



Doing Right by Our Girls

Girls need rituals and communal experiences to strengthen their resistance to... media-based culture

I love this program! As a mother of a twelve-year-old girl and a researcher in the field of girls' development, I affirm that *Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl Thing!* is truly a blessing. It is very tricky to be a preadolescent girl in this new millennium. Clearly the Women's Movement has been successful in making some pro-girl changes, such as narrowing the educational gender gap in K-12 math and science, opening career options, and Title IX. Perhaps because some barriers have been broken, we shouldn't be surprised to see even more resistance to girls' strength and leadership in other areas. In spite of, or perhaps because so many steps have taken us forward in the movement towards equality, we are seeing some major backsliding in the culture's attitudes and norms for girls.

The developmental task of the transition from childhood to adolescence is to expand beyond your family and join the culture at large, while developing your identity, independence, and relationship skills. One of the biggest challenges that today's adolescent girls face is that many aspects of contemporary popular culture are debasing, dangerous, and profoundly disrespectful of girls in ways that interfere with their healthy development. Rap music that normalizes sexual violence, prime-time television that normalizes disconnected sex and teasing, and movies that portray girls as incapable of making clear and healthy choices all contribute to girls' confusion, at an ever-earlier age, about what it means to be a teenage girl. In spite of much progress in the move towards gender equality, and improved quality of life for each gender, adolescent girls today must travel in a teen culture that makes risky and dangerous values and behaviors—again, at ever earlier ages—seem normal.

It is hard for us adults who have not grown up with e-mail and instant messaging or two hundred television cable channels to understand how the media is the culture for today's adolescents. In this visual, media-saturated culture, girls are surrounded by images and stories of teens making bad choices—choices about truth telling, friendship, family relationships, education, leadership, and love. *Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl Thing!* offers girls the chance to be enveloped in an alternative culture that will help them counter the media/popular culture's unhealthy messages. Experts know that girls are very grateful for the opportunity to have a safe space in which they can get some clarity about what they think and what they want, practice using their voices, and learn how to have the courage to hold on to their convictions.

Girls need education and programs that steep them in an alternative culture to learn how to stay connected to their bodies as a source of health, natural wisdom, spirituality, and fun. Girls need rituals and communal experiences to strengthen their resistance to the media-based culture that would direct them to disconnect from their bodies. *Rosh Hodesh*, in its very essence, connects girls' bodies to their psyches, their

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spirits, their souls, and to the rhythm of nature and the cycles of life. Girls are hungry for soul food—nourishment for their connections to peers, older women, and God, to heartfelt values, to beliefs and values which deepen their sense of being connected to a family, a religion, a community of good people who are trying to make the world a better place.

The good news is that even though it can be a challenging culture out there for girls, programs designed to strengthen girls' resilience really work! So often, preventive programs take an approach that is based in fear ("here are all the dangerous life-threatening diseases you can get if you are sexually active"). These programs tend to be short-lived in experience and impact. You can't scare a girl out of an eating disorder nor will teaching abstinence in one or two "health education" courses have much, if any, impact on actual behavior. However, programs that are rooted in ongoing connections to peers and older women, with pedagogical methods that are girl friendly, and messages that celebrate girls' and women's strengths, can clearly have a big impact on girls' lives.

When you look at research on risk and resilience in girls today, it is understandable why educators would feel worried and try to scare some sense into girls. It is easy to forget when reading the research on girls' risk-taking behavior that it is cultural images, values, and norms that direct girls towards dangerous and risky behavior. In the last decade, we have seen some sorry trends for young girls that threaten to undermine the safe passage of girls through childhood to young adulthood. From a very young age, girls are challenged in their relationships to themselves and each other. The most popular girl protagonist in young children's television is a six-year-old female cartoon character who is distinguished by her endless teasing and bullying of babies and her disrespectful and manipulative relationships. By the age of four, most girls have been introduced to Angelica, the six-year-old star—and bully—on *Rug Rats*, and girls at this young age enter a culture with an unprecedented amount of teasing and bullying among children.

With the popularity of Britney Spears and the inclusion of elementary school girls into the teen world, we have seen girls lose critical precious years of being children. Previously, girls ages five to twelve spent much of their time consolidating the important values that they need during adolescence. Until recently, girls' play throughout elementary school and into middle school focused on family and peer relationships, telling stories and pretending about conquering adversity ("let's play pioneer girls," for example). Through play, girls learned to trust their bodies as a source of speed and agility; much of their play was not particularly gender restricted and included games, sports, and fantasies full of imagination and curiosity. Children's music remained children's music—Raffi, Tom Chapin, camp songs, "Free To Be You and Me." This was a time when girls were often the most free to live fully in their bodies and learn how their bodies work by riding, skipping, jumping rope, playing sports, dancing, gymnastics, skating, sledding, roller blading, and other competitive and noncompetitive sports—a time of climbing trees and running as fast as the wind. This is the stage in female development when girls need time to connect to their bodies in a way that is free of sexual objectification.

Girls in elementary school are being bombarded and targeted by the culture of sexist body-consciousness and consumerism that used to greet girls at the edge of adolescence. The teen industry has slid down developmentally into the elementary-age girl industry, with girls buying teen music and going to Britney concerts instead of concerts for children. Now five- and seven-year-olds are singing “Oops I did it again”—songs about sex and lack of self-control and imitating Britney and her dancing and her schoolgirl/girl-slut routines. Fashions for girls are increasingly the same as fashions for teens and older women (spaghetti-strap cocktail dresses, belly shirts, tank tops, and hip huggers).

Many of the most difficult challenges girls face in the transition to young adulthood will play out in the arena of their bodies, the arena in which girls experience their gender, live their gender, embody their femaleness. In fact, girls’ bodies remain the primary source of girls’ risk-taking behavior. A central challenge of adolescence is to accept and respect your natural body, and girls need a lot of help learning how to stay healthy in a culture that would lead them away from safety and a strong sense of self and health. Those of us in the field of research on girls’ development continue to be alarmed by the disconnection between girls’ knowledge in school and girls’ behavior out of the classroom as girls continue to descend into risky behaviors such as eating disorders, disconnected and degrading sex, and drugs and drinking—again, all at ever earlier ages.

It is extremely difficult to accept and take care of your female body in a culture that promotes anorexic chic and makes it impossible for the average girl to shop in fashionable stores. Girls are three times more likely than boys to have a negative body image, and 90% of individuals with eating disorders are females. Of female high school students, 36.4% consider themselves overweight and 59.45% are trying to lose weight. To lose or avoid gaining weight, 64% of students exercise obsessively; 56.1% eat fewer calories or foods low in fat; 18.8% go 24 hours without eating; 10.9% use diet pills, powders, or liquids without a doctor’s advice; and 7.5% vomit or use laxatives. Body-loathing, self-loathing, and depression run high in girls: 35.75% of female high school students report having felt sad or hopeless every day for two or more weeks, and 24.9% have considered suicide [“Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance,” U.S. 1999, MMWR, 49 (SS-5) 1–104, 2000].

Research on disordered eating and eating disorders is grim. Girls between ages eight and ten start to relate to their bodies critically as body parts, good or bad; research suggests that 30% of nine-year-old girls are afraid of being fat, just at the time when their bodies will enter puberty and naturally accumulate fat on hips and breasts. By ages thirteen and fourteen, girls are at high risk for the onset of clinical eating disorders. Girls continue to smoke in order to curb their appetites. One in five girls in the United States between the ages of twelve and seventeen smokes cigarettes and drinks alcohol [“Girl Power!” Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, 1997]. One study found that 40% of young people had drunk alcohol by the fifth grade [National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism], and young people who drink alcohol by age fifteen are twice as likely to abuse it later in life.

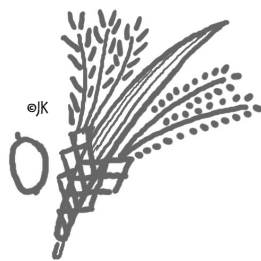


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Girls need to learn how to resist disconnected, premature, and violent sex. When girls grow up—as they do today—in a culture where casual sex, cynicism about sex, and date rape is depicted in the teen film industry (beginning with *Saturday Night Fever*), they need a lot of help learning how to stay safe and true to themselves. In 1996, three out of four “family hour” programs on the networks contained some sexual content, either talk about sex or sexual behavior. Girls ages eight to ten understand jokes about casual sex. For example, in a joke on *The Nanny*, girls got the joke about Fran losing her “virgin...airlines ticket.” Statistics show that 32.5% of ninth-grade girls and 65.8% of twelfth-grade girls have had intercourse, 4.4% of girls have had sexual intercourse before the age of thirteen, and 24% of ninth-grade girls and 39.5% of eleventh-grade girls are currently sexually active. The media is the main source of information for preteens and teens about sex, HIV and AIDS, violence, drugs, and alcohol.

Not surprisingly, we are seeing younger girls experimenting with risky behaviors at earlier ages: 57% of ten- to twelve-year-olds and 61% of thirteen- to fifteen-year-olds say kids their age get “a lot” of information from the media [“Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now,” 1997]. In this post-Bill-Monica era, we have to wonder who benefits from normalizing risk-taking behavior like “friends with benefits”—the current vogue of thirteen- to fifteen-year-old girls performing “sexual favors” for boys without any relationship, maturity, or safety. Research suggests “one in eleven girls who ever had sexual intercourse indicated that she had her first sexual intercourse before the age of thirteen” [Hann, L., et al., “Youth risk behavior surveillance,” 1998]. In grades nine through twelve, 26% of girls have been the victim of physical abuse, sexual abuse, or date-forced sex [“The Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls,” Louis Harris and Associates, 1997].

Girls need programs like *Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl Thing!* to help them build self-confidence, self-acceptance, independence, and the ability to make wise choices. Girls need to be exposed to the stories of other women from the same background as themselves who have become leaders in order to believe that they matter and can make a difference in the world. Recent research by The Ms. Foundation For Women [“The New Girls Movement: Charting the Path,” 2000] cites several factors that make a difference in the impact of girls’ programs. It especially welcomes and celebrates girl-friendly programs that approach girls who are not at risk but are “at strength.” Girls so often hear about themselves as problems or at risk. Girls need upbeat, positive, highly relational programs that offer an embodied experience and vision of girls’ and women’s strength. Programs that offer girls critical tools for deconstructing unhealthy cultural norms and foster girls’ strengths, leadership abilities, and interdependence succeed in promoting girls’ health and efficacy. Central to their report is the necessity for girls-only programs that connect girls to mentors from their own ethnic, racial, or religious background and offer girls a sense of connection to generations that have preceded them. Activism is also a critical part of successful girl programs, for it is through activism that girls experience themselves as agents of change. And of course, all of these can



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only occur in a safe space, with a long-term commitment (ideally, six to twelve months), and with plenty of time to learn in relationship to each other. In other words, girls need lots of time to talk, laugh, disagree, wonder, create, and experience joy.

Rosh Hodesh leaders, you will have the opportunity to help girls stay connected to their bodies as a source of pleasure, health, wisdom, and youthful creativity. This program is, in essence, a program that helps girls discover and stay connected to their bodies and themselves by learning about their own religious and ethical Jewish culture from other women. And, fundamentally, this is a girl-friendly, women-led culture, infused by the stories of their Jewish foremothers. You will offer girls the opportunity to tap into Jewish roots that strengthen resilience, connection to self, others, and Jewish cultural wisdom. As a New Moon group, the program is embedded in a Jewish ritual that honors the cyclical nature of female bodies, a message that is sorely missing in the common culture. Girls need to learn to trust that just as the moon keeps cycling, so too will group relationships—through hurt feelings, fights, deep moods, and big bonding. Just as their bodies go through monthly cycles, girls need the time, space, and connection to shed and regenerate their evolving selves around school struggles, family life, and big life questions.

We hear a lot about the importance of self-esteem yet little about what creates it. Self-esteem comes from learning how to accept yourself, knowing what you believe in, knowing how to say “no,” and knowing how and when to take a stand. Self-esteem comes from learning how to disagree, saying what you think and feel, and tolerating being different from—as well as the same as—others. *Rosh Hodesh: It’s a Girl Thing!* offers girls invaluable opportunities to deepen their connection to themselves as future leaders by strengthening their self-esteem and connection to peers, leaders, values, and information that will enable them to stay connected in healthy ways. The timing couldn’t be better for offering girls a deeper and more meaningful connection to Jewish culture, Jewish women, and Jewish rituals and values. This program offers girls at the edge of young adult life a vision of what is holy in them and their world, and the skills about how to stay whole. And it offers you, as leaders, an opportunity to ferry the next generation across the threshold to young adulthood, and in so doing, to renew the voice and spirit of youth within yourself.

