

real girl  
vs.

# real world

Raising self-confident daughters  
despite society's mixed messages

BY AMY HENRY

"I SUCK AT VIOLIN," my 14-year-old daughter says as we drive home from a summer music workshop.

"How can you say that?" I snap. I'm startled and dismayed—her trashing of herself has become all too familiar. "You were concertmistress of the school orchestra last year!"

She rolls her eyes but grudgingly ups her self-assessment. "OK. I'm average."

We continue to debate her ability, our tempers mounting, until I break down and confess. "I hate it when you sell yourself short. Women are always doing that, and their lives end up so much less for it."

As we drive on in silence, I wonder how it is that, in an era of female opportunity and empowerment, my bright, capable daughter feels she cannot claim her due.

TABITHA SOREN



## THE PRESSURE TO MEET CONFLICTING EXPECTATIONS

Later, while mulching my garden, I ponder the history that fueled my outburst. Raised on a diet of traditional femininity—*act nice, be polite, don't toot your own horn*—I came of age in the wake of the feminist movement of the early 1970s. Overnight, the image of *Leave It to Beaver's* June Cleaver—the slightly befuddled mom of 1950s TV who was eternally deferential to her husband, Ward, and “the boys”—gave way to the New Woman, power-suited and wielding a briefcase of dazzling ideas. *Her ideas.* But where was the instruction manual for this new model of womanhood? I had ambition, but no clue how to act on it nicely. I was proud of my grades, but believed it was for others to praise me. Politely, I waited for those others to recognize and nurture my gifts, but their praise never materialized. As I waited, my anger rose and my confidence fell.

I cherish the notion that my daughter, born in a different time, will escape such painful inner conflicts, yet the evidence suggests that girls today are caught in an increasingly dizzying crossfire of contradictory demands: Be smart, but not too smart. Conquer the world, but don't trumpet your accomplishments. Compete, but do it while dressed in a wardrobe Cameron Diaz would envy. And whatever happens, for heaven's sake, *don't eat.*

“Girls are being given the message ‘You can be anything you want to be,’” says Courtney Macavinta, co-author (with Andrea Vander Pluym) of *Respect: A Girl's Guide to Getting Respect and Dealing When Your Line Is Crossed* (Free Spirit Publishing, 2005), and founder of *RespectRx.com*, a popular advice

site for teens, parents, and advocates for girls. “At the same time, they're being told, ‘You have to package yourself as an object of desire.’”

Packaging oneself as an object of desire is the first clue that this brave new world our daughters face remains in the shadow of old stereotypes. Watching my daughter and her friends straighten, curl, and color their hair, seeking the look that will stamp them as “hot,” I'm reminded of sleepless nights, my hair rolled on Coke cans, desperate to smooth the waves that were “all wrong.”

“Traditional concepts of femininity are [still] firmly reinforced,” says Joyce Roche, president and CEO of Girls Incorporated. And there's more at stake than the texture or cut of one's hair. Society continues to tell girls to speak softly and not to brag about their accomplishments, Roche says.

The admonition to be thin, beautiful, and self-effacing is hardly news, but today's girls struggle to thrive under an unprecedented assault from

electronic media that invades every corner of their lives. Coupled with consumer-driven exhortations to be pretty, popular, and dressed to kill are mandates for athletic success, straight As, and acceptance at Ivy League schools. Small wonder that, in a recent survey conducted for Girls Inc., 74 percent of girls in grades 3 through 12 reported that “girls are under a lot of pressure to please everyone.”

“It's a huge pain point,” Macavinta says. “Girls wonder how they can develop their internal assets, their resourcefulness, figure out their values and boundaries.

Trusting their gut—it's all in conflict with packaging themselves.”

Roche agrees: “The intense pressure created by [these] expectations takes a toll on girls' confidence, and on their ability



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to manage stress and cope with challenges.”

It can feel easier, safer, not to draw attention to oneself (*What if I fail?*) and to defer to others (*No one can blame me.*) than to confront the demands that three-fourths of girls in grades 9 through 12 say often leave them feeling stressed.\* When the only acceptable goal is perfection, our daughters may go to ground, choosing the path of least resistance: that of the “good girl.”

### THE LURE OF THE GOOD-GIRL HABIT

In first grade, I held my breath when the boys talked out of turn or grew rowdy, and were made to stand in the corner. I could imagine nothing more humiliating, and vowed I would never do anything to make the teacher mad. I would be a Good Girl.

Though today’s classrooms are wired for Internet access and teachers strive to avoid gender stereotypes in their speech, the Good Girl habit continues to start young and dig deep. Girls still encounter a school environment in which obedient, nonassertive behavior earns them gold stars and the teachers’ approval.

“The desire to fit in with peers and the need for approval from adults appears to be the driving force behind girls’ attempts to mold themselves to the expectations of others,” says Joyce Roche. Mindy Bingham, lead author of the award-winning Career Choices curriculum and author of *Things Will Be Different for My Daughter: A Practical Guide to Building Self-Esteem and Self-Reliance* (Penguin, 1996), agrees: “[We] get reinforced—the pat on the head for being the good girl—when we fit in and don’t step out.”

“Fitting in” is frighteningly easy for many girls—a sort of left-handed gift for the developmental edge they enjoy over boys. On average, girls talk, count,



and read earlier than boys do,\* and they exhibit greater self-discipline,\* making them “naturals” at being the sort of model student sought by teachers struggling to control a classroom. In turn, a teacher’s praise can strengthen a girl’s sense of self, making it seem highly desirable to adopt a set of behaviors—waiting to be called on, following directions without question—that “reward” a girl in the moment but pose problems as she matures. The ability to follow directions, as I discov-

ered in my late teens, provides zero comfort when the thing a girl seeks to direct is her own life.

There are perceived peer rewards, too, for the girl who plays down her assets and abilities in an attempt to flatter other girls, hoping to win their approval and friendship. Hanging around the food court at the mall, my ears bent to the throngs of preteen and teen girls, I was transported back decades by what I overheard: “I wish I had your thighs. Mine look like tree

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trunks." "You're the best sprinter on the track team. It takes me a year to run a mile."

Bingham calls this the "ain't it awful" line of communication. "It's a way to give a compliment, but it involves putting yourself down," she explains. "Self-effacement becomes so engraved, the girl doesn't realize she's taking the second position."

I recently became uncomfortably aware of the truth of Bingham's words when a friend remarked, "You're so organized; I can never get myself together," and I responded, "But you're always relaxed, and I'm ridiculously driven." That this sort of self-effacing exchange has become reflexive underscores the dark conviction learned in adolescence: for a girl to have friends, she must appear nonthreatening.

"Girls wonder 'How can I be friends with other girls and not be in conflict with them?'" Courtney Macavinta says. "We're still being socialized to be demure. Girls are afraid if they say something positive about themselves, they'll be seen as conceited or stuck-up." This fear is not unfounded, my daughter confirmed. If a girl displays confidence in her appearance or abilities, there are other girls just waiting to put her in "her place" with a withering comment or, worse, unkind gossip from which she's excluded but is intended to overhear.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP TRAP

The supremely high value girls tend to place on relationships doesn't end with self-disparaging comments about "thighs like tree

trunks." It can seriously impact their sense of autonomy. Dee Moreno (not her real name), a small-business owner in Boulder, Colorado, expresses dismay at how often the need to conform to "the pack" has kept her daughter, now 18, from pursuing what she enjoys. "She's a great skier, but she wouldn't join the ski club because none of her friends were in it," Moreno says. Her daughter also quit acting, a passion since elementary school, because "none of her friends were interested."

As mothers, we can tally what our daughters don't yet count: the cumulative loss of talents undeveloped, skills unlearned, and interests abandoned as we cast ourselves in a shape we could share with others. "My friends save me," my

daughter says. I tell her that's wonderful, but from my "midlife vantage point I catalog the lost opportunities and want to add, "Learn to save yourself."

Healthy relationships are about supporting each other's strengths, not sacrificing your own interests to fit in, Macavinta says. Roche concurs: "Girls who feel the pressure to conform are deprived of the opportunity to give full voice to their aspirations and explore their dreams."

That pressure intensifies when boys enter the picture. Girls' worries about appearance are as great in high school as their concern for achievement and grades.<sup>9</sup> According to the Girls Inc. survey, 84 percent of girls said they feel enormous pressure to dress the right way.<sup>10</sup> Almost no one feels thin enough. For Elsa





Dixler's daughter, despair over her weight has cast a long shadow across her middle- and high-school years. Despite a bevy of friends, excellent grades, and recognition for her acting and literary talents, her daughter often feels ugly and unlovable because she's not thin, says Dixler, an editor from Brooklyn, New York.

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A preoccupation with the bathroom scale is not something our daughters invented. My mother, herself obsessed with thinness, nagged me without mercy the year I gained weight, believing she was doing me a favor. I vowed never to do my daughter that "favor," but my silence on the subject is drowned in the cacophony of a mass media that never lets up. A recent sampling from the [www.aol.com](http://www.aol.com) homepage promised readers the lowdown on "How [Jessica] Simpson Got So

Skinny," and asked "Who's the Sexiest Slimmed-Down Celeb?"<sup>24</sup> The stories rotate frequently, but the plot remains constant: Size Zero or Bust. "Girls are marinated in this stuff, and it costs them their power," states Macavinta.

If you can't be too thin, neither can you be too rich. Commodities rank high in the list of what it takes to command sex appeal. To counter a mass media that trades on girls' hopes to attract boys by hyping expensive clothes and cosmetics, the Adbusters Media Foundation has launched a campaign, "Girls vs. Beauty Marketing Madness." Their "Your Beauty" subvertisements, such as the one shown on the next page, are posted online at Adbusters' MemeWars forum ([www.adbusters.org/campaigns/memewars](http://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/memewars)). Girls are invited to communicate with each other about these issues and decide for themselves what constitutes beauty. "The resistance we face is obviously the enormously powerful force of peer influence," says Paul Cooper, Adbusters' campaigns manager. "What starts out as an image being

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pushed by a salesman becomes a culture which girls freely support.”<sup>9</sup>

Further confusing the issue for our daughters are the convolutions of corporate marketing. The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty has released a video, *Ouslaught*, that looks at sexualized images of women used to promote beauty products. It ends with the message, “Talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does.” The problem, reports the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, is that Unilever, which owns Dove, also produces Axe, a line of male grooming products marketed to boys on the Internet, MTV, and in print via a scantily clad, all-girl singing group, the Born Chicks Wah Wahs.<sup>10</sup> The Wah Wahs’ message is clear: “Use Axe products and we’ll give you our bodies.” To be or not to be an object—that is the question our daughters must sort out, often with little more to go on than their own conflicting desires for selfhood and popularity.

## RESPONDING TO HER NEGATIVE TALK

Few things have aroused more pain in my heart than hearing my daughter trash herself. In her negative self-talk, I hear my own adolescent uncertainty: fear of not measuring up to the expectations of others, the sense of needing someone else’s permission to act, an almost crippling desire for approval. But beneath it all, an angry whimper that is small but persistent: *This is my life*. I long to console her, tell her she’s smart, funny, talented—but I know, as a mother and a daughter, the futility of trying to argue against a girl’s negative self-assessment. “Sometimes,” says Elsa Dixler, “I’ll say to my daughter, ‘I won’t let you talk about yourself that way! I wouldn’t let someone else talk that way about you, so why should I sit back while you talk that way about you?’ That gets a smile, but that’s it.”

We can’t talk our daughters out of their poor self-esteem, says Mindy Bingham. We can only try to get them to talk themselves into a more realistic and positive self-evaluation. She suggests responding to negative comments with a question. “Try saying, ‘Oh, that’s interesting. Tell me why you think that.’ Under scrutiny, a girl’s harsh self-judgment often evaporates

for lack of evidence. That’s when the teachable moment occurs. “Then you can point out, ‘Maybe you’re saying ‘I’m no good’ because you think that’s what people want to hear,’” Bingham says.

It can be hard to bite back the temptation to contradict a girl’s self-trashing, but experts agree that it’s healthier to hear her out. “If a girl speaks about herself negatively, do not simply brush aside the comment,” Joyce Roche advises. “Ask to know more about how she feels.”

“It’s all in your head,” my mother used to say when I grumbled about gossipy girls and unfair teachers. But girls’ negative feelings often spring from real-life experiences that they interpret as accurate feedback about their abilities and worth.

Julie Shannan, deputy director of Girlstart, an Austin, Texas-based organization devoted to empowering girls in math, science, and technology, cites an example common in classrooms.<sup>11</sup> “Boys are generally more confident about trying something before they have it figured out, and girls tend to not want to ‘mess up’ but wait to try something until they have the right answer. Boys get rewarded by having the chance to show off their knowledge, and girls often get overlooked because they might be afraid to be wrong,” Shannan says. “At Girlstart we show girls that taking a risk, even if it doesn’t lead to the ‘right answer,’ is all part of exploring math, science, and technology.” Girls need someone to take their frustration seriously. They also need to be rewarded for being intelligent risk-takers. “Parents can support girls by helping them resist the pressure to ‘play small,’” Roche adds.

Adbusters’ Paul Cooper believes that context is critical in discussing sensitive issues. “Challenging the influence of advertising is an indirect method of getting at the issue,” he says. “When you talk about an objective media issue rather than getting into a personal, psychoanalytical conversation [about self-esteem], you’re less likely to hit that wall of awkwardness.”

## COMING INTO HER OWN

Finding the confidence and courage to speak from my own, true core consumed decades of my life. I

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Macavinta serves as an "ambassador," [www.girlsforchange.org](http://www.girlsforchange.org)); or Expanding Your Horizons ([www.expandingyourhorizons.org](http://www.expandingyourhorizons.org)), a national math and science program for middle-school girls (endorsed by Girlstart). In such settings there are no boys to steal their thunder, and with the support of peers and adults, girls discover that they "can do," says Roche. Success breeds confidence. With each achievement, it becomes harder for a girl to sustain a negative self-image, and easier to shed the need for media-imposed packaging and listen to her true gut, as Macavinta puts it.

In midlife, I have come to honor my authentic voice. I no longer sell myself short. I have a framework for sifting what I owe myself from what I owe others. I just wish it hadn't taken so long to get here.

Listening to my daughter rehearse for an upcoming audition, playing her violin with a skill and sensitivity that represent years of committed work, I hope that, whatever the outcome, she will be able to appreciate her progress, bask in her love of music, and believe she has the right to be proud. And I hope that pride includes a little bragging.



#### NOTES

1. This and subsequent references: Courtney Macavinta, personal communication (18 July 2007).
2. This and subsequent references: Joyce Roche, personal communication (March 2007).
3. Girls Inc., *The Supergirl Dilemma: Girls Deal with the Mounting Pressure of Expectations: Summary Findings* (New York: Girls Inc., 2006): 22 (download at [www.girlsinc.org/globalpage.php?id=2430](http://www.girlsinc.org/globalpage.php?id=2430)).
4. *Ibid.*: 21.
5. This and subsequent references: Mindy Bingham, personal communication (March 2007).
6. Anita Gurin, PhD, "Gifted Girls: Many Gifted Girls, Few Eminent Women: Why?" *New York University Child Study Center* (July 2007): [www.aboutourkids.org/articles/gifted\\_girls\\_many\\_gifted\\_girls\\_few\\_important\\_women\\_why](http://www.aboutourkids.org/articles/gifted_girls_many_gifted_girls_few_important_women_why).
7. Angela Lee Duckworth and Martin E. P. Seligman, "Self-Discipline Gives Girls the Edge: Gender in Self-Discipline, Grades, and Achievement Test Scores," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 98, no. 1 (2006): 199-208.
8. Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development*

- (Dorby, PA: Diane Publishing Company, 1998), passim.
9. See Note 3: 26.
  10. See Note 3: 8.
  11. This and subsequent references: Elsa Dixler, personal communication (March 2007).
  12. [www.aol.com](http://www.aol.com) (accessed 17-18 July 2007).
  13. This and subsequent references: Paul Cooper, personal communication (20 July 2007).
  14. Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, "CCFC to Unilever: Ask the Axe Campaign if You Care about 'Real Beauty'" (9 October 2007): [www.commercialfreechildhood.org/pressreleases/axetheaxe.htm](http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org/pressreleases/axetheaxe.htm).
  15. This and subsequent references: Julie Shannon, personal communication (March 2007).

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

- [www.adbusters.org/campaigns/memewars](http://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/memewars)—Click on "Girls vs. Beauty Marketing Madness" for the latest on this Adbusters Media Foundation campaign. AMF is an organization dedicated to advancing the new social activist movement of the information age.
- [www.commercialexploitation.org](http://www.commercialexploitation.org)—A national coalition of health-care professionals, educators, advisory groups, and concerned parents.
- [www.expandingyourhorizons.org](http://www.expandingyourhorizons.org)—A national math and science program for middle-school girls.

#### [www.girlsforchange.org](http://www.girlsforchange.org)

—A national organization that empowers teen-aged girls to create and lead social change.

#### [www.girlsinc.org](http://www.girlsinc.org)

—An international organization whose mission is to "inspire all girls to be strong, smart, and bold." Girls Inc. offers a diverse range of programs for US and Canadian girls ages 6-18.

#### [www.girlstart.org](http://www.girlstart.org)

—Based in Austin, Texas, this organization is devoted to empowering girls in math, science, and technology.

[www.respectrx.com](http://www.respectrx.com)—An advice site for teens, parents, and advocates for girls that continues the dialogue inspired by Courtney Macavinta and Andrea Vander Pluym's book, *Respect: A Girl's Guide to Getting Respect and Dealing When Your Line Is Crossed*.

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