

Why this book now?

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It's been twelve years since the first edition of *How Girls Thrive* was published.

We (my spectacular editor, Dory, and I) have worked hard to make this edition current, better, and more relevant. I'm often asked, "In a nutshell, what has changed, what are the issues?" True confession: I'm not very good at nutshells. Topics about human beings are just too complicated to fit in a nutshell.

Which is why every chapter and every topic has new parts added that reflect recent research and current issues and topics faced by girls. So, bits of the answer appear on almost every page, or I'd rather envision them not as bits, but as pearls. I hope that, after you have completed the whole book, you will have a string of pearls!

However, there is one trend that it is troubling enough for me to want to address it here and now. In the last twelve years I have worked with thousands of girls (and boys) in schools across this country and many others. As I look back and try to remove myself far enough so that the lens I'm using sees major patterns, there is one that emerges that causes me pause — stress.

Stress isn't new, nor is it necessarily bad. In fact, our neurobiology was designed to handle stress. When faced with conflict or challenge, the chemical system of adrenaline and corticoids combine with an effusion of neurotransmitters to prepare the brain and body to respond with an extremely "souped up" system. Therefore, stress can be, and is, motivating, and as such is a natural and necessary part of life.

So why does this stress pattern that I am seeing cause concern? Because stress is incredibly painful, debilitating and downright dangerous if it is pervasive and continues over long periods of time, especially if there is no perceived light at the end of the tunnel.

An example of this destructive side of stress is the suicide, recently in the news, of a teenage girl who hanged herself after a long bout of what was called bullying. Just like stress, bullies have been around for a long time, or at least my grandfather said there were bullies when he went to school, and that was over a century ago. So what has changed?

Bullying, The Media and Social Networking: The Trifecta of Skyrocketing Stress for Tweens and Teens

There is an excellent, comprehensive article, “Big Bad Bully,” in the September 1995 issue of *Psychology Today* (best found at www.psychologytoday.com/basics/bullying along with a slew of related articles) that covers bullying in an exceptionally comprehensive way, including the what, why, when, how, who and what to do about it. So I am not going to try to do that again here. My point is that bullying has reached a level of insidious pervasiveness that puts many adolescents at risk. And, in terms of mental health and self-esteem issues, girls are especially vulnerable.

My work and my books focus mostly on the positive view of how to “grow” healthy and resilient human beings. Indeed, throughout *How Girls Thrive* — from the brain research to understanding external and internal constraints, through a true understanding of self-esteem and how to build it over time, as well as grasping the significance of crucible events and crucible moments — the message of this book is how to ensure that girls will thrive even in the face of the toxicity that they are facing, and will face, no matter what we do as caring parents and educators.

I am not prone to ringing the danger bell. But to answer that question about what has changed for girls causes me to do just that. What’s different, why the alarm? When I was a teen, if a friend was upset with me, she could say negative things about me to others and/or to me. I would, at the least, be able to go home and have some sanctuary. Also, unjustified meanness (compared to justified, when someone does or says something to deserve a negative response) was seen as bad or not nice. The few really “mean” kids were marginalized and had no real social power. Enter two *huge* changes: social networking and the media.

On one internet site alone thirteen social networking sites are listed. Each can be accessed by one click and each sends out messages to thousands of members. You can see how fast and easy it has become to make bullying viral.

Social networking has now removed all sanctuary. With emailing, IMing, tweeting, texting, blogging, Facebook, and new outlets all the time — there is no escape. The onslaught can be and often is twenty-four/seven. Not only is it never-ending, cyberspace spreads the harsh word (or devastating picture) to thousands of teens in a few seconds and *the effects cannot be erased* by “just kidding” (JK), or “I’m sorry.”

How pervasive is social networking and its effects? The Pew Research Center reports that

- The number of teens engaged in daily text messaging has jumped rapidly from 38% in 2008 to 54% in 2009 and climbing.
- Frequency of texting has overtaken every other common form of daily interaction with friends with face-to-face communication accounting for only 33% of interactions.
- Teen girls ages 14-17 average more than any other group at 100 or more messages a day (more than 3,000 texts a month).
- One in three girls report being bullied/harassed through phone calls and texting

Other studies report that

- Teens say they tweet 5-10 people before deciding what to wear to school.
- Most teens say they are fearful about what might be posted about them on-line.
- One in four teens report knowing someone who has had a bad experience because of information posted on the internet (ranging from having “sext” forwarded around school to being sexually victimized).
- Many teens report that their parents are “clueless” about their cyber-activities, and 40% say they don’t tell their parents what they are doing on-line.

We know from the research on stress, that the ability to cope is reliant on both periods of respite and the ability to take control and do something about what is happening. You can see how both of these requisites have been almost totally removed by the tech world.

The media provides a “double whammy.” Television, movies, magazines and music all support and encourage put-downs. Whether it is rapping or reality TV, it has become socially acceptable, no, worse, POPULAR or “in” to denigrate others for no justifiable cause. What has been considered abnormal behavior has now become the norm. I’m not trying to sound old or not with it, but rather to provide the perspective of someone who has watched over and thought about girls for her entire professional life.

A prime example of how “in” it is to be mean, is the recent and rapid growth in the popularity of Formspring. Formspring is a kind of cyber bulletin board where messages can not only be seen by the 28 million people who visit it each month, but can also simultaneously be sent to anyone’s Twitter, email or Facebook account. The key here is that, unlike some other sites, the writer is anonymous. So, I can say that someone is a _____ (fill in the blank). Or that Susie’s boobs are too small for any boy to ever look at her. The end result is that a child’s peers can take dead aim and not be seen as the shooter. Not surprisingly, Formspring has been linked to the recent suicide of a 17-year-old girl.

This is a critical issue of basic safety and sanctuary. Teens tell me all the time that being respectful and kind is considered “geeky.” They are afraid to be supportive of others and not play the game of teasing and bullying others. The fear is palpable in most girls with whom I have spoken, whether individually, or in groups. They wax poetic (frighteningly so) about how they are afraid to step an inch out of the social expectations because they may then be the recipient of teasing and harassment and, the onslaught of public and social networking which will cause the erosion of their social standing, indeed, of their very selves. This social tidal wave is more than frightening to those of us trying to build a world that promotes the healthy and strong development of the next generation.

It is important to know that the girls themselves want help. Children and teens tell me that they appreciate parents who set limits on their networking, schools that cover topics like bullying in their life skills classes, the teachers who will not allow any type of teasing or meanness in their classes, or visiting the homes of friends who have parents present and set a climate of social safety.

I’m not saying that we should remove all social stress from the lives of children. In fact, many of my workshops cover just the opposite: the normalcy and need for children to experience a wide variety of friends and the conflict that relationships always bring to the table. We are not born socially savvy animals; experiencing conflict and learning how to deal with it are part of the path that leads to that extraordinarily important skill. In fact, new brain research is showing a part of the brain (the anterior cingulate cortex) that is activated when we experience conflict and make mistakes. It seems that when the ACC is activated, it increases the probability that whatever is happening will be remembered, thus ensuring real learning and growth from the experience.

Stress is needed and leads to better learning; conflict is needed and leads to social expertise. In a nutshell (well, I guess I can do it sometimes!), the load is too great. Bullying is everywhere, it is inescapable, the cost has skyrocketed and there is often no respite. Counselors who work with junior and senior high school girls find that no matter how much a girl is being hurt by the messages in Facebook’s Honesty Box, or at Formspring — even when they are vile, denigrating, and/or sexually explicit — she is unable to stop looking at them, often returning again and again.

Added to the stress of threatened or real bullying in a child’s world there is the pressure to be successful, do well in school, look great, and join athletic teams and clubs, and many of our children are staggering under the load. Bullying and social stress is one of the areas we need to lighten to make the stress of life more manageable.

Girls bring some additional cards to the table. In this book, you will find evidence that supports the assertion that females are even more prone to the costs of social conflict because of their neurobiology. The combination of their emotional system and that wonderful hormone oxytocin (see Chapter Three) predispose many girls to care deeply about relationships and, their connectedness in a group or school, and to give more weight to how other people view them. It is certainly a human characteristic, and boys care about these things too, but girls have an additional neurobiological dose (so to speak) of concern.

The numbers bear this out. Again, according to the Pew Research Center

- Girls average 80 text messages a day, while boys typically send and receive 30 a day.
- 59% of girls text several times a day to “just say hello and chat,” compared to 42% of boys.
- 84% of girls have long text exchanges on personal matters; 67% of boys do.

But that isn't all there is to the story. When faced with confrontation, most boys most of the time, react with anger and project their distress outward. Anger is what we call one of the most positive of the negative emotions because it promotes immediate action. Boys usually get rid of their upset immediately (if it festers for a long period of time we have Columbine). Girls report that anger is not their primary emotion in the face of bullying. It is fear, anxiety or emotional hurt. These emotions tend to go inward and, as you will see in Chapter Three, begin the serious erosion of self-esteem.

My work in the area of bullying has brought to light another concern. Articles and experts are quick to point out the obvious costs to the victim and the observers of bullying. Their pain resonates with everyone as we think about it. But bullying, over time, changes the one doing the bullying and erodes that person's self esteem as well. I've been in the business long enough to see the pattern of long-term effects on bullies. They grow up not liking themselves. That not liking can lead to a lifetime of mental health problems like depression or suicide, or, head in the other direction: serious anger management, abusive behavior, and criminal actions.

Even though this book stresses change over time, I am well aware that for anyone who is in the middle of trying to help a girl (whether the bully or the bullied), long term is not enough. Again, the literature (especially see Psychology Today website) has lists for everyone. Here are a few key approaches (pearls):

- Girls can practice the type of responses to general bullying that tend to stop a bully in his/her tracks. Fighting back is not one of them! Things like, “Hey, I thought we were friends, I would never do/say that to you.” There is more of a list in what I would call the “avoid being a victim” literature.
- All girls (and boys) should have conflict management training.
- Make sure your girl knows she has an adult who will listen and help her cope with any social stresses she may face. (See the green blanket story in Chapter Four.)

- Be proactive. Bullying will happen in all schools at some time, so form a good partnership between family and school so that as a team you can deal with bullying issues (either head on or in a more behind the scenes way) before they get out of hand.
- When you see unjustified meanness, make it visible and make it clear that it is not “teasing” and not healthy and that it can’t be part of this family, this class, this school, etc.
- **CRITICALLY IMPORTANT: Every parent should have their children’s on-line account codes and check the postings at least once a month to help their children handle what is toxic, to set guidelines and limits, and to keep the conversation going about life in the cyber century.**

This serious point needs to be made: NO ONE BENEFITS FROM BULLYING OR UNJUSTIFIED MEANNESS AND EVERYONE PAYS BOTH SHORT TERM AND LONG TERM COSTS. It is such a serious social cancer that we all need to intervene to reduce it. That is what this book is all about — a preventive and powerfully long lasting approach. How do we go about it?

First and foremost, we must help design and orchestrate environments (at home and at school) that lead to the layering, over time, of strong, resilient human beings with integrity — those who can better withstand bullying when it occurs, will not join in when it occurs, will do something about it when it occurs, and will not bully others. Although the focus in this book is on girls, the general principles are not that different for boys.

And when you need your own “green blanket” to help handle this thorny problem, write to me and I’ll answer.

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