women less powerful than they would naturally be. It trains us to see women as younger, as more girl like.

[Unlabeled TV clip] Because of her baby doll image and precocious attitude, Emma is also known as Baby Spice, but there's more to her than just innocence. -- (Music video) "The last time that we had this conversation –"

MARY PIPHER: Where do we get these notions about how girls should look? In my experience the two worst companies, or kinds of companies, are jeans and perfumes. I think the reason for that is designer jeans are expensive, and what they're about is status. So what they do to sell is be sexy and offer some sort of specially attractive sexy status to girls. So a lot of times they have very sexualized images.

[TV ad] Sometimes you just want to put on a pair of jeans, go out, and get dirty.

MARY PIPHER: The other set of ads that I think is very bad, is perfume ads. Perfume ads often times have a hint of sadomasochism, or they have women that, when I see the pictures, I think, this doesn't look like an emotionally healthy woman. Or is this the face of a self-actualizing person? So you see a lot of ads where women look disoriented, where their faces are vacant, and absolutely reflect no intelligence or interest in the world. They're traumatized, they're victims.

One of the things that's very common right now, rather than have a whole person, only a part of a person will be depicted. Their breasts, their behind, their torso, whatever. I think this is a very dangerous trend. First of all, I think all of the important information about people, their personhood, is carried in their face. When you think of it, your face carries your intelligence, your compassion, your character, your sense of humor, your investment, your interest, and so on and so on. If you cut off the head, you don't have a real person, you have an object. Objects are hard to respect, you don't vote for an object for president. And it's also easier to hurt an object, so it has implications for things like domestic violence.

One thing I encourage is when you see products that advertise by showing, say, a woman's behind, write that company and say I will not buy your product. If you want to use women to advertise, show a whole person, with a face. I think that's very important.

SEXUAL PRESSURES

MARY PIPHER: One of the experiences I had recently was a friend of mine who wrote a book on teenage girls was telling me about her Internet search. And she keyed in "pre-teen", she wanted to see all the academic research that had been done on pre-teens recently. First thing she gets is soft core/hard core pornography of young girls. So one of the things I think is really important to say to teenagers, to parents, is the information super highway has got a lot of stuff on that that sexualizes girls, that treats girls like trash.

Soft-core pornography, advertising and fashion have all sort of blurred together in one set of images. And you know, you look at advertising anymore, it doesn't look all that much different from the poses and so on of a *Playboy* magazine. I mean there's not much boundaries anymore between those different kinds of photography. Women are valued in the media for their sexuality. And particularly the way this affects young teenagers is they think it's very important to be sexually attractive. Or if they aren't sexually attractive or if they're afraid of being sexual and sexually attractive, they feel badly about themselves because they aren't more sexual. They feel like they're left out of the really important stuff that's happening for teenagers.

[TV ad: Clothes Time] Now at Clothes Time, twenty-five dollars gets you this black shirt, and matching reputation.

MARY PIPHER: An interesting thing that happens to girls is particularly in secure girls, tend to do what I call lead with their sexuality. And a common thing is they'll present themselves as very sexual, they'll call up boys, they'll proposition boys, a lot of times when I speak, mothers will come up to me and say "my son's getting calls from girls offering to have sex with him, wanting him to go out," and so on. And they'll go "what could be in these girls' heads?" To me, its totally simple what's in girls' heads. They've been taught that what's valuable to them is their sexuality, so when they go out and interface with the world, that's what they offer people.

[TV ad: Clothes Time] One little twenty-dollar sweater from Clothes Time, and you're covered for the weekend.
-- Sort of.

MARY PIPHER: People had sex in high school when I was a teenager, but very few girls were being propositioned at twelve and thirteen so everything has been pushed back at a younger age. And its very significant because those five years between say thirteen and eighteen are years when kids do so much growing, so much centering, so much development in terms of their social and emotional maturity that they make much better decisions at eighteen than they make at thirteen.

Both girls and boys really get pushed into sexual relationships, much earlier than they're ready. In fact kids get kind of channeled into behavior that they later regret, realize they weren't old enough to handle, and so on.

Margaret Mead's a role model to me, and one of the things she said that I think is very beautiful is "An ideal culture is one in which there is a place for every human gift." It's a very succinct definition of an ideal culture. If you apply that to adolescent girls, what you can say is one of the reasons they get in trouble is they go from a developmental stage when most of their gifts are appreciated. You take the average nine year-old girl, she can be a good baseball player, a good math student, a good violinist, and most of those gifts are valued by her family, her neighborhood friends. She moves into junior high, what's likely to happen is the number of her gifts that are valued is reduced to a very small set. They're probably related to her attractiveness, her thinness, her sex appeal, and her popularity. And so girls experience a real diminishment of value because so many things they're good at, have no account, and on the other hand if they don't happen to be pretty, if they don't happen to be popular, if they aren't sexy, they feel somewhat worthless. And it's a very hard time for girls.

Here's what I think girls need to do to protect themselves from all the bombardment of sexual stimulation, from all the different pressures they feel to be more sexual than perhaps they're ready to be. I think they need to really center and make some decisions about what they're ready for, under what conditions they'd want to be in a relationship. Now I had a story recently from a girl that I thought was a really good example of a girl who had her head screwed on straight, who'd thought things through. She was at a party, and a real popular party game is a kind of truth or dare game where kids who lose on a bottle spin or something like that, have to do something other kids dare them to do. And this boy had been, had lost, and he had to go around the room and give every girl a big passionate kiss on the mouth. And when he got to this girl I know, she said, "I won't kiss you." She said, "I haven't been kissed yet, and when I'm kissed, I want it to be by somebody I choose to kiss, and I want it to be somebody special to me. And you don't meet my criteria." And when I heard that story, I though, well this girl is really smart. She's figured out what she needs, and she's assertive enough in a room full of other kids to say that. I worry about girls who are less assertive because the predicament she was in is a very typical kind of predicament. And if you don't know who you are, you're very vulnerable in a spot like that. Particularly if you want those other kids to think you're cool and sophisticated and so on.

BOYS

[Movie: Beauty & the Beast]
And I've got my sight set on that one.
-- The inventor's daughter?
She's the one, the lucky girl I'm going to marry.
-- But she's –
The most beautiful girl in town
-- I know but –
That makes her the best, and don't I deserve the best?
-- Well of course.

MARY PIPHER: The reason I write about girls is I see girls in therapy. That does not mean that boys don't have issues. I personally think the culture is very damaging to boys at this age. Boys have a very hard time right now knowing how to be good men. There's lots of information for boys how to be rebels, how to be anti-social, how to be tough. There have been way too many movies where macho men are portrayed as heroes. Boys have very little guidance on how to grow up to be loving, emotionally sturdy, pro-social people.

[Movie: Demolition Man] Hey wait for me!

MARY PIPHER: Another thing you rarely see in a movie is a man who is at all articulate about his feelings. Who can say something simple like "I love you" for example. So boys have almost no modeling in how to in a manly way, express feelings.

[Movie: Ghost]
I really love you.
-- Ditto.

MARY PIPHER: One of the things that happens to young men is they end up thinking that the most important thing in a date, in a woman, is attractiveness. And there's actually a lot of research that this is true, unfortunately. They tend to see images of women not being the subjects of their own lives, but the objects of other people's gaze. So they get a kind of a view of women as very beautiful, passive, sexually attractive. So it socializes men to think about potential mates, potential partners, not in terms of their sense of humor or character or common interest, but in terms of their breast size, and the shape they have and so on and so on.

[Movie: Goldeneye] (Moaning, groaning noises).
Oh, you think you're gonna hurt me. (laughter)

MARY PIPHER: A lot of the sex they see is violent sex. Sex and violence are increasingly intermingled in films.

[Movie: Goldeneye] *You think you can break me?*

MARY PIPHER: So that boys are likely to get a little mixed up about those two things, which is very dangerous for the culture.

I speak a lot in high schools, and its very common for me for boys to come up and say, you know I'm really worried about my girlfriend, she won't eat, I can't get her to eat, or she worries all the time if she's pretty, and she's really pretty enough for me, how can I help her feel better about herself? And I think there's a lot of things boys can do. One thing is, they can compliment girls on things besides their appearance and their clothes and so on. They can let girls know they value girls who are good decent people, and compliment them on things beside appearance and sexual attractiveness. Another thing they can do is make sure they don't put down girls who are not pretty, they don't make jokes about fat girls, they don't make comments about girls being dogs, or how they'd never take out somebody who looked like that. Because that sends all girls the message that what really matters is looks.

[Movie: Barb Wire]
Hey handsome, want some company?
-- You a cop?
See a badge?

MARY PIPHER: One of the things that happened to my son when he was in high school, he came home from a movie where women were portrayed as basically objects, you know with big breasts and stuff, and he said, Mom, you know I don't really like going to movies like that. Because I don't like how it makes me think about my girlfriend or the girls in my classes. So that's another thing for boys to think about, is what kind of movies am I watching? What messages is it teaching me about girls? Is this what I want to think about girls? Is this the most respectful attitude I can take? And if not, maybe I won't watch it; maybe I'll look for a different kind of media.

GIRLS

MARY PIPHER: One of the things that's very important for girls is that they keep doing what they enjoyed doing when they were younger. If they enjoyed doing chemistry experiments, if they enjoyed playing soccer, keep those things up. Nature can be helpful. Girls talk about the things they do to de-stress themselves. A lot of them like things like music, their pets, reading, taking a warm bath, talking to friends. Exercising is a very good way to decompress. It's very important to have good habits for coping with stress. Because life is so stressful in the nineties for teenagers. If they don't have good habits, they'll have bad habits, like using drugs and alcohol and so on.

[TV ad] Her second date with Chris.
-- It's only the most important night of life!
What will he think?
-- What should I wear?
The air was filled with tension.
-- Ta-da!
*   -- NO WAY!*

MARY PIPHER: A lot of the messages you get as a teenager encourage you to worry about being attractive and popular.

[TV ad] Will she find true love? What about him? And what about you?

MARY PIPHER: In my opinion, neither one of those is a good goal. I think its much more important to have one or two close friends, to think about what it is you really care about, and go for that.

Another thing, very important, I think is to have girls in sports. Not necessarily competitive sports, but sports that allow them to experience their bodies as functioning, as healthy, as working to do things for them. So they have a different set about their body than, how does it look to other people? How do I appear to boys?

One of the best things you can do if you want to stay healthy and whole, is go spend time with the older lady down the block, with the little baby you baby-sit with, and so on. It will keep your life in perspective. We put all our three year olds, all our twelve year olds together, all our eighty year olds together, and when we do that, we lose the collective wisdom of all these people combined.

Another thing I think is very important is that boys and girls do things together that have nothing to do with dating or romance or sexual relationships. That they spend time together as friends, that they do a lot of talking, that they do mutual projects together, they share common interests. And that boys, by the way they

interact with girls, are teaching them, we value you as a person, we want to know you in your entire beautiful nature, not just for how you look in your clothes.

One of things I advise teenagers to do is to find some cause they really believe in, and get to work making a difference. It's an antidote for despair. It gives them a feeling of usefulness. It gets them away from some of the superficial kinds of things that teenagers often do to each other. It gives them a real sense that they can make an impact on the culture, and it's an empowering experience so I recommend it to teenagers.

One of the very strong values of teenagers is they want to be free. They're very much socialized in this culture that freedom is a very positive value; it's a very important kind of thing to have, if you're going to be an adult. My definition of freedom is this: that you have a real sense of who you are, you have a sense for where you want to go, you have a value system you can trust, and you have the ability to hold the course. To stay focused on your own long-term goals, and move pretty consistently in that direction. The contrast to that is the ability to act impulsively on whatever whim or impulse happens to hit you at the moment. I say that's a terrible form of slavery. You're at the beck and call of whatever impulse you have. You're in a little boat out on a big lake. You're getting blown all over this lake by winds from the north, from the south, from the east and the west. The only way that you can stay true to your own course, the only way you can keep from just being totally disoriented, is to have a real sense for where you're going, how to navigate in that direction, and keep looking at your north star.

TEACHERS & PARENTS

MARY PIPHER: What happens is, parents try to just take care of their own children and ignore the community. And I say its like going first class on the Titanic. It just will not work that way. If you live in a lousy community, you will have lousy mental health, and your children will. You've got to have a community for children. Children need to grow up embedded in a network, a web, of caring adults. And community can be created. It's something that can be done. It takes a little bit of effort.

Early adolescence is about social life. And one of the things teenagers need, is a lot of help organizing themselves socially so they can have good positive interactions with their peers. What I'd look schools to do is to take a lot of responsibility, to have teenagers working with each other but in supervised settings, where there's adults around to help them negotiate with each other, behave properly to each other. I like things like peer counsels that have teenagers doing some policing of each other in terms of what are the guidelines for proper behavior at our school? What's the respectful way for the genders to interact?

One thing teenagers need, by the way, is more places they can go and be supervised where there's no alcohol or drugs, and just hang out together. Places like coffee houses, places to have poetry readings, and places where teenagers can play their music and dance. They aren't so many venues like that anymore.

One of the things I think is really important for families is not to just let the culture happen to you. I had a single father one time. He told me after his wife died, he had to get up to leave for work real early in the morning, but before he left for work, he had three kids. He'd leave them a note in their lunch box. Just saying something simple like, good luck on your math test today. When his daughter graduated from high school, she told him those notes were what held my life in place. So you as a parent can really make a big difference to your child just taking a few minutes a day to plug in to where they are and connect with them.

Another thing very important is support your daughters' interests. Praise girls for their character, and their integrity, not so much their attractiveness. Its hard to break oneself of the habit of commenting on how cute girls are, talking to girls about how pretty they are. I've really tried to break myself of that habit because it's a double-edged sword. On the one hand you're praising a girl, but you're also telling her, that's what matters about you. So I really work hard to praise girls on what they're actually doing, and on their character, not on their appearance or their popularity.

Girls need some help deconstructing media, they need help processing media, and I think at a certain age, they need help sorting out what is and isn't good media. For example we know that the more TV girls watch, the more popular

magazines they consume, the more at risk they are for eating disorders. Because they hear a combination of messages that basically are eating disorder producing. They hear it's important to be thin and beautiful, and have some chocolates and pizza. And it creates a sort of energy that's very bad for girls.

One of the problems we have as a culture right now is we're letting down a whole generation of children in terms of giving them good guidelines as to how to be decent adults. And they will suffer and we will suffer, because of our failure to give children good advice on growing up.

Cultural change is a million acts of individual courage and kindness. That's the only way our culture has ever changed, and it's the only way it will change. And if you believe that, what that means is you're a change agent, I'm a change agent, we can be working every day by the way we relate to the people we come in contact with, to make a very different culture, person by person, community by community.

[Young People's Voiceovers]
The popular kids make me feel awkward. With my real friends, I feel free.

I have fun fooling around with someone, as long as everything that happens is in my control.

It's lame to make fun of people based on their looks.

Feeling good about my body doesn't have to mean being skinny.

I'll never push a girl to do something she doesn't want to do.

Next time I see an ad that offends me, I'm not gonna buy anything from that company.

I'd rather have a serious girlfriend than a serious boyfriend.

I wrote an article for the school newspaper about how TV teaches boys only to like pretty girls.

I'm going to do whatever it takes to protect myself.

I'm angry at society for teaching me to hate my looks and my body. I have better things to do.

Hollywood pretty is not the only kind of pretty.

I joined a group that opposes testing make-up on animals.

What would society look like if women were valued for their strength and not their appearance?