

SUICIDE

Teen Angst Turns Deadly

WHY GIRLS ARE KILLING THEMSELVES



MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS have never been easy ones for kids, but girls today are having a particularly tough time. The suicide rate for girls ages 10 to 14 increased a whopping 76 percent in 2004, according to the latest numbers available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For those between 15 and 18, the rate went up more than 30 percent.

Alan Berman, a psychologist and director of the American Association of Suicidology in Washington D.C., says although the increase is worrisome, it could be just a random fluctuation. But child and adolescent psychologists report that the prevalence of self-harming behaviors—like cutting and burning—is also rising.

Steve Hinshaw, a clinical and developmental psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, believes a combination of cultural and parental pressures is to blame. His new book, *The*

Triple Bind: Saving Our Teenage Girls from Today's Pressures, argues that girls today are subjected to unrealistic pressures from society and the media, and their once-private identity struggles are now public, thanks to the Internet. Girls are still socialized to be nurturing caregivers but are now pressured to excel academically and athletically as much as boys—all while remaining thin, sexy, and beautiful.

Female role models, Hinshaw says, are “ultra-sexy, ultra-feminized women,

like the female surgeons on *Grey's Anatomy* or swimsuit-modeling tennis players” like Ana Ivanovic. Long gone are the days when girls revered women like Dorothy Hamill, Joan Baez, or Gloria Steinem. Now every preteen aspires to be Gabriella Montez, the lead female character in Disney's *High School Musical* franchise, who is not only sexy but a Broadway-caliber dancer and singer and a soon-to-be freshman at Stanford.

Girls feeling pressure to achieve often go frenetically from one activity to the next, leaving little time to develop coping skills, laments Alec Miller, chief of child and adolescent psychology at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. “They don't have unstructured time to just hang out with

GIRLS SUFFER ADDED PRESSURES—PUBLICLY

friends,” he says. “Yet this is when kids learn how to tolerate frustration, regulate emotions, and solve problems.”

They also lack the privacy needed to work through the emotional struggles of adolescence because of cell phones, instant messaging, and social networking sites. “Let's say things aren't going well in middle or high school and you email someone about it,” Hinshaw says. “Soon it's all over everyone else's email, text messages, MySpace, Facebook. Everyone knows what's going on in your life and they're all talking about it. You can't escape it.” —Eilene Zimmerman

PARENTAL CONTROL

What can parents do about the increasing pressures on young girls? Miller advises cutting down extracurricular activities and turning off the computer and cell phone so kids have time just being with themselves: “They should not be continuously connected, because they need time with their own thoughts.” Hinshaw says the answer may be in getting middle-schoolers to think about something other than themselves, like ecology, politics, or community service: “They need a connection to something deeper than themselves, their friends, and their appearance.”

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