

A close-up, black and white photograph of a young girl's face. She has a green braided headband. Her eyes are looking directly at the camera. The text is overlaid on the right side of her face.

What Are We Doing to Girls?

The Early Sexualization Phenomenon
and How Communities Are Responding

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Written by Jennifer A. Smith and Mindi Wisman

Edited by Melanie Wilson

Designed by Doug MacLaughlin

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the following individuals and organizations in the production and dissemination of this report.

Amy Abair, Lynn Amey, Katherine Arthaud, Mary Bailey, Gary M. Blau, Lyn Mikel Brown, Rosemarie Burton, Anthony and Kelly Burton, Vicki and Ross Cohen, Patrick DeLeon, Jackie Dupont, Jill Faulkner, Lilia Goldfarb, Debra Grollman, Mary Imbornone, Sandy Hart, Shanley Hinge, Lori Mathews, George McCully, Katherine McLaughlin, Rebecca Muller, Derek Murphy, David Newman, Peter Mendelson, Sarah Smith, Kay Stephens, Henekis Stoddard, Megan Williams, and the US Attorney's Office, Vermont.

NEN is a not-for-profit training and research organization that works to advance the field of child and youth services. Our reports and toolkits are aimed at improving the work that social service agencies, schools, community coalitions, civic groups and government do on behalf of young people and their families.

For a list of our publications, see: <http://www.nenetwork.org/publications/pub-descriptions.html>

For community-building products and services,
see: http://www.nenetwork.org/community_building/products_services.html

2011© by New England Network for Child, Youth & Family Services. All rights reserved.

New England Network for Child, Youth & Family Services

PO Box 35

Charlotte, VT 05445

<http://www.nenetwork.org>



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
WHAT IS SEXUALIZATION?	4
<i>What causes sexualization?</i>	5
<i>Is it a problem?</i>	5
<i>Potential contributors</i>	5
Media, technology and marketing	5
Biological changes in development	7
Family type and dynamics	7
Social factors	8
WORKING WITH GIRLS	9
HOW COMMUNITIES AND AGENCIES ARE RESPONDING	11
<i>Media and Technology Education</i>	11
Internet Safety	11
'Sexting'	13
Media literacy	13
Online tools	15
<i>Sex Education</i>	16
Abstinence	16
VOICES OF GIRLS	18
Comprehensive sex education	20
Peer-led sex education	22
Online sex education	23
Informal sex education	25
<i>Girls' Empowerment</i>	27
Support groups	27
Adventure groups	28
<i>Education and Advocacy</i>	30
Community outreach	30
Parental education	32
Product and media protests	33
Policy work	35
AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY	36
CONCLUSION	38

INTRODUCTION

Seven-year-olds wearing thong underwear, halter tops and make-up; pre-teens sending partially nude pictures of themselves through cell phones; girls in middle and high school hooking up with boys for casual sex. These stories and more have emerged in the media in recent years, prompting a good deal of anguish and soul-searching on the part of parents, teachers and communities as a whole. What's gone wrong, or could it be that nothing is wrong? Are girls being "sexualized" by outside forces, or could these new displays of sexuality be healthy, simply the natural and normal self-expression of girls no longer constrained by outmoded social rules? Is early sexualization a real phenomenon? If so, is it a problem? And if it is a problem, has it reached such critical proportions that society as a whole needs to respond to it? No single answer to these questions seems adequate, and thus the unease continues.

"Doing something" about such an amorphous issue is obviously challenging. The best way to grapple with sexualization and potential responses to it may be to examine what organizations and communities are in fact doing – what sort of responses they have formulated to cope with what seems on its face to be an almost intractable problem. This report describes those responses, their theoretical bases and methods of implementation, and, where possible, the published outcomes that support, or fail to support, their use.

WHAT IS 'SEXUALIZATION'?

A girl is "sexualized" when she comes to believe that her value lies only in her beauty and sexual appeal.¹ Since such beliefs are, by definition, imposed by outside forces, a sexualized girl, and particularly one who is young, is in a sense performing a role created for her by others. Other groups are not immune to this phenomenon, of course; older girls and even mature women are shaped by the same cultural attitudes. But the distinction, at least for this report, is this: while older girls may also believe that they must be sexy to attract attention, they have achieved, by virtue of their age alone, at least some

Most people would worry far more about an 11-year-old girl engaging in sexually explicit 'chat' with an adult man online than an 18-year-old adolescent discussing sexual topics with a same-age intimate partner. Girls in both scenarios may be shaped by unhealthy social expectations, but one is at much greater risk of sustaining real and even life-changing damage.

measure of personal power and control. Sexual interest for girls in their mid- and late teens is normal, and though knowledge and self-control at this age is still imperfect, teenage girls can at least understand what sex might mean for them and a partner. This is why most people would worry far more about an 11-year-old girl engaging in sexually explicit "chat" with an adult man online than an 18-year-old adolescent discussing sexual topics with a same-age intimate partner. Girls in both scenarios may be shaped by unhealthy social expectations, but one is at much greater risk of sustaining real and even life-changing damage.

¹American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2010). *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>

Theories of human development tell us that as girls grow and mature, so do their abilities to respond to their environment with autonomy and self-assurance.² In the previous example, the older adolescent is presumably (and ideally) expressing genuine sexual interest within the context of a relationship of balanced power, whereas the 11-year-old girl, despite being an active participant, is part of an interaction that she cannot truly understand. For pre- and early-adolescent girls (ages 9-15 years old), healthy sexuality is still emerging. To whatever degree, then, that girls are identifying and acting out sexualized roles that come from the world outside them, the phenomenon of early sexualization is at play.

What causes sexualization?

Concern over the early sexualization of girls is a phenomenon primarily of the 1990's, and research on the topic is minimal. Nonetheless, academics, practitioners, parents, educators, and the media have begun to delve into it. To date, the most significant research on this topic is a lengthy 2007 report by the American Psychological Association (APA). That report argues that media, society and others contribute to the sexualization of girls by valuing "sexiness" above nearly all else in a culture already inundated by sexualized images, and that this emphasis has led many girls to model their own behavior and development on the sexually objectified women they see every day.³

Is sexualization a problem?

While much of the research on the sexualization of girls argues that it is a problem, a few scholars have questioned aspects of the research. In a 2009 critique of

the APA's report on sexualization, Lerum and Dworkin argue that the report underemphasizes common feminist objectives such as girls' and women's sexual health and rights. They also point out that the APA report primarily discusses sexualization as a negative phenomenon, without presenting evidence of sexualization in the media having either no effect or even a positive effect on girls. They suggest, for instance, that images of powerful women in control of their own sexuality just might be good for girls.⁴

Others question whether the amount of attention given to this issue may blow it out of proportion, interfering with our ability to discern what is really happening and unintentionally worsening conditions for girls trying to navigate today's society. But in her discussion of pre-teen girls' sexual behavior in chat rooms (a five-year study of 8- to 12-year-old girls), New York Psychologist Joan Atwood makes a counter-argument: even if the problem impacts only the 1% of girls estimated by her study, she said, "1% is a really big number. For example, in the U.S. the prevalence of HIV infection is 0.4%, and we are incredibly concerned about that....One percent represents 100,079 young girls. These girls are at risk."⁵

Potential contributors

Media, technology and marketing

Most of the research on this topic identifies the objectification of women and girls in movies, television shows, music videos, the Internet, video games, and advertising as a primary cause of sexualization. Girls today are exposed to media on a daily, if not minute-to-minute, basis; in fact, young people between the ages of 8 and

²Dixon-Mueller, R. (2008). How young is too young? Comparative perspectives on adolescent sexual, marital, and reproductive transitions. *Studies in Family Planning*, Volume 39, Number 4.

³American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2010). *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>

⁴Lerum, K. & Dworkin, S. (2009). Bad girls rule: An interdisciplinary feminist commentary on the report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls. *Journal of Sex Research*, 46(4), 250–263.

⁵Atwood, J. (2006). Mommy's little angel, daddy's little girl: Do you know what your pre-teens are doing? *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 34: 447–467.

18 spend an average of nearly 6.5 hours a day with media.⁶ The pictures, songs and words washing over them influence their understanding of sexuality and what it means to be “sexual,” a hypothesis backed up by Kaiser Family Foundation research that found that young teens ranked entertainment media as their top sources for information on sexuality and sexual health.⁷ (In a recent National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy study, teens say parents are the biggest influence when it comes to sex, far more so than the media, which they ranked almost last.⁸ The real issue here may be whether teens are able to accurately identify the forces influencing them.)

News reports tell us that young girls are now wearing make-up, going to tanning booths, dieting, and receiving manicures and waxes.^{9 10 11} In fact, a recent *Newsweek* article reveals that 43% of 6- to 9-year-olds use lipstick or lip-gloss; 38% use hairstyling products; and 12% use other cosmetics. What’s more, 8- to 12-year-olds (or, perhaps more accurately, their parents) spend more than \$40 million a month on beauty products.¹² Also alarming is that according to a 2004 study by the Dove Real Beauty campaign, 42% of first- to third-grade girls want to be thinner, while 81% of 10-year-olds are afraid of getting fat.¹³ Parents can and do buy their girls Playboy-themed stationary and

sheets, girls as young as three are wearing high heels, and pole-dancing classes for children are popping up in the UK and Australia.^{14 15 16} Excited by popular culture and wanting to fit in, young girls make both a quick sell and an easy target.

A spate of recent books, including *What’s Happening to Our Girls?*, *Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualization of Girls*, *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing our Daughters from Marketers’ Schemes* and *The Lolita Effect*, also charge the media with undermining the healthy development of girls. Each author discusses countless examples of sexually suggestive clothing, dolls, and toys specifically marketed towards young girls, including stilettos, stripper poles and padded bras.¹⁷ Each book also discusses the role parents can have in directly and indirectly reinforcing the sexualization of girls by purchasing sexually suggestive items, while at the same time ignoring the onslaught of sexualized images that girls are exposed to through the media. Indeed, the parents themselves are likely shaped by the same messages, without realizing it.

The rapid advancement of technologies like the Internet, phone texting and social networks have also made it far easier for anyone or anything to communicate directly with girls, and to do so in uncensored and unmonitored settings. Pre-teens and early adolescents throughout the

⁶Kaiser Family Foundation. (2010). *Generation M: Media in the lives of 8-18 year-olds*. Retrieved from <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/8010.pdf>

⁷Kaiser Family Foundation. (2001). *Teens and Sex: The Role of Popular TV*.

Retrieved from <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/loader.cfm?url=/commonspot/security/getfile.cfm&PageID=13556>

⁸Albert, B. (2010). With one voice 2010: America’s adults and teens sound off about teen pregnancy. Washington, DC: *The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy*

⁹Denny, C. (2008, March 25). Trend: Pretty babies. *Philadelphia Magazine*. Retrieved from http://www.phillymag.com/articles/pretty_babies/

¹⁰Appleyard, D. (2009, May 8). Rise of the child women: The new breed of girls as young as ten who dream of manicures, diets and breast implants. *The Daily Mail*. Retrieved from www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1174626/Rise-child-women-The-new-breed-girls-young-dream-manicures-diets-breast-implants.html?ITO=1490

¹¹Appleyard, D. (2009, July 17). The primary school prom queens: The 7-year-olds with £800 dresses, limos, make-up and fake tans. *The Daily Mail*. Retrieved from www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1199956/The-primary-school-prom-queens-The-7-year-olds-800-dresses-limos-make-fake-tans.html

¹²Bennett, J. (2009, March 30). Generation diva. *Newsweek*. Retrieved from <http://www.newsweek.com/2009/03/29/generation-diva.html>

¹³Ibid

¹⁴Singh, A. (2010, June 13). High heels for girls are sexualizing children, parenting groups warn. *Telegraph*.

Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/7825301/High-heels-for-girls-are-sexualising-children-parenting-groups-warn.html>

¹⁵Yamine, E. (2007, October 8). Fury over pole dancing kids. *Daily Telegraph*.

Retrieved from <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw-act/fury-over-pole-dancing-kids/story-e6freuzi-111114591438>

¹⁶Coy, M. (2009). Milkshakes, lady lumps and growing up to want boobies: How the sexualization of popular culture limits girls’ horizons. *Child Abuse Review Vol. 18*: 372–383

¹⁷Jones, G. (2009, October 6). Alarming milestones for young Australian girls. *The Daily Telegraph*.

Retrieved from <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/national/alarming-milestones-for-young-australian-girls/story-e6freuzi-1225783117792>

industrialized world spend an enormous amount of time online and on their cell phones, and perhaps not surprisingly, nearly one-quarter of teens (22%) say that technology makes them personally more forward and aggressive, encouraging them to project sexy personas.¹⁸

Biological changes in development

Sexualization cannot be blamed solely on the media, of course; dynamic biological and social factors are also continuously at play. For example, girls in the U.S. and in Western Europe appear

to be reaching puberty at younger ages than in previous generations. Biomedical and environmental researchers hypothesize that these changes may be linked to obesity, to

hormonal changes linked to the food we ingest, or to chemical toxin exposure.^{19 20} Yet the scientific debate on the causes is intense. A 2009 Danish study found that obesity and hormone level differences could not explain early breast development in girls.²¹ In 2007, the Breast Cancer Fund found that while girls in the U.S. are reaching puberty earlier than they have before, neither environmental factors nor obesity could clearly be held responsible, at least not yet.²² In a 2010 study published in the journal *Pediatrics*, a multi-site study of over 1200 girls aged 6-8, found that girls, especially white girls,

were developing breasts at significantly younger ages than girls 10-30 years ago, but the causality was not studied.²³ Recently, focus has sharpened on Bisphenol A (BPA), a form of hard plastic used in drinking bottles and canned food, which can mimic the body's own hormones and may lead to negative health effects, including reproductive problems, cancers, and early puberty.²⁴ Both Canada and the European Union have banned the use of BPA in baby bottles, and several other countries have debated banning certain uses of BPA.

Girls in the U.S. and in Western Europe appear to be reaching puberty at younger ages than in previous generations. Biomedical and environmental researchers hypothesize that these changes may be linked to obesity, to hormonal changes linked to the food we ingest, or to chemical toxin exposure.

Legislation to regulate BPA use has been proposed in at least 31 U.S. states and eight states have already passed legislation to limit its use.²⁵

Family type and dynamics

Social factors such as parent expectations and the “rules” that govern peer interactions also play a role in the early sexualization of girls.²⁶ Young girls, after all, do not generally buy their own clothes or toys, and they are certainly not responsible for monitoring their own behavior and safety. The APA argues that parents are

¹⁸The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. (2009). *Sex and Tech: Results from a Survey of Teens and Young Adults*.

Retrieved from http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/sextech/PDF/SexTech_Summary.pdf

¹⁹Aksglaede, L., Sørensen, K., Petersen, J., Skakkebaek, N., & Anders J. (2009). Recent decline in age at breast development: The Copenhagen puberty study. *Pediatrics*, 123; e932-e939.

²⁰Steingraber, S. (2007). The falling age of puberty in U.S. girls. *The Breast Cancer Fund*.

Retrieved from <http://www.breastcancerfund.org/media/publications/falling-age-of-puberty/>

²¹Aksglaede et al., (2009).

²²Steingraber, S. (2007).

²³Grady, D. (2010, August 9). First signs of puberty seen in younger girls. *The New York Times*.

Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/09/health/research/09puberty.html?_r=1&hpw

²⁴The Breast Cancer Fund. (2009). Abstracts of Selected BPA Studies.

Retrieved from, http://www.breastcancerfund.org/assets/pdfs/tips-fact-sheets/bpa-abstracts_mar2009.pdf

²⁵Safer States. (2011). About Bisphenol-A. Retrieved from <http://www.saferstates.com/2010/01/bisphenol-a.html>

²⁶Choate, L. & Curry, J. (2009). Addressing the sexualization of girls through comprehensive programs, advocacy, and systemic change: Implications for professional school counselors. *Professional School Counseling*, Vol. 12, Issue 3.

also seduced by marketing and the desire for thin, attractive children, pushing them into beauty pageants and paying for plastic surgery. However, the APA did not find a clear reason for the phenomenon other than speculation about the power of marketing and media.²⁷ In the book *So Sexy So Soon*, authors Jean Kilborne and Diane Levin contend that blaming parents is a smoke-screen for where the blame actually belongs—on media and marketing powerhouses. Kilborne and Levin maintain that expecting parents to say no to beauty products just doesn't work against the power of marketing.²⁸

Factors like family stress and paternal absence have also been linked to early puberty and sexual initiation in girls,

Factors like family stress and paternal absence have also been linked to early puberty and sexual initiation in girls, although the relationship between these dynamics is not yet fully understood.

although the relationship between these dynamics is not yet fully understood.²⁹ Moffitt et al. found that there was a significant correlation between family conflict and early puberty, and that girls who experienced “father absence” before the onset of menstruation matured four to five months earlier than girls in a control group. They concluded that taken together, family conflict and paternal absence may contribute to the timing of the onset of menarche.³⁰ Similarly, Ellis and Garber found that girls in

high-stress family situations (for example, families that experienced divorce and remarriage, or maternal depression) not only tended to experience puberty earlier than those in a low-stress group, but also had more exposure to unrelated male father figures (stepfathers and boyfriends). Ellis and Garber hypothesized that it is not simply the absence of a biological father, but family stress plus the presence of an unrelated father figure that contributed to early menstruation. They also found a significant correlation between the age of a girl when an unrelated father figure first came into her life and the timing of pubertal maturation.³¹

A study published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* in the fall of 2010 also found a link between father absence and early puberty. In higher income households, biological father absence significantly correlated with early onset puberty, independent of a girl's weight.³² The researchers acknowledge that their findings bring up more questions than answers, yet one fact has only grown more clear: girls are maturing at earlier and earlier ages.

Social factors

Girls who are disadvantaged – who are poor, have inadequate education, are in single parent families or in economically depressed neighborhoods – have more

²⁷American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2010). *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>

²⁸Kilborne, J. & Levin, D. (2008). *So sexy so soon: The new sexualized childhood and what parents can do to protect their kids*. Ballantine Books, New York.

²⁹Colborn, T., Dumanoski, D., & Peterson Myers, J. (2005). Factors identified as possible causes of early puberty. *Our Stolen Future website* Retrieved from, <http://www.ourstolenfuture.org/NewScience/reproduction/Puberty/potentialcauses.htm>

³⁰Moffitt, T., Caspi, A., Belsky, J., & Silva, P. (1992). Childhood experience and the onset of menarche: a test of a sociobiological model. *Child Development Vol. 63*: 47-58.

³¹Ellis, B. & Garber, J. (2000). Psychosocial antecedents of pubertal maturation in girls: Parental psychopathology, stepfather presence, and family and marital stress. *Child Development Vol. 71*: 485-501.

³²EurekAlert. (2010). Father absence linked to earlier puberty among certain girls. Retrieved from, http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2010-09/uoc--fal091410.php

trouble than their peers in managing their emerging sexuality in positive ways.

While early sexualization is not synonymous with early sexual behavior, girls who are socially defined as sexual beings at young ages, and who accept and embrace that definition, are more likely to engage in sexual behavior at young ages. And early sexual behavior, of course, puts girls at higher risk for a number of negative outcomes. Those outcomes include difficulty forming positive relationships with other girls, unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, depression and suicide, and legal problems and criminal charges.^{33 34 35} The protective factors that save some girls – for example, a strong relationship with parents, family stability, parental supervision, strong personal values and motivations, and access to quality sex education and health services – are notably lacking for most high-risk girls; indeed, their very absence is what puts these girls at risk.³⁶ It is these girls, then, whom we consider in this report.

WORKING WITH GIRLS

How do social service agencies across the country – those agencies most professionally attuned to needy girls and skilled at working with them – respond to early sexualization? How do they see the social milieu of girls changing, and what behaviors are they seeing in girls as a result? To

find out, we interviewed an array of health and education professionals, and youth workers at agencies and schools throughout the U.S. and in Canada. While our scope was necessarily limited, we found broad consensus among staff working with high-risk girls that early sexualization is indeed a serious issue.

To state the obvious, most girls who become involved with social service agencies have family problems, mental or behavioral health problems, or issues related to their socioeconomic status that put them at risk for pregnancy, STIs and sexual violence. At the same time, they have fewer resources to cope with these risks.³⁷ Poor girls have less access to health services that could prevent

While early sexualization is not synonymous with early sexual behavior, girls who are socially defined as sexual beings at young ages, and who accept and embrace that definition, are more likely to engage in sexual behavior at young ages.

or treat sexual problems, and becoming a teen parent multiplies the chances of dropping out of school, staying poor, and passing along those disadvantages to their own children.³⁸ In other words, of all girls, these girls are the ones who can least afford to be sexualized at young ages.

Social service agency workers we spoke with say the girls they see are often desensitized to sex, seeing it as a prerequisite to, rather than a product of, intimacy. “Oral

³³American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2010). *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*.

Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>

³⁴O'Donnell, L., O'Donnell, C. & Stueve, A. (2001). Early sexual initiation and subsequent sex-related risks among urban minority youth: The reach for health study. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 33(6), 268-275.

³⁵Atwood, J. (2006). Mommy's little angel, daddy's little girl: Do you know what your pre-teens are doing? *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 34: 447-467.

³⁶Singh, S., Darroch, J., & Frost, J. (2001). Socioeconomic disadvantage and adolescent women's sexual and reproductive behavior: The case of five developed countries. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 2001, 33(6), 251-258 & 289,

³⁷Sarri, R. & Phillips, A. (2004). Health and social services for pregnant and parenting high risk teens. *Children and Youth Services Review*, Volume 26, Issue 6, 537-560.

³⁸Albert, B. Brown, S., & Flanigan, C. (2003). *14 and Younger: The Sexual Behavior of Young Adolescents*. National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

Retrieved from, <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/14summary.pdf>

"Girls are giving away the most private parts of themselves electronically and they end up humiliated beyond belief."

sex, to them, is considered safe, like holding hands," said one youth worker.³⁹ Another said, "They don't see sex as an intimate act – it's not a big deal to them, they're very casual about it. They'll talk about it in public, they don't care who's listening."⁴⁰ Said another staff member, "You can see the aftermath of this on social networking sites... 'flame wars' when people fight online and trash each other's reputations. Everyone at school will read whatever story gets posted online about how the girl's a slut or slept with someone at a party."⁴¹ Another way that agency staff see girls' sexuality being publicized and shared among peers is through "sexting," when girls send nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves via text message on cell phones and handheld devices. Said one professional in the field, "Girls are giving away the most private parts of themselves electronically and they end up humiliated beyond belief."⁴²

Said one youth worker, "12-year-old girls are having sex with guys at least five years older than them. They'll say it's voluntary but then describe it as a bargain situation where he'd give her alcohol and cigarettes if

she'll have sex with him."⁴³

Said another worker, "We call that prostitution – we name it. You're trading

sex for food, or sex for shelter, or sex for favors, and it's a slippery slope."⁴⁴ Indeed, a November 2009 article in the *New York Times* documented how easily young teens disconnected from their families – both boys and girls – slip into sex-for-trade transactions, noting that the economic recession in the U.S. has forced thousands of new teens, some as young as 13, onto the street and into just such situations.⁴⁵

According to one Vermont worker, sexualization "is a very real danger for girls, [especially those] that are experiencing sexual violence. Technology seems to be accelerating this issue. Girls as young as 12 years old are 'sexting.' They need the education behind them and to know the risks before it's too late. Education gives the girls options.... The messages girls are getting tell them that males are dominant, females are submissive, women need to look sexy and girls need to act in sexual ways. This is what girls are learning about what it means to be a woman. We are teaching girls that they have rights and that they don't need to do things they don't want to."⁴⁶ Said another youth worker, "They have a knee-jerk

reaction to go find the next guy and use sex to feel better again. You know, we all have a link between love and self-esteem, but for these girls it's love equals sex equals self-esteem. This pattern and internal link is a problem."

"They have a knee-jerk reaction to go find the next guy and use sex to feel better again. You know, we all have a link between love and self-esteem, but for these girls it's love equals sex equals self-esteem. This pattern and internal link is a problem."

³⁹D. Murphy, (personal communication, May 12, 2008).

⁴⁰A. Abair, (personal communication, January 30, 2009)

⁴¹S. Smith, (personal communication, May 12, 2008)

⁴²K. Stephens, (personal communication, May 7, 2009)

⁴³J. Faulkner, (personal communication, June 2, 2008)

⁴⁴D. Grollman, (personal communication, 2005)

⁴⁵Kristof, N. (2009, May 6). Girls on our streets. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/07/opinion/07kristof.html>

⁴⁶S. Smith, (personal communication, May 12, 2008)

sex equals self-esteem. This pattern and internal link is a problem."⁴⁷

One Canadian agency director sums up the issue like this: "[As a society], we are struggling to define healthy sexuality. People don't know what's appropriate and what's not. [Girls] feel like they need to dress 'sexy' and act 'sexy' in order to be popular. If you don't do these things you won't be popular—that's the message. Pressure to conform is so great for some girls. A lot of girls [feel] they have very little choice.... From all the evidence I have collected from thousands of people who work with kids, parents and other concerned citizens, plus my own focus groups with girls, I know the problem is real."⁴⁸

HOW COMMUNITIES AND AGENCIES ARE RESPONDING

What can be done to stall, or even reverse, the trend toward the early sexualization of girls? The array of responses by communities, schools and social service organizations is broad, and includes formal sex education, girls' empowerment groups and activities, parent and community outreach and advocacy, as well as informal activities that address life skills and girls' transitions to womanhood. While they differ in what they target, the approaches all share one feature: they utilize knowledge about protective factors and prevention to minimize the negative effects of broad social and cultural pressures for girls that are not otherwise easy to grasp or control.

Media and Technology Education

Because so many messages about sexuality come via the media and Internet, a number of organizations focus

their energies on educating girls about them, hoping that by doing so, they can reduce the impact of the negative messages girls receive about themselves. Some researchers suggest that using pop culture itself to address sex-related topics can make the discussion more relevant and engaging for teens.

Internet safety

Workshops on Internet safety are readily available and are often provided in the context of regional conferences or day-long seminars. Originating as a response to online exploitation of children, Internet safety courses focus on teaching skills to protect one's identity while online, using available security features that are built into technologies, and understanding how to report problems if harassment or threats arise.

Internet safety trainings teach girls about different types of communication, including instant messaging, texting and social networking sites. In communities across the country, officers from local police departments have teamed up with agencies and schools to provide these safety trainings.^{49 50} Trainers from Umbrella, Inc., a private, non-profit in Vermont that specializes in sexual and domestic violence programs, conduct workshops with parents, service providers and girls themselves. Umbrella, Inc.'s presentations address not just the practical do's and don'ts of surfing online, but also tell girls where they can find support if they encounter emails, websites or chats that make them uncomfortable.⁵¹

Staff members at Northeast Kingdom Youth Services, a private, non-profit in northeastern Vermont, go online

⁴⁷A. Abair, (personal communication, January 30, 2009)

⁴⁸L. Goldfarb, (personal communication, February 28, 2009).

⁴⁹Kelly, D. (2010, April 15). Yucaipa teens cited for "sexting" nude photos of classmates. *The Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/apr/15/local/la-me-teen-sexting15-2010apr15>

⁵⁰West Hartford News. (2011, January 20). *Cybercompass: Texting, Sexting and Cyberbullying*.

Retrieved from, <http://www.westhartfordnews.com/articles/2011/01/20/news/doc4d34bae2bf8b2337872383.txt>

⁵¹H. Stoddard, (personal communication, April 29, 2009).

While girls may think that removing their age and hometown from a profile is enough to ensure anonymity, staff will instead tell them, “Look, half your ‘friends’ are listed as 14 years old and are from the [local] school, and here you posted that your mom isn’t going to be home and you want to meet at Dunkin Donuts. That makes it easy for someone to find you.”

with girls and view their MySpace and Facebook pages to point out their vulnerabilities. While girls may think that removing their age and hometown from a profile is enough to ensure anonymity, staff will instead tell them, “Look, half your ‘friends’ are listed as 14 years old and are from the [local] school, and here you posted that your mom isn’t going to be home and you want to meet at Dunkin Donuts. That makes it easy for someone to find you.”⁵² Staff report that taking this hands-on approach helps girls understand their own personal level of risk, and that it is important that girls consider not just their own online activity but that of their friends. Said one worker, “We hear girls later telling their friends and younger girls about what they learned, saying, ‘Don’t ever post something like that again on my page! I’m going to delete it.’”⁵³

In cases where the girls are posting sexually provocative pictures online and parents don’t have the skills or

commitment to monitor activity, staff from Northeast Kingdom Youth Services form agreements with girls that let them view their social networking pages regularly in order to discourage inappropriate

content. “The girls I work with know that I’m checking their sites because I care about them and they appreciate that there’s an adult they trust who really knows what’s going on and is paying attention,”⁵⁴ said a staffer.

The encouraging news is that teens may be starting to listen to warnings about Internet safety. According to a 2007 Pew study, 66% of teens who have created an online profile on a social networking site limit who can access their profile pages.⁵⁵ And research done by Girl Scouts of the USA indicates that girls do want to be able to turn to adults with questions about how to navigate the Internet and dilemmas they face online. According to a recent study conducted by the organization, girls whose parents monitor their behavior (i.e., that know girls’ friends, what they are doing, and where) start having sexual intercourse later and also have higher rates of contraception use than their unsupervised peers.⁵⁶

Research done by Girl Scouts of the USA indicates that girls do want to be able to turn to adults with questions about how to navigate the Internet and dilemmas they face online.

⁵²S. Smith, (personal communication, May 12, 2008).

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Lenhart, A. & Madden, M. (2007). Social Networking Websites and Teens: An Overview. *Pew Internet and American Life Project*. Retrieved from, <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2007/Social-Networking-Websites-and-Teens/Data-Memo.aspx>

⁵⁶Girl Scout Research Institute. (2002). *The Net Effect: Girls and New Media*. Retrieved from, http://www.girlscouts.org/research/pdf/net_effect.pdf

'Sexting'

A 2009 Pew Research Center study reported that 4% of cell phone owning 17-year-olds say they have sent nude or nearly nude images of themselves via cell phone and 15% say they have received nude or nearly nude images.⁵⁷ Furthermore, a 2007 report by the Pew Research Center found that 51% of girls say pressure from boys is a reason they send sexy messages or images, and 18% of boys say pressure from a girl is a reason they send racy images or messages.⁵⁸

Kay Stephens, an author and trainer who works throughout New England, focuses her presentations on the dangers of sexting, or sending sexually explicit text messages or photographs through mobile phones. She said, "Relationships start online and progress from IM'ing to texting, and boys are pressuring girls to send partially or fully nude pictures in order to 'prove' they really like them. The girls think this is a personal, intimate relationship that will stay private."⁵⁹ Stephens said that after her one-hour workshops, many teens approach her and admit that they have sent images of themselves electronically, but that "they didn't have a name for it and didn't know it was something happening to other girls."⁶⁰

In addition to educating girls (and boys) about the risk of pictures being forwarded to unintended recipients or posted on porn sites, Stephens said, "I also tell them about the legal ramifications, that they might be charged with distributing or trafficking child pornography if

they are sexting, in the hopes that that will scare them enough to prevent it."⁶¹ There is some debate about whether such an approach would be useful or even, in some states, legal. In 2009, Vermont enacted a law that allows minors charged with a first offense of "sexting" to be tried as a juvenile and sent to a diversion program rather than facing more serious consequences, such as ending up on a state sex offender registry.⁶² Other states, including New Jersey, have followed suit and have proposed legislation to decriminalize sexting.⁶³

Media literacy

Media literacy focuses on teaching teens critical analysis skills to "unpack" the real messages underlying pictures, slogans, and dialogue used in various media formats. To adults, it may seem obvious that images of young teens in suggestive clothes carry the subtle message that girls must wear such clothes to be attractive. But pre-teen and adolescent girls are rarely so savvy.

Hardy Girls, Healthy Women (HGHW), a Waterville, ME, organization, offers media literacy activities to middle-school-aged girls through its Girls Coalition Groups. These groups, which meet weekly along with an adult "muse" facilitator, offer participants the opportunity to deconstruct media images and explore the negative or false messages behind them. Said Jackie Dupont, Director of Programs, "It's great because the groups bring girls from different social circles together to work on projects, which ultimately helps to reduce cliques and girl-fighting."⁶⁴ Groups use a curriculum

⁵⁷Lenhart, A. (2009). Teens and Sexting. *Pew Internet and American Life Project*. Retrieved from, http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2009/PIP_Teens_and_Sexting.pdf

⁵⁸Family Violence Prevention Fund. (2009). *Family Violence Prevention Fund & Ad Council Launch Innovative Campaign to Prevent Digital Dating Abuse Among Teens*. Retrieved from, <http://www.rga.com/news/release/2009/family-violence-prevention>

⁵⁹K. Stephens, (personal communication, May 7, 2009)

⁶⁰K. Stephens, (personal communication, May 7, 2009)

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Curran, J. (2009, September 3). Vermont teen gets reduced sentence in "sexting" case. *MSNBC*. Retrieved from, www.msnbc.msn.com/id/32681970/ns/technology_and_science-tech_and_gadgets/

⁶³Toutant, C. (2009, July 23). N.J. legislation would decriminalize "sexting" by teens. *Law.com*. Retrieved from www.law.com/jsp/article.jsp?id=1202432466455

⁶⁴J. Dupont, (personal communication, May 14, 2009)

called From Adversaries to Allies that was developed by HGHW's founder Lyn Mikel Brown, Ed.D and Mary Madden, PhD.⁶⁵

Other organizations address this issue through one-time workshops or conference presentations. Umbrella, Inc., for example, discusses media literacy as part of a unit on body image during their school-based Lunch Bunch groups for girls in 5th-6th and 7th-8th grades. After defining body image and what influences how girls feel about their bodies, the group looks at a series of magazine excerpts and discusses what messages they are sending about girls' bodies and how they define themselves as people. To counteract negative media

Umbrella, Inc., for example, discusses media literacy as part of a unit on body image during their school-based Lunch Bunch groups for girls in 5th-6th and 7th-8th grades.

messages, the group then does an activity in which girls brainstorm all the positive things that their bodies do for them (for example, "My body lets me see the stars and eat pizza and breathe air and go jogging...").⁶⁶ The exercise acts to contradict the limited ways they see themselves portrayed in the media.

Several websites tackle media literacy by displaying images and materials that can be co-viewed and discussed with girls. About Face, for example, provides an online gallery of "winner" and "offender" ad campaigns, commercials, and images depicting positive

and negative portrayals of women and girls in the media.⁶⁷ About Face also conducts media literacy workshops for young adults aged 13-30 in the San Francisco area. The workshops teach young adults how to interpret the media messages they see every day, how to understand the portrayal of gender, and how to resist negative messages about their body image and identity.⁶⁸

The Media Education Foundation website provides extensive resources for teaching media literacy, including handouts and study guides. "Killing Us Softly 3," a video on the website, addresses media images of women as well as gender stereotypes.⁶⁹ The National Association for Media Literacy Education site also offers helpful

materials, including articles about incorporating media literacy and critical thinking into existing curricula, as well as a full list of online media literacy resources.⁷⁰

While there appears to be no shortage of resources for teaching teens about the hidden messages in the media, it isn't yet clear how effective this sort of education really is. A three-year study of middle school students in San Francisco showed that those participating in the Media Education, Arts and Literacy (or M.E.A.L.) program improved their understanding of how to become more media literate. For example, 6th through 8th graders in the program were more likely than their peers to agree with the concept that media messages are social constructions and not necessarily objective, and to disagree with statements that claimed news was

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶H. Stoddard, (personal communication, April 29, 2009).

⁶⁷About Face. (n.d.) Retrieved from, <http://www.about-face.org/>

⁶⁸About Face. (n.d.). Retrieved from, <http://www.about-face.org/r/presentations.shtml>

⁶⁹The Media Education Foundation. (n.d.). Retrieved from, <http://www.mediaed.org/>

⁷⁰The National Association for Media Literacy Education. (n.d.). Retrieved from, <http://namle.net/>

always objective and accurate.⁷¹ However, students in this study were not found to be more skilled at analyzing media messages than their peers. Apparently, knowing that messages might be skewed is not enough for middle school youth to figure out how they might be skewed. Figuring out how to take this next step is important and perhaps indicates that continuing media literacy education over time, and into high school, is necessary.

Online tools

The positive youth development theories adopted by many organizations that work with girls indicate that “meeting youth where they’re at” is an effective strategy for building trusting and collaborative relationships with girls.⁷² In the case of early sexualization, this means using current media to connect with girls in a way that captures their attention. Many organizations use their websites and social networking sites like Facebook to provide informational resources and create online forums for discussion. While these online presences are usually a secondary approach to an agency’s main work in communities, there are also a number of organizations that use the Internet as their primary vehicle for supporting their work with girls.

Girls, Inc., a national organization, has a popular website portal specifically designed for pre-teen and early adolescent girls that offers educational and recreational opportunities for girls online.⁷³ The site collects survey

responses from girls and lists informational resources related to early sexualization, including online safety, knowing one’s body, and how to handle relationships with peers. The site is developmentally appropriate (i.e., easy to read and navigate with fun graphics and activities) and offers girls a place online to connect with other girls. Moderated by adults and requiring a secure log-in, the Girls Inc. website tackles a broad range of issues for girls, including sexuality and sexualization.⁷⁴

Another site that targets pre-teen and early adolescent girls is Zoey’s Room, which describes itself as a “tech know” community for girls, a place where middle school-aged girls can indulge their interest in science, technology,

Knowing that messages might be skewed is not enough for middle school youth to figure out how they might be skewed.

engineering and math.⁷⁵ In addition to featuring positive female role models that defy stereotypes, Zoey’s Room offers a secure forum for girls to blog, connect with their peers and ask questions about girls’ issues.

The YWCA in Montreal, Canada, has done extensive work on the issue of early sexualization of girls and offers several online tools to combat the problem. Staff there have collaborated on two educational films about early sexualization, one for adults, “Sexy, Inc.: Our Children Under Influence,” and one for youth, “Staying Real: Teens Confront Sexual Stereotypes.” The adult version is geared toward youth educators and is meant to help professionals deepen their understanding of early

⁷¹Michael Cohen Group, LLC. (2007). Evaluation of the Implementation and Educational Outcomes of a Middle School Media Arts Curriculum. Prepared for “The Alliance for a Media Literate America” and “Just Think”. Retrieved from, <http://namle.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/MEAL-Eval-Final.pdf>

⁷²Krueger, M. (2002). A further review of the development of the child and youth care profession in the United States. *Child and Youth Care Forum*, Volume 31, Number 1, 13-26.

⁷³Girls, Inc. (2003). Annual Report. Retrieved from, www.girlsinc.org/downloads/girlsinc_annualreport_03.pdf

⁷⁴Girls, Inc. (n.d.). Retrieved from, <http://www.girlsinc-online.org>

⁷⁵Zoey’s Room. (n.d.) Retrieved from, <http://www.zoeyroom.com>

sexualization and how to address its effects.⁷⁶ The youth version is geared for adolescents in grades 6-8 and addresses sexual stereotypes and marketing strategies targeting youth. The youth film includes scenes of girls discussing being called derogatory names, wanting attention from boys and feeling pressure to look sexy. The film also offers an accompanying workshop guide with discussion suggestions and activities designed to help youth unpack the messages in the film. Questions include, “Do the media, singers and fashion influence your personal choices and do your choices in music and fashion define who you are?” and “In your opinion, does a person’s worth depend on their appearance?”⁷⁷ Activity suggestions include creating a poster illustrating what is meant by sexual stereotypes and creating a fashion and beauty timeline depicting how our ideas of what is attractive have changed throughout history.⁷⁸

Sex Education

Because it focuses so heavily on shaping sexual behavior, sex education is another obvious strategy for combating the early sexualization of girls. While the two are not synonymous, the connection between early sexualization and early sexual behavior cannot be ignored. Depending on the philosophy undergirding a chosen curriculum, sex education can include encouraging girls to abstain from sex; use protection from pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections when they do have sex; recognize healthy relationships from unhealthy ones; and understand their sexual rights and get help if they experience coercion or sexual assault.

A 2008 study co-authored by Girls, Inc. and Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., surveyed more than 800 high-risk adolescent girls affiliated with Girls, Inc. programs throughout North America about their sexual experiences. The researchers concluded that there was strong evidence for the need for sexuality education programming in middle school and high school, especially since “close to a third of girls will engage in sexual intercourse by ninth grade.” The researchers recommended that programming be multifaceted and set in the context of academic achievement, peer relationships, and family relationships.⁷⁹

As we know, however, the content and tone of sex education in the U.S. varies markedly between school districts. In the next section, we describe the types of sex education most common in schools, agencies and communities, and discuss what the research shows regarding the effectiveness of each approach.

Abstinence

Abstinence education teaches young people about the risks of sex and encourages them to pledge that they will refrain from sexual activity, typically until marriage. Some abstinence programs focus on the physical and psychological danger of sexual intercourse itself, while others go so far as to suggest that teens not engage in any sexually arousing behavior such as kissing or masturbation. Critics say that abstinence education is out of touch with today’s teens, is ill-defined, and uses shaming tactics to control what is, after all, normal developmental behavior.⁸⁰

⁷⁶YWCA Montreal. (n.d.) Retrieved from, http://www.ydesfemmesmtl.org/En/Sexualization_Documentaries.html

⁷⁷YWCA Montreal. (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://www.ydesfemmesmtl.org/documents/StayingReal.pdf>

⁷⁸Ibid

⁷⁹Girls, Inc. (2008). *Girls Shape the Future*. Retrieved from, http://www.girlsinc.org/downloads/Girls_Shape_the_Future_Summary.pdf

⁸⁰Remez, L. (2000). Oral sex among adolescents: Is it sex or is it abstinence?. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 32(6), 298-304.

Social service providers have generally been hostile to abstinence approaches, both because they feel it doesn't work with the higher-risk youth they see and because they believe it fails to equip young people with the concrete tools they need to manage their emerging sexuality. Yet, for all the controversy surrounding it, abstinence remains an important strategy that some groups and communities continue to use with young people, sometimes in response to what they see as today's unwholesomely permissive sexual climate.

TEARS, Inc. (Teens Empowerment Awareness with ResolutionS), an agency based in Phoenix City, AL, provides intervention services to youth in schools, residential and community settings, and offers abstinence education to both middle school and high school girls using the Choosing The Best (CTB) curriculum.⁸¹ TEARS, Inc. groups meet weekly, sometimes using a workbook and other times watching videos that prompt discussion about real-life situations that girls face.

According to early studies, CTB was thought to be effective in reducing the number of teens who start having sex, as well as improving or maintaining attitudes and beliefs that promote abstinence in adolescents.⁸² Weed and Anderson's more recent study (a comparison of more than 300 7th-, 8th- and 9th-grade virgins participating in either CTB or the state-approved standard abstinence curriculum), found that students receiving CTB were

47% less likely to start having sex than their peers who received standard abstinence education.⁸³ Students in the CTB group had more positive attitudes about abstinence, and higher scores on factors related to delaying sex (such as the ability to think independently from peers, and intending to remain abstinent), even one full year after receiving CTB. It is important to note, however, that CTB was not compared with comprehensive sexual education, but rather with other abstinence programs.

Another recent and comprehensive evaluation of abstinence-only programs paints a less positive picture of the approach. A 2007 independent, federally funded

For all the controversy surrounding it, abstinence remains an important strategy that some groups and communities continue to use with young people, sometimes in response to what they see as today's unwholesomely permissive sexual climate.

report by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. evaluated abstinence programs throughout the U.S. in a multi-year, multi-site study. The report surveyed over 2,000 adolescents who either had participated in abstinence-only classes or who had not. The researchers found that the youth in the abstinence group were no more likely to have abstained from sex than the youth in the control group, as approximately half of the youth in each group reported remaining abstinent. Youth who reported being sexually active had similar numbers of sexual partners and had initiated sex at the same mean age as those in the control group. However, the youth in the

continued on page 20

⁸¹Tears, Inc., (personal communication, August 17, 2009)

⁸²Vessey, J. (1996). Choosing the best: Abstinence-centered curriculum longitudinal study. *Choosing the Best*. Retrieved from, http://choosingthebest.org/docs/CTB-Longitudinal_Study.pdf

⁸³Weed, S. & Anderson, N. (2005). Evaluation of Choosing the Best. *Institute for Research and Evaluation*. Retrieved from, http://www.choosingthebest.org/docs/CTB_2005_Research_Study.pdf

Voices of Girls

What do girls and young women themselves say about the phenomenon of early sexualization? Do they perceive it as real, and if so, what consequences does it have for them? To find out, we sat down with a group of eight young mothers at Lund Family Center in Burlington, VT. They ranged in age from 15 to 26; each had at least one child, and two were pregnant with subsequent children. All of them had begun having sex in their early teens.

Like many teenagers and young women receiving specialized social services, they expressed nonchalance about early sexual behavior, seeming to echo the anecdotes we had heard again and again from caseworkers: that sex is no big deal, and every romantic relationship from the early teen years onward is expected to turn sexual quickly.

One girl lost her virginity at 15 in a bet; another “waited” until she was 14 but had been called a slut since middle school because of her stream of boyfriends.

Another girl, now in her late teens, recalled that as a middle school virgin, boyfriends would break up with her as soon as they discovered she wouldn’t have sex with them. All that changed, though, when she finally gave in: “As soon as I did start having sex, I was popular, and then everybody tried to have sex with me. The first time I started having sex I was 12. And even all the older guys – I had guys [that] were almost 30 – they were trying to have sex with me.”

Young girls who are sexually active can’t seem to identify a single personal benefit to having sex beyond telling workers they do it to please their partners, which they want to do because they are “in love.” Yet older girls looking back on their own early sexual lives do name some reasons: to escape poverty and miserable home lives.

“I lived in this very poor community. The richest person in our school was middle-class. Some of us didn’t even have homes to live in. So it was this thing of, I want to be settled now, I want to have money now. I don’t want to wait 15 years, and go to school, we just want something now.

“It was a competition when I was in school – the older the guy you had the better it was, because they could provide more for you.”

It was a competition when I was in school – the older the guy you had the better it was, because they could provide more for you. When I was 15, I dated a 23-year-old and all my friends were jealous because most of their boyfriends were 19. When I was 16, I dated a 38-year-old, so it was this competition thing: who could have the oldest guy and who could have the best provider, and what job he had and stuff like that.”

The messages telling young girls to attach themselves to older guys are all over, one girl said – on TV, in music, and on the street, “[where] you see 12-year-olds who are trying to date guys that hustle

because they have all the money. They take care of them, they give them money, or some of them are prostitutes because they make money that way because the guy tells them to.”

Inadequate parenting and early trauma also play a role. Girls who are emotionally damaged by their home lives have been primed for early sex, said one young woman, a 22-year-old who was pregnant with her second child. Reflecting on friends at school who applaud young girls for hooking up with older guys, she said it goes deeper than that.

“It’s not just what’s happening [in] school, it’s what happening at home, what’s happening in their lives. If children grow up being abused, especially sexually, they’re going to start doing stuff like this early, because they’re already there.”

Several girls said that, looking back, they wished they had had more parental guidance and better sex education before they made the decision to have sex. Said one, “My baby’s father, who I lost my virginity too, he just tried to control me little by little. You have to sleep with me, he told me, you come live with me, I’ll take care of you, you won’t have to deal with your mom telling you what to do all the time. I’ll take you to school every day. I actually dropped out of school, I was living in hotel

“My mom just let me go. She said, ‘Go ahead. You’re going to have to learn the hard way.’”

rooms, I was homeless, I didn’t have any money, so it was pretty hard. My mom just let me go. She said, ‘Go ahead. You’re going to have to learn the hard way.’” She didn’t say so directly, but it was clear from her wistful tone that she wished that her mother had found a way to pull her back into safer territory.

Another girl also mentioned lack of clear guidance; she said, “... nobody had control over me, really, so I had nobody to tell me, ‘[you] can’t be doing this.’” I just [went] off and did whatever I wanted.”

“When I got to the point in my life when I was taking a health class,” said one.... “I was already pregnant.”

For some girls, adult influence was just a case of too little, too late. “When I got to the point in my life when I was taking a health class,” said one, “I was already pregnant. And I’d been sexually active for a few years. If I had gotten the right guidance and direction growing up, I may not have ended up doing the things that I did. But I didn’t get that.”

From these comments, it appears that girls are not actually jumping into the sexual fray with both feet, but that they have mixed feelings about their early decisions. Said one, “I think you think you want to [have sex] but you really don’t want to. You think you’re supposed to want to, but you’re not really sure inside.”

abstinence program were no more likely to have engaged in unprotected sex than the youth in the control group, another common fear of abstinence program critics. The study also found that both the abstinence-educated youth and control group youth had a clear understanding of the risks of pregnancy but a less clear understanding of STIs and their health risks.⁸⁴

Another recent evaluation of more than 1,700 youth and their sexual activity and knowledge supports the findings of the Mathematica report. Youth from across the U.S. were surveyed by the National Center for Health Statistics, which reported that youth who received comprehensive sex education had a 50% lower risk of teen pregnancy than teens who got abstinence-only education. In addition, abstinence-only programs had no significant effect in delaying sexual activity or in reducing the risk for teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.⁸⁵

Ironically, just as the federal government was changing course on abstinence programming in response to such studies, new research, this time led by the University of Pennsylvania, caused critics to rethink their position. In this study, released in February 2010, middle-school African-American students in an abstinence-only course were significantly less likely to begin having sex than their counterparts in a comprehensive sex education course. While opponents of abstinence education conceded that the findings were both impressive and surprising, they also noted that the curriculum in question differed in two important ways from standard abstinence

education: it didn't advocate "abstinence-until-marriage," and it didn't portray sex negatively or imply that condoms were unreliable.⁸⁶

In light of this recent study, it would seem that the jury is still out on abstinence education and its potential value. At the very least, it appears that the approach needs to be carefully framed and stripped of some of its earlier biases in order to be effective.

Comprehensive sex education

Comprehensive sex education uses an expansive approach that includes abstinence messages, skills training and sexual health facts, and sometimes begins at young ages. For example, Get Real, developed by the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts, is a three-year curriculum taught to students in nine lessons each during 6th, 7th and 8th grades. The goals of the program, which was implemented in 30 middle schools in 2005 and used for a pilot study starting in 2007, include promoting effective relationship skills, positive attitudes toward delaying sexual activity, and increased communication with parents about relationships and sexuality.⁸⁷ Developers hoped that improving adolescents' skills, attitudes and behaviors would impact longer-term sexual health by delaying sexual activity and increasing proper use of contraceptives and other protection when teens do become sexually active.

Pre- and post-surveys from an evaluation of Get Real indicate that participants did increase their knowledge and awareness in a number of areas even after just one year

⁸⁴Trenholm, C., Devaney, B., Fortson, K., Quay, L., Wheeler, J., & Clark, M. (2007). Impacts of Four Title V, Section 510 Abstinence Education Programs Executive Summary. *Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.* Retrieved from, <http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/impactabstinenceES.pdf>

⁸⁵Kohler, P., Manhart, L., & Lafferty, W. (2008). Abstinence-only and comprehensive sex education and the initiation of sexual activity and teen pregnancy. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 42, 344–351.

⁸⁶Jemmott III J.B., Jemmott, L.S., & Fong, G.T. (2010). Efficacy of a theory-based abstinence-only intervention over 24 months. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 164 (2): 152–9. Retrieved from <http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/short/164/2/152?home>

⁸⁷Erkut, S., Grossman, J., Ceder, I., & Corderio, L. (2008). Measuring the impact of a middle school comprehensive sex education curriculum. *Wellesley Centers for Women*. Retrieved from <http://www.wcwonline.org/getreal>

of lessons. The youth in the study had more insight into themselves and others than before, a better understanding about self-control, decision-making and healthy relationships, and an increased sense that it is possible to postpone further sex if already sexually active. Attitudes related to delaying sexual activity and avoiding situations that are sexually risky also improved; after Get Real, students were significantly more likely to believe that they could talk with a romantic partner about abstinence than they were before. And although parents and teachers were rated as important sources of information from the beginning, students in Get Real reported these adults were even more important after participating.⁸⁸ Researchers noted that in the schools where Get Real was tested, 10%-35% of middle school students were already sexually active, which they suggested indicates a need for implementing comprehensive sex education with even younger children.⁸⁹

Researchers noted that in the schools where Get Real was tested, 10%-35% of middle school students were already sexually active, which they suggested indicates a need for implementing comprehensive sex education with even younger children.

Another comprehensive sex education program that has been extensively studied is the Children's Aid Society-Carrera (CAS-Carrera) Program. This program, tested in New York City, takes a holistic approach to working with teens, offering educational, vocational and recreational opportunities for youth, five days a week, starting at age 13 and extending through high school. For girls in the study, CAS-Carrera successfully delayed the initiation of sex, increased use of condoms and other contraception, and decreased pregnancy rates for three years

following participation.⁹⁰ Although these results are promising, others have struggled to replicate the program with similar outcomes – its comprehensive nature makes it expensive to run, and supportive training and program materials have not been readily available.

Other comprehensive approaches can be less structured, like school health education classes. In one S. Burlington, VT, middle school, in addition to sharing factually accurate sexual health information, one health educator asks students thought-provoking questions like how they would let someone know they liked them if they'd been dating for a week, three months or one year. The teens write their answers down (one color paper for boys and

another for girls) and then responses are read aloud by the teacher to prompt further discussion. She also invites high school students to speak with younger kids about sexual health issues and uses role-playing which, "works really well, the kids like it; they can act something out and not have to be answering as themselves."⁹¹

European countries are often touted in the U.S. for their progressive policies on sexuality education, and for a social climate that seems to produce better outcomes for teenagers. Of the European countries, Norway has

⁸⁸Erkut, S. (2008).

⁸⁹Philliber, S., Kaye, J. & Herrling, S. (2001). The national evaluation of the children's aid society Carrera-model program to prevent teen pregnancy. *Philliber Research Associates*. Retrieved from <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/viewprogram.aspx?id=50>

⁹⁰Jemmott III J.B., Jemmott, L.S., & Fong, G.T. (2010). Efficacy of a theory-based abstinence-only intervention over 24 months. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* 164 (2): Retrieved from <http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/short/164/2/152?home>

⁹¹L. Amey, (personal communication, July 9, 2009)

one of the lowest rates of teen pregnancy, STIs and abortion. Sex education in Norway has been mandatory and “comprehensive” for many decades; indeed, education begins in elementary school, with age-appropriate topics woven into various parts of school curricula, rather than being packaged into a separate class.⁹² Information about family, relationships, societal rules and gender norms are addressed at young ages, progressing to education about HIV/AIDS, sexual identity, masturbation and abortion in the middle school years. The final year of sex education occurs when students are 13 years old, after which teens can elect to study further if they choose. Mostly, though, sex education shifts to health clinics (located both in schools and in the community) for older teens.

The goals of the peer-led units are to convince teens that not all their friends are having sex, and to practice skills for saying “no” to unwanted sexual pressure.

Significantly for U.S. policy, researchers point out that sexuality education is not controversial in Norway – a fact apparently due to the country’s cultural and ethnic homogeneity. Whether a Norway-like model could work in the U.S., where skirmishes over “values” occasionally flare up into a full-blown political war, is questionable, at least in the current highly politicized and polarized environment.

Peer-led sex education

Peer-led sex education is based on theories of social learning that argue that our behavior is strongly influenced by what we observe in the world around

us, particularly among people we admire and think are similar to us. Studies of teens who initiate sex early also reinforce this idea, showing that teens who believe their peers are sexually active are more likely to be sexually active themselves – regardless of whether peers are actually having sex or not.⁹³ In recognition of the influence of peers, a few programs have been developed that use peer educators to provide sex education to teens.

One approach is the Added Power and Understanding in Sex Education Program (called A Pause, for short), used in England and Wales. The curriculum includes teacher-led instructional sections, focusing on factual information as well as peer-led sections that focus on relationships, peer pressure and more. The goals of

the peer-led units are to convince teens that not all their friends are having sex, and to practice skills for saying “no” to unwanted sexual pressure.⁹⁴

The evaluation found that the program increased students’ knowledge about sexual health, tolerance of others’ choices, and the likelihood they would delay sexual activity.⁹⁵

A study of more than 8,000 teens in Britain indicated that most young people preferred peer-led sex education to the standard teacher-led sex education. Girls in the study who received peer-led sex education starting at age 13 reported significantly fewer pregnancies by the age of 18, compared to their peers who had received the standard teacher-led sex education.⁹⁶ Girls in the peer-led sex education group also reported fewer

⁹²Bartz, T. (2007). Sex education in multicultural Norway. *Sex Education*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 17–33

⁹³Calabia, A. (2001, July 1). Teens and sex. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200107/teens-and-sex>

⁹⁴Stephenson, J., Strange, V., Allen, E., Copas, A., Oakley, A. (2008). The long-term effects of a peer-led sex education programme (RIPPLE): A cluster randomised trial in schools in England. *PLoS Med* 5(11): 1579-1590.

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Ibid.

live births by age 18; however, there were no significant differences between the peer-led group and teacher-led group in age of first unprotected sex, knowledge of contraception or rates of STIs and abortions.⁹⁷

Researchers comparing multiple studies of peer-led programs concluded that they can be effective at improving knowledge, attitudes and intentions, but tend to have little or no effect on condom-use or reducing rates of STIs.⁹⁸

Online sex education

It is clear that young people are getting a lot of their information about sexual behavior and sexual health online.⁹⁹ According to a 2010 Pew Research Center report, approximately one third of adolescents aged 12-17 go online to get health information, with 23% of girls reporting that they look online for “sensitive” health information like sexual health.¹⁰⁰ Given what’s known about how strongly pre-teens and adolescents are influenced by their peers, offering an online forum that connects teens in a supportive environment may be a highly effective strategy for educating girls about sexuality in an honest and low-pressure way.

Sex, Etc., a comprehensive site developed by Answer, a national organization that promotes comprehensive sex education, is geared toward a slightly older population of girls than those discussed previously (15-year-olds and above). The Sex, Etc. site (and Answer’s national magazine by the same name) offers sex education by teens and for teens in a format that is moderated by adult experts behind the scenes to ensure accuracy and

safety. Health professionals address teens’ questions about sex and relationships, pregnancy, STIs, birth control, sexual orientation and more in both public blogs and confidential chats. Teens can read and comment on articles written by their peers (for example, articles advising how teens can talk to parents about sex) and read comments posted by other kids their age.¹⁰¹

Another site that is working to improve teens’ sexual health is That’s Not Cool, which is sponsored and co-created by the Family Violence Prevention Fund, the Office on Violence Against Women, and the Ad Council. That’s Not Cool addresses new problems that today’s teens face related to dating and technology. The site uses videos, skits and graphics to appeal to adolescent visitors. The site also offers “call out cards” that teens can send to peers in response to digital boundary violations (for example, being stalked on Facebook or asked to send nude pictures). That’s Not Cool offers practical strategies adolescents can use to advocate for themselves with peers, as well as a “Talk It Out” forum where teens can ask questions, describe their experiences and offer each other support about sexting, peer pressure and relationships.¹⁰²

It is not completely clear how online forums and interventions affect teens’ actual sexual behavior. One study by the University of Wisconsin evaluated older teens who had sexual and drug-related content on their MySpace profiles. After the teens received e-mail messages from “Dr. Meg” highlighting the dangers of posting personal information in public forums, a

⁹⁷Stephenson, J., Strange, V., Allen, E., Copas, A., Oakley, A. (2008). The long-term effects of a peer-led sex education programme (RIPPLE): A cluster randomised trial in schools in England. *PLoS Med* 5(11): 1579-1590.

⁹⁸Kim, C. & Free, C. (2008). Recent evaluations of the peer-led approach in adolescent sexual health education: A systematic review. *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* Volume 40, Issue 3, pages 144–151.

⁹⁹Jones, S. & Fox, S. (2009). Generations online. *Pew Internet and American Life Project*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/Generations-Online-in-2009.aspx>

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Chaloner, E. (2000, November 10). Talking to your parents about sex. *Sex, Etc.* Retrieved from www.sexetc.org/story/love_relationships/1936

¹⁰²*That’s Not Cool*. (n.d.) Retrieved from, <http://www.thatnotcool.com>

significant proportion deleted the revealing posts and started using more of the site's privacy settings within three months of "Dr. Meg's" contact.¹⁰³ This study is promising because it indicates that older teens who may be at risk can be successfully identified through their profiles, and that outreach can be effective in modifying their online behavior.

In addition to traditional websites, social networking platforms and virtual reality environments offer opportunities to connect with youth. Researchers have begun to examine how teens are actually using social networking sites and virtual worlds and what opportunities exist for using these sites as forums to

One Spanish medical group conducts office hours in Second Life, where physicians (represented by avatars themselves) can meet with teens in a virtual clinic and answer questions about sexual health and alcohol and drug use.

address public health issues.¹⁰⁴ According to researchers at the University Health Network's Centre for Innovation in Complex Care (CICC), "virtual worlds and the social networks that populate the Internet offer a new domain for healthcare. Although it is early in the development, there is a great opportunity to use these platforms for education, research and even disease surveillance."¹⁰⁵

Second Life and Teen Second Life –virtual reality worlds where members use "avatars" and create virtual lives – allow young people to communicate with people they might not normally connect with in the "real world." One Spanish medical group conducts office hours in Second Life, where physicians (represented by avatars themselves) can meet with teens in a virtual clinic and answer questions about sexual health and alcohol and drug use.¹⁰⁶ Said one of the participating medical professionals, "Teenagers do not often go to see the doctor, but this is an efficient and amusing tool to reach them because we can both use the same route. Even though they do not often suffer serious illnesses, they [teens] often expose themselves to risks which can

develop into problems in the future."¹⁰⁷ The health portal provides low pressure, anonymous access to medically accurate advice. Of course, doctors are clear that online consultations are not a substitute for

face-to-face care, but they hope to reach a population through Second Life that would otherwise go unserved.¹⁰⁸ Said one doctor, "This is a way to talk about their doubts about taking drugs or sexual relations which they cannot do in a traditional consultation [because of fear or discomfort]."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³Perez, E. (2009, January 6). Study finds many teens publicize risk behaviors on MySpace pages. *Milwaukee-Wisconsin Journal Sentinel*.

Retrieved from, <http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/37177239.html>

¹⁰⁴Beard, L., Wilson, K. Morra, D. & Keelan, M. (2009). A survey of health-related activities on second life. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, Vol. 11, #2.

Retrieved from <http://www.jmir.org/2009/2/e17/>

¹⁰⁵Beard, L., Wilson, K. Morra, D. & Keelan, M. (2009). A survey of health-related activities on second life. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, Vol. 11, #2.

Retrieved from <http://www.jmir.org/2009/2/e17/>

¹⁰⁶Keely, G. (2008, May 10). Teenagers to take embarrassing ailments to Second Life doctors. *The Guardian*.

Retrieved from, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2008/may/10/secondlife.spain>

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

In an interesting twist on sex education and technology, several organizations have been experimenting with providing sexual health information through cell phone text messages. The Birds and Bees Text Line out of Durham, NC uses qualified health educators to respond to teens aged 14-19, in text message questions about sex.¹¹⁰ Staffers are careful to craft nonjudgmental, kind responses that do not advocate abortion or offer medical advice. Opponents are concerned that the Birds and Bees Text Line circumvents parents and flouts the state's abstinence-only education policy. But those working the text-line say that it's clear from the texts they receive that teens are already receiving a lot of misinformation that puts them at risk. Experts suggest the approach is limited in the number of teens it can help because texting relies on human staff to answer questions (versus a website with FAQ's and articles) but, on the positive side, live health educators can provide more personal answers and even send teens information about local clinics and resources they can turn to.¹¹¹

In order to be most effective at reaching teens, programs must create a safe, comfortable social environment, use multiple activities and strategies to target risk or protective factors and help teens personalize the information.

skills groups, and casual conversations in teen drop-in centers. Life skills education teaches teens the skills they need to develop into healthy, productive adults.

Most social service agencies focus their programming on teens' risk and protective factors. These factors can be related to sexual or nonsexual aspects of girls' lives – for example, do girls know how STIs are transmitted (a sexual factor), versus do girls have plans for their future (a nonsexual factor). Life skills education can address either one or a combination of these factors in order to impact sexual health outcomes. But according to research, in order to be most effective at reaching teens, programs must create a safe, comfortable social

environment, use multiple activities and strategies to target risk or protective factors and help teens personalize the information.¹¹²

Other ways that agencies can and do address girls' sexual health is by providing education about HIV and STIs, as well as alcohol and other substance use. Explained one staff person at Spectrum Youth Services in Burlington, VT, "There's a connection there in that they'll use drugs and alcohol to boost their self-esteem so they can approach someone that they like, but then because they're under the influence it's hard to make clear decisions."¹¹³ Some

Informal sex education

Although most formal sex education happens in schools, girls in contact with social services agencies often receive information there as well. Agencies frequently address sex education through one-on-one work with girls, life

¹¹⁰Hoffman, J. (2009, May 1). When the cellphone teaches sex education. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/03/fashion/03sexed.html>

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Kirby, D. (2007). Emerging answers: New research findings on programs to reduce teen pregnancy. *The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy*. Retrieved from <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/EA2007/default.aspx>

¹¹³P. DeLeon, (personal communication, September 30, 2008).

agencies focus on risk reduction, and making sure girls have accurate information about the possible consequences of their behavior. “We’re not their parents and we can’t always be with them so we try to educate girls about the risks. Education entails talking about risks, teaching them about healthy relationships and safer sex, and providing access to condoms,” said one agency staff member.¹¹⁴

If agency providers are not using formal sex education curricula though, how do they, in practical terms, approach these topics with girls? They start by building trusting relationships. “That’s the key to getting them to talk about sexually related concerns and to listen to adult input about it,” said one staffer.¹¹⁵ In order to keep

“We ask a lot of questions and shut up,” said one staff member. “We’re asking, ‘What makes someone a healthy partner?’, ‘What’s putting you in a dangerous situation?’ and ‘How do you communicate that?’”

the conversations youth-driven and engaging, many providers recommended avoiding lectures and genuinely inquiring about girls’ experiences and thoughts. “Ask a lot of questions and shut up,” said one staff member simply.¹¹⁶ Questions run the gamut, but a common strategy is to ask girls how they are making decisions related to sex and relationships, and what they would do in various situations. “We’re asking ‘What makes someone a healthy partner?’, ‘What’s putting you in a dangerous situation?’ and ‘How do you communicate that?’”¹¹⁷ In the midst of these conversations, skilled

staff are also modeling healthy communication themselves and pointing out girls’ strengths, as well as showing interest in girls’ lives and ideas. “We spend a lot of time in conversation with girls, listening to them and giving them an open forum to talk about sexual issues,” said one agency worker. “In a lot of cases, we’re the first trusting adult relationship the kid’s ever had and so we’re there to support them.”¹¹⁸

“You need to be able to joke about it [sex, sexual relationships and sex education] and talk openly to engage kids in these conversations. I figure, if you talk about it, you’re thinking about it. Then it’s not some big dark secret. And if you’re thinking about it, that means it’s important. These conversations and the

questions we ask are what help kids learn how to make decisions around these issues.”¹¹⁹

Given that agencies often take an informal approach

to sex education, measuring outcomes is difficult. Staff at Northeast Kingdom Youth Services said effects are positive but subtle. “We would characterize it [informal sex education] as relatively successful because girls will make small changes that increase their safety. They’ll get access to condoms and start taking them regularly, or they’ll bring their friends in with them to join the conversation and ask their own questions.”¹²⁰ Staff base their anecdotal evaluations on the dynamics they observe in the agency’s drop-in centers, and emphasize that uncovering issues is a critical first step.

¹¹⁴S. Smith, (personal communication, May 12, 2008)

¹¹⁵S. Smith, (personal communication, May 12, 2008)

¹¹⁶P. DeLeon, (personal communication, September 30, 2008)

¹¹⁷Ibid.

¹¹⁸S. Smith, (personal communication, May 12, 2008)

¹¹⁹P. DeLeon, (personal communication, September 30, 2008)

¹²⁰S. Smith, (personal communication, May 12, 2008)

Changing behaviors that have developed over time for girls, particularly girls with multiple risk factors, is often a slow and complicated process. “They’ll take in the information and may act on only one piece of it at first, but there is some positive behavior change. They start to understand they’re not alone and it’s normal to have questions about what they’re doing sexually,” said one staffer.¹²¹ Another benefit to getting girls to think about sexual issues is that they’ll naturally tend to continue the conversation with peers. “Kids we don’t know will trust us if their friends do. We’ll hear kids in the drop-in center tell younger girls not to be pressured into sex or to make sure they are being safe at parties,” staff said.¹²²

Girls’ Empowerment

Empowerment programs attempt to address girls’ well-being in a broad sense by nurturing the abilities, self-concepts and motivation girls need to exercise control and make changes in their own lives. Some empowerment groups specifically target issues related to early sexualization and facilitate positive experiences that counter-balance the limiting messages girls receive from the world around them. Girls’ empowerment groups use a variety of approaches, from fostering supportive discussions in safe settings, to actually taking girls out in the world to engage them in physical and skill-building activities.

Support groups

Staff at Umbrella, Inc. in northeastern Vermont facilitate multiple support groups for girls in 3rd through 8th grades. The organization’s Strong Girls Club for 8- to 12-year-olds is based on a curriculum developed by the

YWCA of Annapolis and Anne Arundel County, which was originally designed for girls who have witnessed domestic violence. The Strong Girls Club tackles topics like self-esteem, healthy relationships, understanding emotions and coping with stress, which are addressed through hands-on activities that help girls recognize their unique personal qualities and explore how they feel about themselves. Said one staff, “The first thing we do in every group is have an ‘opening circle’ – sometimes we’ll pose a question, but the purpose is to break the ice and get girls engaged in group. Our goal is to create a safe space for sharing so that girls can learn about these issues and themselves.”¹²³ Strong Girls Club sessions occur once a week, for an hour and a half in schools, and are free for girls to participate. Workers say that girls often ask to continue with the group for a second round and that even though participation is voluntary, very few drop out. About halfway through each round of sessions, the staff hosts a Family Night where girls show their parents or guardians what they have been learning. Said staff, “They show off their activities, their art projects, and talk about the toolkits we’ve worked on. This starts the conversation with adults in their lives so it can continue at home.”¹²⁴

Community Bridges, a multicultural empowerment and leadership program for girls in Silver Spring, MD, does outreach work with more than 300 young girls at 15 elementary, middle and high schools in the area. Through its Jump Start Girls program, 8- to 15-year-old girls build their self-confidence and sense of self-expression through team-building exercises, academic support, and health and prevention activities. Community Bridges also features a mentoring program that

¹²¹P. DeLeon, (personal communication, September 30, 2008)

¹²²S. Smith, (personal communication, May 12, 2008)

¹²³H. Stoddard, (personal communication, April 29, 2009)

¹²⁴H. Stoddard, (personal communication, April 29, 2009)

pairs 8th grade girls with adult female mentors from their community to address issues such as dating safety, divorce, sexuality and body image, and relationships.¹²⁵

Empowerment is a process, and measuring it is difficult.¹²⁶ However, at least one girls' empowerment support group model has been evaluated and is used throughout the country: Girls Circle. Girls Circle Association is a program for adolescent girls that consists of 8-12 week sessions of structured, weekly support groups for girls, led by Girls Circle trained staff. The support group curriculum addresses healthy decisions, positive body image, and the expression of individuality (see box).

*Girls Circle groups are typically held weekly and are led by trained adult leaders. Guidelines involve giving each girl a turn to speak without being interrupted and ensuring a safe and confidential space. The group offers participants an opportunity to express themselves using journaling, poetry writing, acting, role playing, drawing, working with clay, and dancing. The idea is to instill self-confidence and improve girls' interpersonal relationships; it is hoped that this stronger interpersonal network will in turn improve girls' current lives as well as their futures.*¹²⁷

A 2006 evaluation of several Girls Circle programs across the country assessed the effect of the program on girls' self-esteem and body image. Comparisons of pre- and post-program data found that girls participating in the program significantly increased their "sense of

belonging, their perception and acceptance of their own bodies, and their belief in their ability to accomplish meaningful tasks and goals in their lives."¹²⁸

Adventure groups

Adventure groups are another approach that organizations use to empower girls and protect them from early sexualization. The purpose of engaging girls in new adventures is to expand what girls see as their options and to provide them with healthy, positive experiences that contradict the often limited roles that they are offered by society. For example, to combat media messages that subtly and not so subtly suggest that girls be thin and use their bodies for sex, adventure groups invite girls to climb mountains, feel strong and have fun while doing so. How one defines "adventure" differs from community to community and from girl to girl. Experiences need not be risky or technically difficult to have an impact. What is important is that girls feel challenged, either physically or mentally, and that they are supported in overcoming obstacles and in celebrating successes they hadn't believed possible.

Community Bridges, in Silver Spring, MD, runs an outdoor adventure summer camp for elementary and middle school girls who have participated in other Community Bridges groups during the school year. The goal of the camp is to foster leadership, self-confidence and personal growth and learning through field trips, physical activities and outdoor experiences.¹²⁹ According to the organization's own evaluation, approximately 70% of girls participating in programming reported that they improved their communication, conflict resolution

¹²⁵Community Bridges. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.communitybridges-md.org/programs.html>

¹²⁶L. Goldfarb, (personal communication, February 28, 2009).

¹²⁷Roa, J., Irvine, A., & Cervantez, K. (2007). Girls Circle National Research Project. *Proceedings of Persistently Safe Schools: The 2007 National Conference on Safe Schools and Communities*. Retrieved from <http://gwired.gwu.edu/hamfish/merlin/cgi/p/downloadFile/d/19161/n/off/other/1/name/031pdf/>

¹²⁸Steele, S., DoUette, M., Phillips, W., Hossfeld, E., Matthews, G., & Taormina, G. (2006). Understanding Girls Circle as an intervention on perceived social support, body image, self-efficacy, locus of control and self-esteem. *Adolescence*, Vol. 41, No. 161

¹²⁹Community Bridges. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.communitybridges-md.org/programs.html>

and leadership skills. Additionally, adult program leaders reported that elementary school-aged girls had a better understanding of how premature sexual activity could negatively impact their lives.¹³⁰

The Women's Wilderness Institute in Boulder, CO, also offers adventure opportunities to girls. The Institute leads wilderness excursions and outdoor adventures for women and adolescent girls in the Rocky Mountains, and says its programming is specifically designed to be supportive and "girl-positive."¹³¹ Outdoor adventure programs can be an expensive undertaking for some girls, so the organization offers scholarships and financial aid and reports that they have "never turned a girl away in need of financial assistance."¹³² According to a staff member, the program aims to "recognize the qualities that girls have as strengths and things to cultivate, rather than liabilities or ways that girls deviate from some 'norm.'"¹³³

The program is meant to teach self-sufficiency, confidence and personal strength, to encourage girls to try new things, learn new skills, and learn about themselves.¹³⁴ According to internal program evaluations, 90% of girls reported improvement in self-efficacy, self-esteem, or leadership capacity after participating in programming.¹³⁵

Hardy Girls Healthy Women (HGHW) runs a series of groups called Adventure Girls. Activities are offered

several times each year to girls in 2nd through 6th grades and are led by women with unusual and interesting personal resumes. Guest leaders may conduct a one-day event involving kayaking, orienteering, or dog-sledding; the Colby College women's rugby team has even led Adventure Girls groups.¹³⁶ Adventure Girls leaders are trained by the agency and many volunteer their time, which means the groups can be run at low cost.

One of the perceived benefits of Adventure Girls is that it brings together groups of girls and engages them in team-building experiences. Said the co-creator of the organization, "We want to debunk the notion that 'all girls can't be trusted and they'll stab you in the back.'"

"We want to debunk the notion that 'all girls can't be trusted and they'll stab you in the back.' As girls get older we see that 'girl fighting' becomes a performance for boys. These group events give girls a subjective experience to counter this."

As girls get older we see that 'girl fighting' becomes a performance for boys. These group events give girls a subjective experience to counter this."¹³⁷

"We have a life-size cut-out of Barbie that shows what her body would look like if she were a real woman, based on the proportions of a Barbie doll," said the HGHW program director. "Girls come back after Adventure Girls and they start comparing themselves to her – they realize 'Barbie can't climb the rock wall!' They

¹³⁰Community Bridges. (2008). *2008 Annual Report*. Retrieved from http://www.communitybridges-md.org/annual_reports/Annual_Report_2008.pdf

¹³¹The Women's Wilderness Institute. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.womenswilderness.org/girls-programs>

¹³²The Women's Wilderness Institute. (n.d.). *Financial Aid*. Retrieved from <http://www.womenswilderness.org/financial-aid>

¹³³L. Mathews, (personal communication, February 3, 2011).

¹³⁴The Women's Wilderness Institute. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.womenswilderness.org/girls-leadership-course>

¹³⁵L. Mathews, (personal communication, February 3, 2011).

¹³⁶M. Williams, (personal communication, May 14, 2009)

¹³⁷Ibid.

make the connection that it's all about how she looks and not what she can do."¹³⁸

HGHW has done an initial evaluation of the effectiveness of Adventure Girls and continues to refine the way staff measures the program's impact. The evaluation, led by researchers at the University of Maine, measured self-esteem and depression in Adventure Girls participants versus a control group. The researchers reported that the Adventure Girls participants were more critical of media messages and stereotypes than their peers, and had slightly higher self-esteem and lower rates of depression; however, these results were not statistically significant. HGHW says it hopes to replicate the study in the future and explore how Adventure Girls impacts girls from different backgrounds.¹³⁹

HGHW has developed "Adventure Girls in a Box," which is essentially a do-it-yourself kit that anyone can use to replicate the program in their own community. (The organization also offers other curricula and a community action kit on combating the bullying of gay and lesbian youth.)

Education and Advocacy

Many advocates argue that addressing early sexualization by targeting girls themselves misses the point entirely. The real problem, they say, is not girls at all, but the culture in general. Thus some organizations are focusing their efforts on broader-based interventions that tackle early sexualization by working with parents, schools and communities. Community outreach and advocacy activities include conducting workshops and summits, forming

community coalitions, campaigning to change products and media messages, and working to improve policies so that they better protect and respect girls' place in the world.

Community outreach

One organization concentrating on parents and professionals is the YWCA in Montreal, Canada. Lilia Goldfarb, the director of Leadership Services, said, "When I realized the magnitude and complexity of the [early sexualization] problem, I realized that the strategy that was needed was indeed multi-pronged, so I set out to touch as many people as possible."¹⁴⁰ In 2009, the YWCA held a conference for professionals that brought together a group of researchers from around the world to share their thoughts on the phenomenon of sexualization.¹⁴¹ Since then, the organization has presented two-day sexualization training workshops to over 200 community organization and schools throughout Quebec. The training looks at sexualization through a systemic lens. "We look closely at the relationship between consumerism and patriarchy, which we believe to be the main driving force of sexualization," Goldfarb said, "and focus closely on youth interventions by reflecting and sharing experiences as well as exploring new intervention methods."¹⁴²

"[In trainings with youth service workers] we discuss the issue of understanding one's own perception of sexuality and the factors that shape it, as well as the link between perception and values. We make a distinction between broad human values and singular ones. Then we reflect on how knowing what your values are, specifically

¹³⁸J. Dupont, (personal communication, May 14, 2009)

¹³⁹J. Dupont, (personal communication, May 14, 2009)

¹⁴⁰L. Goldfarb, (personal communication, February 28, 2009).

¹⁴¹YWCA of Montreal. (n.d.). *International Conference: Youth, Media and Sexualization*.

Retrieved from http://www.ydesfemmesmtl.org/documents/Proceedings_Youth_Media_and_Sexualization.pdf

¹⁴²L. Goldfarb, (personal communication, February 28, 2009).

around sexuality, allows you to know what is right for you and what is not. We encourage them to be critical thinkers about the media 'sell' of sexuality and then, in turn, to help kids be critical thinkers themselves based on their own values, which of course they need to identify. In our view, adults who are not afraid to state their values, without imposing them on others, model the idea that it is good to have boundaries and to live by one's values."¹⁴³

Another conference on sexualization, the SPARK Summit, took place in October 2010 in New York City. SPARK (Sexualization Protest: Action, Rebellion, Knowledge), a collaborative effort between several influential girls' and women's organizations, is committed to challenging the sexualization of girls through collaborative activism.¹⁴⁴

Approximately 500 people from 80 different organizations around the country attended the summit, which offered lectures on topics including media literacy, healthy sexuality, blogging, the underrepresentation of girls and women on television and in film, and the marketing of sexually charged products toward young girls.¹⁴⁵

"Adults who are not afraid to state their values, without imposing them on others, model the idea that it is good to have boundaries and to live by one's values."

HGHW, the Maine group, uses a multi-faceted approach to combating early sexualization, and places strong emphasis on outreach at community levels. Said one staff member, "It's about buy-in from all groups. This work is so much more effective if there's an understanding that there is not something wrong with girls, but rather that communities need to learn to support girls in new ways."¹⁴⁶ HGHW is currently conducting outreach to rural communities and facilitating needs assessments in small towns. The process includes input from adults and from girls.

"We have a Community Film Discussion program where we show documentaries about sexualization and media literacy issues, and then facilitate a community-wide discussion. The community is there from the start and they decide how to proceed themselves. We have a 'real conversation' with them. We have done this anywhere there is a space that allows for this to happen."¹⁴⁷

"We have a Community Film Discussion program where we show documentaries about sexualization and media literacy issues, and then facilitate a community-wide discussion. The community is there from the start and they decide how to proceed themselves. We have a 'real conversation' with them."

¹⁴¹YWCA of Montreal. (n.d.). *International Conference: Youth, Media and Sexualization*.

Retrieved from http://www.ydesfemmesmtl.org/documents/Proceedings_Youth_Media_and_Sexualization.pdf

¹⁴²L. Goldfarb, (personal communication, February 28, 2009).

¹⁴³Ibid.

¹⁴⁴SPARK Summit. (n.d.). *About Us*. Retrieved from <http://www.sparksummit.com/about-us/>

¹⁴⁵Blau, L. (2010, November 4). Girl power: Great feminists you may not know. *The Huffington Post*.

Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lily-blau/girl-power-great-feminist_b_776997.html

¹⁴⁶L.M. Brown, (personal communication, May 14, 2009)

¹⁴⁷M. Williams, (personal communication, May 14, 2009)

The Montgomery County, MD chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) is also combating the sexualization phenomenon. In March 2010, the group started a “Sexualization of Girls” project and began producing a monthly newsletter series, *The Watchful Eye*, which disseminates research, news articles, political briefs and more addressing the issue. The goal of the project is to increase the public’s awareness of the problem.¹⁴⁸

Parental education

One way to advocate for girls is to work directly with parents, offering them information, training and support around how to participate in their daughters’ healthy development and education. Said one health educator

The research shows that teens whose parents talk openly about sexuality and their own values tend to engage in fewer risky sexual behaviors. Obviously, though, those conversations can be difficult for parents.¹⁵⁰ For that reason, some communities, schools and agencies are focusing on teaching parents how to recognize “teachable moments” and exploit them.

YWCA Montreal, for example, has developed an interactive, animated video and print guide that uses scenarios to teach parents how to respond to different aspects of girls’ sexualization. The guide suggests multiple ways of responding to each scenario and discusses the merits of each approach.¹⁵¹

YWCA Montreal, for example, has developed an interactive, animated video and print guide that uses scenarios to teach parents how to respond to different aspects of girls’ sexualization.

from Planned Parenthood of Northern New England, “If we as a culture of mothers and fathers could talk about it, then more girls could learn the tools to navigate this terrain. When our kids ask us where babies come from, we respond to them honestly, and it’s the same here. I do a lot of work just calming people down. Parents will be really escalated, saying, ‘All the kids at the middle school are having oral sex!’ and I’ll say, ‘Yeah, I know you didn’t want to talk to your seventh grader about oral sex ... but you have to. And not everyone is doing it.’”¹⁴⁹

other community settings. The program is based on the premise that parents are the primary sexuality educators for their children and that parental input should not be limited to “the sex talk” or reacting to risky behaviors that have already occurred. Instead, parents are encouraged to make sexuality a regular topic of discussion throughout their children’s lives. The workshops are geared toward parents of middle-school-aged youth and allow parents to practice answering difficult questions, find and use teachable moments and feel more confident about the role they play in their children’s sexuality education.¹⁵²

Talk Early, Talk Often, a program developed by the state of Michigan, offers 90-minute workshops free of charge to parent groups in schools, churches and

¹⁴⁸The Watchful Eye. (n.d.). Maryland National Organization for Women. Retrieved from, <http://www.mcmdnow.org/newsletters.html>

¹⁴⁹K. McLaughlin, (personal communication, October 22, 2008)

¹⁵⁰Erkut, S., Grossman, J., Ceder, I., & Cordiero, L. (2008). Measuring the impact of a middle school comprehensive sex education curriculum. *Wellesley Centers for Women*. Retrieved from <http://www.wcwonline.org/getreal>

¹⁵¹YWCA Montreal. (2010). *Early Sexualization: A Guide for Parents of Preteen Girls*.

Retrieved from http://www.ydesfemmesmtl.org/En/Sexualization_Animation.html

¹⁵²Michigan Parent Resources. (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://www.michigan.gov/miparentresources/0,1607,7-107-37383---,00.html>

Parent education is now also being incorporated into some comprehensive sex education curricula for teens. Some, like Get Real for middle school students, include homework assignments that require parent involvement. Parents are given supplemental materials at the start of the program to help clarify their values around sexual activity, and then, following each lesson, students must discuss with their parents how the family's values relate to a given topic. An initial evaluation of Get Real showed that students do trust parents as sources of sexual health information.¹⁵³

Another intervention that is geared directly toward parents is the Saving Sex for Later program, which has been shown to increase parents' sense of confidence in talking with their pre-teens about sex. In a study of 846 5th and 6th graders attending racially diverse schools in New York City, researchers found that the program also increased students' perceptions that their parents had rules regarding sexual behavior and were monitoring their children's activities.¹⁵⁴ Consisting of CDs and DVDs that are mailed to parents over the course of six months, the program uses realistic videos of parents and teens dealing with issues of sexuality. Not only do parents benefit from observing how the characters approach difficult topics, but they are also able to use the act of viewing the videos to start conversations with their children. Researchers suggest that Saving Sex for Later and similar programs may be an effective alternative for

students whose schools are cutting the time devoted to sex education, as well as for those whose parents are considered hard-to-reach – those who rarely participate in school functions, perhaps due to financial, time or cultural barriers.¹⁵⁵

Product & media protests

Another way to combat early sexualization is by changing the quality of commercial products in order to cut down on the negative messages that girls receive. Although many product protests are met with indifference – industry leaders use a “free market” argument that claims that companies are merely

Researchers suggest that Saving Sex for Later and similar programs may be an effective alternative for students whose schools are cutting the time devoted to sex education, as well as for those whose parents are considered hard-to-reach – those who rarely participate in school functions, perhaps due to financial, time or cultural barriers.

responding to customer demand – effectively organized campaigns do sometimes result in the removal or regulation of advertisements and products. Product and media protests typically consist of letter-writing campaigns, public demonstrations and/or pledges to boycott the offending company. Even when companies refuse to remove products from the marketplace, bad press sometimes results in the loss of potential customers and sales. Over time, even such minimal reductions in profit may lead businesses to consider more pro-girl decisions in the future. In addition, high

¹⁵³Erkut, S., Grossman, J., Ceder, I., & Cordero, L. (2008). Measuring the impact of a middle school comprehensive sex education curriculum. *Wellesley Centers for Women*. Retrieved from <http://www.wcwonline.org/getreal>

¹⁵⁴O'Donnell, L., Stueve, A., Agronick, G., & Wilson-Simmons, R. (2005). Saving sex for later: An evaluation of a parent education intervention. *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, Volume 37, (4) 166–173.

¹⁵⁵Ibid

One interesting example of girls taking action can be found in a video clip on About Face, which shows teens posting decals in store dressing rooms in San Francisco. The decals say things like “Beauty fits every size” and “You: absolutely no Photoshopping necessary.”

profile protests provide another platform for advocates to educate the public about early sexualization and to challenge gender stereotypes.

Organizations like About Face and Media Watch use their websites to organize social action projects that girls can join online, and also offer resources for girls wanting to start their own initiatives. One interesting example of girls taking action can be found in a video clip on About Face, which shows teens posting decals in store dressing rooms in San Francisco. The decals say things like “Beauty fits every size” and “You: absolutely no Photoshopping necessary.” The idea is that girls and women using the dressing rooms will read these statements and feel better about their bodies and themselves. About Face sells ready-made decals and offers instructions for making original decals for girls who want to send their own messages.¹⁵⁶

In 2005, a group of teenage girls in Pittsburgh popularized the term “girlcott” in their campaign to stop clothing designer Abercrombie & Fitch from selling girls t-shirts they deemed offensive, one of which read, “Who needs brains when you have these?”

In 2005, a group of teenage girls in Pittsburgh popularized the term “girlcott” in their campaign to stop clothing designer Abercrombie & Fitch from selling girls t-shirts they deemed

offensive, one of which read, “Who needs brains when you have these?” The protest received national attention and the company eventually pulled two of the offending shirts, apologized to girls, and agreed to meet with the campaign organizers.¹⁵⁷ The store again provoked outrage in March 2011 with its “Ashley” line of push-up bikini tops for girls between 8 and 14 years old; ultimately it agreed to market the bikini as “padded” rather than “push-up” and label it as appropriate for girls 12 and up.¹⁵⁸ In 2010, the clothing store Urban Outfitters was the target of “girlcoting” for selling t-shirts for girls and women that read, “Eat Less” and one for men that declared: “Fathers, it’s up to you to protect your daughter’s virginity!”¹⁵⁹

An appealing feature of public relations campaigns and protests is that they don’t have to be full-time endeavors. A case in point comes from a debate in 2008

over Burton Snowboards’ new line of Primo and Love designs, which depicted images of self-mutilation and Playboy bunny icons. The snowboards led to

¹⁵⁶About Face. (n.d.). Retrieved from, <http://www.about-face.org>

¹⁵⁷Women and Girls Foundation of Southwest Pennsylvania. (n.d.) *The Girlcott Story*.

Retrieved from http://www.wgfpa.org/girl2girlgrants/section_girlsOurVoices/girlcott.htm

¹⁵⁸McKay, H. (2011, March 25). Abercrombie & Fitch sparks outcry with padded bikini tops for 8-year-olds. *Fox News.com*.

Retrieved from <http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2011/03/25/abercrombie-fitch-sparks-outcry-padded-bikini-bras-designed-8-year-olds/>

¹⁵⁹Menkedick, S. (2010, June 16). Girlcott Urban Outfitters’ Racist, Sexist and Degrading Products. *Change.org*.

Retrieved from <http://news.change.org/stories/girlcott-urban-outfitters-racist-sexist-degrading-products>

public demonstrations in Vermont, where the company is headquartered. The executive director of a Burlington youth service organization wrote letters to newspapers explaining the negative impact that the snowboards might have on youth. He also decided to end his agency's own partnership with Burton – a partnership that, while helpful to some individual youth, had become, at least in his mind, contrary to the best interests of the youth of his city at large. Though Burton Snowboards did not discontinue the designs, public outcry from respected groups led to several Vermont ski resorts banning employees from riding Love and Primo boards on their mountains.¹⁶⁰

Policy work

Another strategy involves trying to change local, state and national policy on a range of issues affecting girls. The National Organization for Women, for instance, passed a resolution vowing to disseminate research on the harm being done to girls by sexualization and supporting all legislation that promotes “research, education and action to combat the sexualization of girls in media and more broadly in society.”¹⁶¹

(The conflicted nature of Congress on the issue is perhaps best reflected in the December 2010 defeat of a bill that would have condemned child-bride marriages in countries around the world.)¹⁶²

Policy changes at state and federal levels take time and

can require more active partnership or mentoring from the adults or organizations in girls' lives. A case in point involves the Girl Scouts of the USA, which in March 2010 collaborated with two congresswomen to introduce the Healthy Media for Youth Act. The bill would support the funding of media literacy programs for youth, promote research on the impact of media images on young people, and encourage the adoption of voluntary guidelines to promote healthier media images for young people.¹⁶³

Since a key element of working toward policy change is to tell compelling stories, girls engaged in policy work can make significant contributions simply by sharing their personal accounts. Consider the example of 13-year-old Masha Allen, who as an 8-year-old was adopted from Russia by an American man who molested her and used her to produce online pornographic photos. He is now in federal prison and Masha is in a new home, but she testified to Congress in 2006 that photos of her remain on the Internet. Her testimony resulted in ‘Masha’s Law,’ which increases the fines and penalties for downloading child pornography.¹⁶⁴

When girls take action and tell their own stories, they can inspire others to work for change as well. Members

Members of the British Parliament, for example, recently called for a ban on airbrushing and digital enhancement of media materials targeted to girls under the age of 16.

¹⁶⁰Picchi, A. (2009, January 5). Edgy snowboard graphics test liberal Vermont. *The Boston Globe*.

Retrieved from http://www.boston.com/news/local/vermont/articles/2009/01/05/edgy_snowboard_graphics_test_liberal_vermont/

¹⁶¹National Organization for Women. (2010). *Resolutions*. Retrieved from <http://www.now.org/organization/conference/resolutions/2010.html#working>

¹⁶²Terkel, A. (2010, December 17). House republicans block child marriage prevention act. *The Huffington Post*.

Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/12/17/house-republicans-block-child-marriage-prevention-act_n_798382.html

¹⁶³Girl Scouts of the USA. (2010, September 29). *Healthy Media for Youth Act Introduced in Senate with Girl Scout Support*.

Retrieved from <http://blog.girlscouts.org/2010/09/healthy-media-for-youth-act-introduced.html>

¹⁶⁴ABC News. (2006, August 31). Child-Porn Victim Brings Her Story to Washington.

Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/International/Story?id=1919036&page=1>

of the British Parliament, for example, recently called for a ban on airbrushing and digital enhancement of media materials targeted to girls under the age of 16. They are also proposing rules that would require advertisers to disclose how images have been altered, making it transparent to viewers that what they are seeing is not real.¹⁶⁵

AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

With depressing regularity, social workers and educators say they are seeing girls engaging in provocative and even risky sexual behaviors at younger and younger ages. Yet empirical evaluations of programs meant to impact attitudes about gender identity and sex are few in number, and at best suggest only an indirect impact on girls' beliefs about themselves or their sexual behavior. In other words, these evaluations cannot really

As an example of how a measure of early sexualization might work, we might consider the way mental health practitioners identify and measure stress – a condition that is well-defined in medical literature and that is known to be associated with certain physical and emotional problems.

make the claim that whatever changes programs are able to produce – say, that they positively impact girls' self-esteem, or improve media literacy – will ultimately help girls resist the forces of sexualization. The deficiency of these studies is understandable. Research questions tend to be narrow and the number of girls studied usually quite small. More significantly, the mechanism by which environmental or even biological factors get translated into damaging beliefs or behavior is complicated, and varies even among girls with similar backgrounds.

As distasteful as the concept of sexualization is to parents, educators and most other adults, it is not even clear that the phenomenon causes serious or lasting problems for girls in general. The most we can say is that it contributes to problems for girls already at high risk, stripping away the protective social norms that in earlier times might have at least partly shielded them.

Yet our current, rather meager state of knowledge does point to some promising areas for future research. The most obvious involves agreement on a common definition of early sexualization and development of valid instruments that can measure its impact on subsets of girls. As an example of how a measure of early sexualization might work, we might consider the way mental health practitioners identify and measure stress – a

condition that is well-defined in medical literature and that is known to be associated with certain physical and emotional problems. When doctors or therapists see a patient displaying a certain set of symptoms – sleeplessness or irritability, for instance –

they delve further by asking a series of standard questions. Stress, its symptoms and its effects are by now so well-understood that some practitioners routinely administer questionnaires to screen for stress, flagging patients who seem to be in trouble. However diagnosed, when acute levels of stress are found, an intervention is suggested, and that intervention – whether it be a prescription for medication or a recommendation for more exercise – will have been well-studied and its probable effects on stress known. Finally, the impact of

¹⁶⁵Morris, N. (2009, August 3). MP calls for new controls to rein in advertisers who "airbrush" for perfection. *The Independent*. Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/dont-beef-up-keiras-bust-lib-dems-take-aim-at-advertisers-over-altered-images-1766549.html>

the intervention, once administered, is evaluated. If it doesn't seem to be helping, it will be adjusted. Though not a perfect analogy, we could think of early sexualization in roughly the same way: as a condition to be diagnosed, measured and treated in some way. The point is not to pathologize the beliefs and behaviors associated with early sexualization, but to develop a way of recognizing them and minimizing their impact on healthy sexual development. For without agreed-upon definitions, and the common protocols and tools that develop around them, it will be difficult for responses to early sexualization to move beyond their current fragmented state.

Other areas for development concern our democratic society's ability to either shape or control the media; how boys are involved in the sexualization phenomenon, either as co-victims of it or contributors to it; and how a heterogeneous country such as ours can meaningfully address an issue that is so deeply rooted in culture and ethnic identity.

Finally, at a most basic level, research obviously needs to continue to identify and describe which interventions are most effective in teaching safe, age-appropriate sexual behavior while affirming that sexuality is natural and healthy.

Some of these discussions will undoubtedly be played out against the background of sex education. Sex education is a fraught issue in America, even a proxy issue for the chasm separating social liberals from social conservatives. The debate over abstinence-only sex education versus comprehensive education programs,

while tipping heavily in favor of a comprehensive approach, can probably never be won by either side, if only because the divisions are so sharply drawn and the sides so embattled. More research will surely be conducted, much of it replicating research already done. It is likely that this new research will support the findings of so many previous studies: that the most effective approach to helping teens safely manage their emerging sexuality is comprehensive sex education that includes abstinence as one option but does not mandate it, and that is medically accurate and nonjudgmental. It is also likely that some version of comprehensive sex education will be recommended for children at younger ages, and that media literacy will increasingly play a part in that education.

The debate over abstinence-only sex education versus comprehensive education programs, while tipping heavily in favor of a comprehensive approach, can probably never be won by either side, if only because the divisions are so sharply drawn and the sides so embattled.

Whether or not these changes can be made on any universal scale remains to be seen. And whether they are capable of impacting the sexualization of girls in any case will, without a great deal more research, be an open question.

CONCLUSION

This project arose from the child welfare field itself, and the concerns expressed by social workers and caseworkers about the sexualized behavior of the girls coming to their programs – behavior that was not typical of girls even 15 years ago but was common now. They were certain that early sexualization was an escalating problem, yet they had no idea what they could do about it. Many factors seemed to be contributing to it, but influencing any one of them enough to really make a difference seemed to be impossible. Or was it? That is what we set out to discover.

Understanding a social problem and developing practices aimed at solving it is a tedious, painstaking process. To even get started, a critical mass of people must care about the issue and be willing to devote time, attention and resources to it. Social scientists, policymakers and practitioners must develop a consensus about the problem, its causes and its implications for the individuals and groups affected by it. Funders must be persuaded to support efforts to address it. And that, of course, is a problem in itself. Creating useful interventions requires innovation, trial and error, reverses of direction, and, not infrequently, failure. Even when an approach seems clearly successful to both practitioners and target groups, quantifying that success can be enormously difficult. Given the need to develop deep consensus and mobilize so many different kinds of resources and support, it's easy to see why even "simple" social problems – problems that are clearly defined, with both obvious causes and solutions – are hard to tackle. When the problems are complex or controversial, solutions can seem almost impossible. The early sexualization of girls falls into this second category.

As we have seen, over the past several years many groups have sounded the alarm about the early sexualization of girls, citing the sexual exploitation of girls by media and commercial interests, along with a variety of environmental and social factors that seem to be pushing girls into prematurely sexualized beliefs and behaviors. In response to this concern, many communities, schools and social service agencies have attempted to address at least some of the factors contributing to the phenomenon. Those responses take many different forms, ranging from organizing media boycotts, to educating girls on Internet safety, to creating empowerment groups where girls can focus on their innate interests and abilities rather than viewing themselves solely through the lens of sexual attractiveness. Which responses are the most successful? What do they achieve, for which girls, and how much of a difference do they really make? For entirely understandable reasons, we don't yet have those answers. And we will not have them until social scientists, policymakers, parents and other stakeholders circle back to create the common definitions and frameworks that any emerging body of practice requires. Such foundational work is critical if we are to create interventions that have real and lasting impact. This report, we hope, will form a small part of that foundation.

