



Teen girls pushing the envelope

09/21/03

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I was overjoyed when my first daughter was born 11 years ago. Raise a girl? Easy, I thought. I come from a long line of strong women, and as I was becoming a mother I was armed with knowledge of their experiences throughout a changing century.

My great-grandmother, a logging camp midwife, married and became a mother at 17. My grandmother left two bad marriages, and as a beautician heard about even more. My mom, her family's first college girl, raised four kids as a farm wife.

These women had seen it all -- and never let me forget it.

In the 1980s, my great-grandmother, then an octogenarian, told me: "Your generation didn't invent sex -- the only difference is you talk about it more."

But Grandma Susie hadn't seen the movie "Thirteen."

The new film, directed by Catherine Hardwicke, is a frightening depiction of the reckless shoplifting, drug use and sexual exploits of seventh-grade girls in a suburban Los Angeles middle school. It is based on the life of co-writer Nikki Reed, who plays the role of prematurely provocative Evie. (Reed she is now 15).

The movie is told from the point of view of Tracy (Evan Rachel Wood), a promising seventh-grade student who quickly realizes that the patterned little-girl socks she wears on the first day of school are hopelessly uncool. She tosses her stuffed animals and cozies up to Evie, who at first snubs her.

To win Evie's attentions, Tracy steals a wallet full of cash at a bus stop. Before long, she has abandoned everything for her new friend: her homework, her dignity, even a close relationship with her divorced mother, Mel (a recovering alcoholic and at-home beautician played by Holly Hunter). Mel struggles to keep her family together, going overboard to be cool and understanding.

The film, though at times manipulative, made my pulse quicken. Unlike Mel, I don't have to sandwich AA meetings in between parenting my three daughters (a role I share with my husband). I'm lucky not to have to scrounge for change when I take my kids shopping, too.

But I left the theater feeling very unsettled about raising girls in a world where teen magazines give 12-year-old readers advice on flirting, where girls perform physical hazing and where, to judge by the bare bellies I see even on cold days, Lolita is a role model.

Sex, drugs alcohol Unlike Grandma Susie, I do think this generation goes far beyond my own, and there are statistics to prove it. According to a 2001 report by the Alan Guttmacher Institute, teens in the United States are more likely to have sexual intercourse before age 15 (and have shorter, more sporadic relationships) than teenagers in Canada, Great Britain and Sweden.

And the 2002 Healthy Teen Survey conducted by the Oregon Department of Human Services found that 15 percent of eighth-graders had had sexual intercourse. In the month before the survey, 21 percent of those questioned had obtained alcohol, 12 percent had used marijuana and 7 percent had sniffed glue, spray or gases in order to get high.

When I was in eighth grade, it was a big deal when three boys I knew took their dad's car for a late-night joyride. Dangerous as that was (the police caught them, and no one was hurt), it seems downright innocent by comparison.

While Tracy's downward spiral seems extreme, her experience can be found everywhere, said Cheryl Dellasega, a nurse practitioner on the faculty of the College of Medicine at Penn State University. Author of the best-selling "Surviving Ophelia," she is co-author of the newly released "Girl Wars: 12 Strategies That Will End Female Bullying" (Fireside, \$13, 242 pages).

"So much of the movie is all about how girls hurt each other, and how one girl can be influenced by another to go along to be in the 'in crowd,' " Dellasega said.

"In their teen years, girls in particular are separating from Mom and looking to their friends for identity," she said. "Those friends might be Goths, or hypersexual. They are rough years for many girls, and they'll grab at life buoys."

Self-mutilation, too But wearing black eye makeup seems minor compared with sex, drugs, alcohol and eating disorders. And a behavior as old as Oedipus recently has reappeared in the lineup: self-mutilation. Like Tracy in "Thirteen," it is not uncommon, Dellasega said, for girls to slice open their skin -- with scissors or even paper clips -- and bleed.

Then there is the nonchalance with which girls seemingly regard their experiences. Susan Hazel is a mental health nurse practitioner who works with adolescents in private practice and at Oregon Health & Science University's program at Merlo Station High School, an alternative high school in Beaverton. Hazel said she is often stunned by what she hears in sessions.

"Kids are more sexual today than they were a generation ago, no question," Hazel said.

Recently, a girl casually told her of girls having sex with each other in the living room of their residential home, Hazel said. "I thought, 'Wow, things have really changed in terms of kids' exploration with sexuality and the ability to just talk about it.' "

Little wonder, when Madonna and Brittany kiss for shock value, and even Old Navy markets bikinis in size 2T. "With everyone trying to make a buck off their sexuality, why wouldn't they want to show their tummies and cleavage and tongues?" Hazel asked. "I had never seen so much skin in my life until I came to work in a high school."

Words hurt as much as fists Allison Ambrose, a 17-year-old junior at St. Mary's Academy in Portland, said that even in an all-girls' school where grades are paramount, looks matter immensely, too. "If someone isn't looking too great, people talk," she said. "They'll say, 'She's so fat' the minute someone turns her back.' "

Ambrose hasn't seen "Thirteen," but she knows the premise well. "Boys use their fists, but girls say bad things about each other, and it can hurt just as much," she said. Today, it's not just whispering, either: There is cyber-dissing, in chat rooms and e-mails.

"There is so much pressure today to be perfect," Ambrose said. "If you're not, it feels better to at least have someone who's worse off than you."

Dellasega, for her part, urged parents not to give up hope. "If there are enough mothers and fathers who stay engaged, we can help girls to learn a better way than being mean," she said. "We have to stop excusing it or saying, 'This is just a phase.' It's not acceptable to hurt others or to see a teenage girl struggle and not to try to help her."

It's not just one person Don't point the finger at one "bad influence," either, she said. "If your daughter is having a problem with another child, I can almost guarantee that the whole school is having a problem," Dellasega said. "Together parents should approach the school to find out how things can be done differently, if it's getting them involved in social action or sports. Bullies are just likely to lash out."

But peer pressure is a powerful thing. In a world where fourth-graders are permitted to "date," it takes involvement -- and a nosiness Mel in "Thirteen" was not willing to employ -- to help a child

navigate.

I am close to my girls, and we speak openly about everything. But as my oldest daughter enters the treacherous years otherwise known as middle school, I don't kid myself. I can only hope I will remain in reach as one of the life buoys.

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