Book Review

Girls Uncovered: New Research on What America's Sexual Culture Does to Young Women. By Joe S. McIlhaney Jr., M.D., and Freda McKissic Bush, M.D., with Stan Guthrie. Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2011. 152 pp.

The title, *Girls Uncovered*, refers to the loving action parents perform for their little girls (and boys) when they tuck them in at night. The book reflects the authors' desire to prevent the many disastrous consequences of adolescents' sexual relations that they have encountered in their years of gynecological practice. The warm tone of the book is designed to equip parents not only with the facts needed to warn girls regarding the dangers of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and teen pregnancy but also to suggest successful approaches to holding these discussions: "Young people need our active and constant help...(if)...we give them no reason to limit their inborn sexual desire, a desire that is healthy and good but demands certain limits" (19), then the culture will invite girls to engage in sexual relations without forming the necessary antecedent relationships and leave them vulnerable to emotional damage as well as sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy.

Chapters Two and Three describe the hook-up culture. In 2005, 70 percent of TV shows popular with teens had sexual content. Even if a teen's first sexual encounter took place in a romantic context, subsequent sex is more often casual. Hooking up encompasses any sexually stimulating activity, anything from kissing to intercourse. Among college students 80–90 percent of sexual encounters involve alcohol. (In 2016 hooking up among college students is generally described as a sexual encounter without emotional

investment or expected consequences [Klaus, Dennehy, and Turnbull 2002].) Sexting has also become very widespread and most parents are not aware that their daughter is engaging in it. Because brain development has not reached adult maturity, adolescents are vulnerable. They are not yet ready to embrace the four cardinal virtues: courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom, and thus are in great need of the "covering" parents can provide.

Chapter Four is titled "STIs." *Girls Uncovered* was published in 2011 and cites the statistics that were available then, mostly drawn from 2008 publications from the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics. In 2015 two of five sexually active girls had an STI, while teen births have decreased to 22.3/1000 (Martin et al. 2017). The rate of current sexual activity by high school students has dropped to 30.1 percent by 2014 (Kann et al. 2015).

To prepare the reader for the detailed description of the extent of STIs and the tragic infertility that results from subclinical and therefore undiagnosed and untreated STIs, such as chlamydia and sometimes gonorrhea, as well as pregnancy, the authors write:

parenting is not for the faint of heart or uninvolved. If you want to protect and support your daughter it will cost you in terms of time, money, effort and even relational pain. But think of it as a calling, and the costs as investments—because the payoff in

the life of your daughter could be huge. No, there are no guarantees, but we believe that your daughter has a much better likelihood of surviving and thriving during these difficult years if you stay engaged and provide the 'cover' she so desperately needs. For a girl uncovered is a girl at risk. (34)

The medical and social aspects of teen pregnancy are well documented in Chapter Five as are the effects on interrupted or completely redirected educational and career life goals. The authors cite the Estimate of Contraceptive Failure from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) (United States Department of Health and Human Services 2002) to show that a typical sexually active young woman would have a 12 percent chance of conceiving within one year when using hormonal contraceptive steroids and/or condoms, adding that users of fertility awareness methods have an even higher (25%) failure rate. (The 2002 NSFG did not distinguish between rhythm and fertility awareness based methods [Klaus, Dennehy, and Turnbull 2002].)

The role played by emotional attachment from birth onward is well described in Chapter Six and details the bonding role of oxytocin in women during childbirth and sexual intercourse, as well as the role of mirror neurons in imitative learning. These are a major avenue of child development. Not only must mothers bond with their babies, but babies must bond with their mothers. While bonding is mediated by oxytocin in the mother, there is also a genetic component: "Babies of affectionate mothers become affectionate mothers themselves, while daughters of abusive mothers are often abusive to their own children" (61); yet, this is not only learned behavior but has an epigenetic component.

The role of oxytocin in bonding a woman to her sexual partner is elaborated and is a powerful bond in marriage.

Oxytocin also increases trust in a woman, it can rise with a twenty second hug: "Don't let a man hug you unless you plan to trust him" (62). Touching, gazing, positive emotional interaction, kissing, and orgasm all release oxytocin and may lead teens, even those with a high IQ but immature decision-making capacity, into very bad decisions.

The role of estrogen in raising a craving for sexual intimacy is described as is its role in emotional fluctuations and in making women attractive to men. Estrogen also stimulates oxytocin, which is a combustible combination in adolescence. Dopamine, the hormone of reward, is described as values-neutral. It gives courage to separate from parents but also to take risks mainly because they are not perceived as risks. To all these, add pheromones, which attract men to women especially when estrogen is high. Although the combination leads to rewarding experiences among mature couples, they can lead teenagers into disasters, hence the need for guidance, especially by fathers, to prevent girls from falling for lines of predators. Well-told scenarios illustrate the aforementioned points, as well as exhortations to fathers and mothers on the need to bond with their daughters.

Chapter Seven describes how "Society Misleads Girls" by trying to persuade them that boys and girls are the same while there are undeniable differences not only in genitalia but in brain structure and development, general body differences in weight and strengths, emotions and reactions to life events, and burdens that follow sexual intercourse. Pregnancy obviously takes place in the body of the woman, not the man's, and STIs wreak more havoc in women as intraperitoneal infections of the uterus, tubes, and ovaries lead to adhesions and often infertility. Finally, men's attitudes and expectation regarding sex are vastly different from women's: men often seek release or to satisfy curiosity, while women seek affection or to hold a partner. Many teen women feel regret

for not having waited longer, while college women discover unexpected emotional damage as a result of “commitment free” hook ups.

Society also projects the “supergirl” phenomenon, that is, to be everything to everyone all the time: smart, fun, sexy, athletic, accomplished, sensitive to the needs of others all the time, and outperform boys in the process. These ideals are projected by popular magazines and echoed even by grade school girls. Trying to live up to these ideals often leads to risky behavior, especially abusing alcohol or emotional breakdown, or both.

Another lie is that cohabitation is smart. Far more women than men expect that cohabitation will lead to marriage. Even when it does, the rate of divorce is far lower than among couples who did not cohabit before marriage. If children have been born from non-marital unions, they are far more vulnerable as only too frequently the father leaves and the single mother is either left to raise the child alone, or acquires a boyfriend who, having no biological ties to the child, is far more likely to abuse him/her. All these messages make negotiating adolescence much more challenging.

Chapter Eight considers the means of navigating through confusing and misleading societal messages that our teens receive. While the recommendations are for Society, realistically it is the individual parents who must first recognize the importance of parents in guiding their daughters by being active and authoritative in their lives. They need to be aware of the media messages aimed at their daughters and counter them with correct information, whether the messages come from pop culture, music, or celebrities. Again and again, daughters need to hear that sex on the TV is different from sex in real life and has different meanings and consequences. Society has sexualized our

daughters for commercial profit and misled many girls into thinking that their value as persons depends on how sexy they are. Society has molded girls—often to their detriment—but has also molded boys who too often feel that they are expected to have sex. Boys must be told that they are expected to be responsible members of society and be held responsible for their share of negative outcomes of casual sex, which were detailed earlier in this book. If parents band together, they can influence the enforcement of drinking laws, sexual abstinence education in schools to include accurate information regarding the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of contraception and about STIs, and demand a stop to the violence and graphic sex of the media.

Chapter Nine, which is titled “What Are Parents to Do?,” begins with the word “Relax!” Parenting is a challenging and demanding task but is also one filled with joy. Parents have seen their child’s growth from the beginning and know that growth always means change. Not only the body but the relationship change. Both quality and quantity of shared time are important, among them dinner as a family several times a week, talking about big decisions including sex, while being affirming and offering service especially in “little things,” and not hesitating to love and hug your girl. All these are ways of communicating love. Teens look for affirmation. Messages of unconditional love can be spoken or modelled and include parental expectations regarding behavior in general, while affirming the girl’s value, and the parent’s confidence in her ability to think, to struggle through her own decisions and responsibilities, and be in control of her actions. But the parents’ own behavior speaks louder than words. Helped by mirror neurons, how parents relate to each other is probably the most powerful means of teaching their children

about marital relationship. "As you pursue your relationship with your teen you will find there are times when they test the limits. This is not confrontational behavior. The kid did not know they were limits until they encountered them! Remember, their brains don't work like an adult's" (109). They also seek the excitement that gives a dopamine high, so encourage them to participate in healthy activities. While the responsibilities of parents are awe-inspiring, so is their influence on their children. (While most teens would die rather than admit it, they want the good opinion of their parents more than anything else in this world [Klaus, Dennehy, and Turnbull 2002].)

Chapter Ten addresses girls directly and affirms that each one is unique and precious and needed in society. She needs to formulate her goals and take responsibility for trying to reach them. Her parents will have helped, but on the way she will meet some people who will be committed to her well-being, others not so much. A girl needs to "remember that sex is sexist" (49). Girls get the worst negative consequences of sexual activity whether STI or pregnancy. Abortion is not the easy way out of a difficult situation that has been described and it always kills the baby. Only a woman undergoes an abortion. The baby's father may pay for it and can walk away, but it is the woman who risks the pain and possible infection or bleeding. "So don't have sex with a guy just to make him happy. Your own goals, plans and health should be your priority" (112). Some healthcare providers think that everyone is sexually active and communicate disbelief when told that a patient is a virgin. Find another doctor in that case. Also:

understand that your brain can cause you to want to do some things that are

not necessarily good for you. That is just the way your brain hormones work. Being physical with a guy can give you a great feeling of excitement and can even cause you to want to have sex with him. It is normal to feel like this. But just because something is 'normal' does not mean it is the best thing for you. So when part of your brain is telling you to have sex remember to use a different part of your brain to make intelligent decisions about your future. Don't worry, you are not going to miss out on all the fun of sex for the rest of your life. Once you are married you can experience all of the excitement of sex without jeopardizing your future. (113)

The girl is asked to put herself in the driver's seat and be selfish in the good sense regarding sexual decisions. If a guy talks about "needing" sex, he is actually talking about selfish desires. There is no obligation to comply. Girls need to protect themselves. If a guy is coming on too fast and will not stop when she tells him, this is rape. Should it happen she must report it immediately, even if it occurred on a date. But, it is best to avoid situations when coerced sex may occur, such as going into a guy's dorm room and using drugs and alcohol, which can slow responses.

The section closes with advice on finding a good marriage partner and not postponing marriage and motherhood until all career-oriented education has been completed. "A good husband will help you with your life plans, and if/when a baby comes there are two of you to cope" (115). The shortcut of cohabitation is no panacea.

Chapter Eleven sums up the book, reminds parents that the need to "cover" their children does not end after adolescence but takes on different forms. Parents need to prepare their children to become responsible, independent adults by giving them love, support, and information to make informed decisions regarding their

choices in a world filled with risks. All parents are human, and all have made mistakes, but in a loving setting, children survive and thrive anyway.

The warm, caring tone of this book reflects the deep concern of the authors for their patients and their patients' parents. It is well worth reading not only for the well-documented facts but the reassurance provided to parents in a perplexing world. It is a pity that there is not a parallel book for parents of boys who need positive parenting just as much as girls do. I regret that the authors took no note of the maturational effect of teaching girls to understand and value the biological markers of their fertility as is done in the Teen STAR program. Monitoring one's cycle, knowing when you ovulate is a sign of health and has shown social effects especially in rejecting peer pressure and supporting primary and secondary abstinence.

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