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teens before their time

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Photography

Super Stock, Cover; Corbis Images, pp. 6, 7, 12, 19;
The Stock Market, pp. 9, 10, 12, 14, 17; Image Bank, p. 11

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First Impression 2000

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Research Background and Objectives	Page 5
Methodology	5
Summary of Findings	6
The Inner Lives of Preteen Girls	8
The Family Realm	9
The Social Realm	11
The Academic Realm	14
The Dynamics of Gender Identification and Physical Development	16
Gender Identity Dynamics	16
Physical Development Dynamics	17
Conclusions/Implications	19

Research Background and Objectives

In the past, middle childhood (ages 8–12) was viewed as a relatively idyllic stage of life preceding the turmoil of the teenage years. However, any parent or guardian in the new millennium would leap to challenge that belief.

Research supports parents' beliefs that child development is being "hurried" or "compressed." Girls, in particular, seem to be pressured to deal with typically "teenage" issues years before they reach their teens.

They are reaching *physical* and *cognitive* maturity earlier than previous generations. But, how are they coping *emotionally* with these dramatic changes? What do they want and need to ease the challenges of such compressed development?

The objectives of *Girls Speak Out: Teens Before Their Time* are to:

- Identify the issues, challenges, and pressures on girls ages 8-12.
- Provide ways for girls to speak out about issues, thoughts, and concerns they might not always feel comfortable expressing.
- Serve as an initial benchmark for the continuing examination of the concerns, strengths, diversity, and effective support of girls.

Methodology

Girls Speak Out: Teens Before Their Time explores issues ranging from relationships and physical development to gender roles. The sample consisted of 214 girls, ages 8–12, in seven regionally diverse locations across the country. The study, conducted by Applied Research & Consulting LLC, from November 1999 to January 2000, used questionnaires and small focus groups to provide forums for girls to express their opinions, concerns, and needs.

In addition to *Girls Speak Out: Teens Before Their Time*, Girl Scouts collaborated with SmartGirl.com in conducting a national online survey of similar issues. Between December 15, 1999, and January 31, 2000, a total of 2,702 girls responded to the SmartGirl.com survey. Of the total sample, 1,082 girls ages 8–12 responded, and this subgroup is referred to in this report.

The findings in *Girls Speak Out: Teens Before Their Time* have given Girl Scouts of the USA valuable information on what it is like to be a young girl today. Those results are featured here, along with some data gathered online with SmartGirl.com. This combined approach should provide the reader with a revealing look inside the lives of tomorrow's young women.

Summary of Findings

Child development occurs in three key areas:

1. Cognitive development concerns acquiring critical thinking skills and the accumulation of information about the world.
2. Physical development involves bodily growth and sexual maturation.
3. Emotional development includes social and psychological development, as well as an understanding of family, peers, gender, sexual identity, and the self.

Two striking outcomes of the *Girls Speak Out: Teens Before Their Time* and SmartGirl.com research are worthy of consideration and further study. First, for girls today, **the three areas of child development are not working in sync!**

Cognitive and physical development have accelerated, while emotional development often has not. The imbalance has led to stress and tension in 8- to 12-year-old girls that were not formerly present. For example, while girls may know facts about sex and may even be physically mature, they may not fully understand what it means to be in an intimate relationship.

“If you get together with a boy too soon, you have to get married, have a baby and then you can’t go to school.”
(5th grade, *Girls Speak Out*)



“She is wearing those tight crop tops so the boys like her.”
(4th grade, *Girls Speak Out*)

The second, and equally important finding is the enthusiasm and relief girls in this age range express at having the opportunity to discuss their worries and concerns. They were generally open, willing, and relieved to share their thoughts with researchers. They want and in many ways need to speak out about their issues, and the focus groups and online survey provided a welcome forum for them to do so.

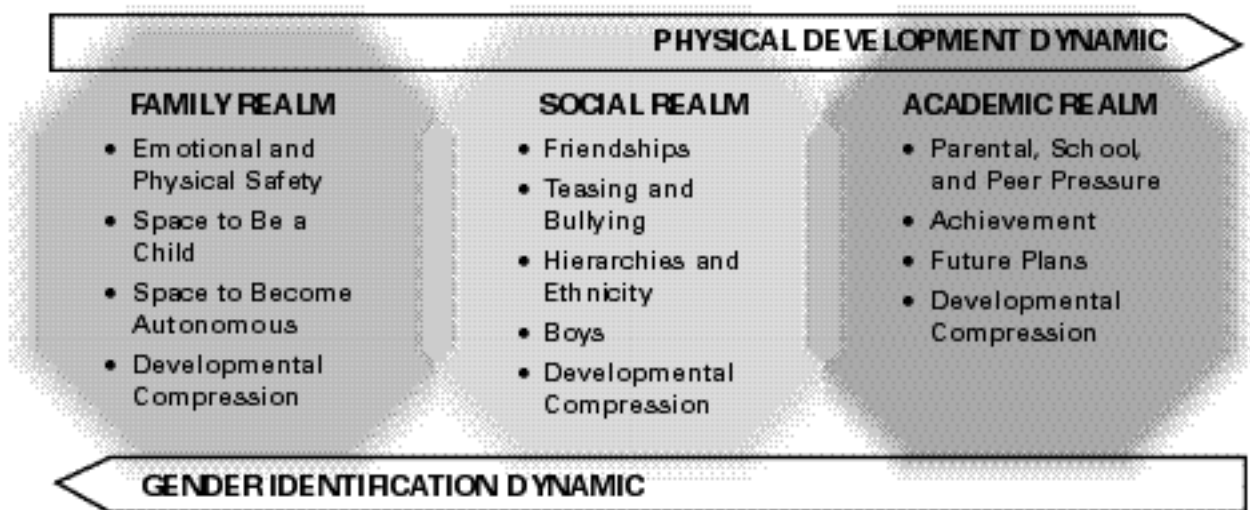
One major implication of these two outcomes should not be ignored. Many girls told researchers that their parents would be unwilling to listen to certain questions if they felt the girls were too young to be asking them. However, this study shows that **girls are facing accelerated concerns that will not go away until they are addressed.** As they undergo more rapid changes, they need family support more than ever as a source of emotional and physical safety. Leaving questions about sexuality, boys, and physical development unanswered has the potential to create negative outcomes for these girls. They may look to less reliable sources and gather misinformation. They may believe that parental resistance to talk means that the topics are evidence of “wrongs” the girls have committed. Or they may believe that asking these questions will lead their parents to trust them less in the future. Such misinterpretations will only increase already stressful situations.



The Inner Lives of Preteen Girls

On what do 8- to 12-year-old girls focus? The research found that their attention and most serious concerns centered in three major realms: **family, school, and social**. In addition, two major dynamics move across and influence all three realms: **gender identification** and **physical development**. The figure below represents the interaction of these realms and dynamics.

THE INNER LIVES OF 8-12-YEAR-OLD GIRLS: REALMS AND DYNAMICS



The Family Realm

The key realm in the lives of young girls is the family. Unlike teens, 8- to 12-year-olds are not yet separating from the family. On the contrary, they seek consistent, reliable, and practical support from family members, especially emotional support.



“Families are important because we are juveniles and we need someone to take care of us.”

(6th grade, Girls Speak Out)

“You need them for love and someone to tell you about what to expect of life.”

(4th grade, Girls Speak Out)

The online survey with SmartGirl.com asked girls whom they go to when they have a problem or need advice. They were asked to check all responses that apply. Among girls ages 8-12, the critical importance of family members is indicated in the table below:

WHO DO GIRLS GO TO FOR ADVICE ?			
SEEK ADVICE FROM	8- 9 YEAR OLDS	10 -12 YEAR OLDS	8-12 YEAR OLDS
Total Number	284	798	1,082
Mom	91%	75%	79%
Friend(s)	57%	77%	72%
Dad	55%	36%	41%
Teacher	46%	22%	28%
Sister	19%	21%	20%
Brother	16%	11%	12%
Other Relatives	36%	27%	29%

Source: SmartGirl.com national online survey, December 1999–January 2000

In viewing the preceding table, it is interesting to note that:

- 91% of girls ages 8-9 go to their mothers for advice, and only 57% go to their friends; by ages 10-12, they are seeking the advice from friends (77%) as much as, and sometimes more than, from their mothers (75%). However, overall, mothers are still extremely important confidantes for girls ages 8-12 (79%).
- Girls ages 8-12 sought the advice of other adult relatives (29%) more than they did advice from their siblings.
- Though girls ages 8-12 are going through an intensely personal and “female” transition stage, they also rely on advice from their fathers (41%) and their teachers (28%), but not nearly as much as they do from their mothers and friends.
- Girls ages 10-12 seek advice from others (except friends and sisters) less than 8- to 9-year-olds.

The Girls Speak Out: Teens Before Their Time study also reveals that just as young girls are confronted with difficult “teen” issues like dating and sex at an increasingly early age, they are learning that their family confidantes are often unwilling or unable to discuss such issues. Since these girls have depended upon their family confidantes as their most valuable support systems for all other issues, the inaccessibility of these confidantes at this time is a great source of stress.



“All they say is I’m too young and I shouldn’t even think about stuff like that until I’m 16. But I do think about boys anyway.”

(5th grade, *Girls Speak Out*)

“She (my mother) yelled at me when I told her I liked a boy. She says I’m too young for that and I shouldn’t be thinking about boys.”

(4th grade, *Girls Speak Out*)

The SmartGirl.com online survey responses support the findings regarding the importance of family to girls ages 8-12 cited in the *Girls Speak Out: Teens Before Their Time* study. As shown below, nearly two-thirds of 8- to 12-year-olds report that their families are extremely important to them.

HOW IMPORTANT IS YOUR FAMILY TO YOU?			
FAMILY IMPORTANCE	8-9 YEAR OLDS	10-12 YEAR OLDS	8-12 YEAR OLDS
Total Number	284	798	1,082
Extremely Important	73%	62%	65%
Pretty Important	18%	26%	24%
Somewhat Important	2%	5%	4%
Not really Important	1%	2%	2%
No Answer	6%	5%	5%

Source: SmartGirl.com national online survey, December 1999 - January 2000

While 8- to 12-year-old girls, and particularly those 8-9 (73%), may dress like teens, talk like teens, and mature physically like teens, they appear to have strong ties to their families and a need for that support.



The Social Realm

This is a broad area, including best friends, peer groups, and boys. Some interesting findings of the *Girls Speak Out: Teens Before Their Time* study concerning the social realm are summarized here:

- **Girls speak about needing to navigate peer group hierarchies in which the “cool” kids, distinguished in this study by their appearances, material possessions, sexual maturation, and sexual posturing, dominated. Status and popularity, in these girls’ opinions, require the ability to attract boys with looks and expensive clothing—along with a certain degree of emotional callousness.**



“I moved up the popularity food chain after I got new clothes.”

(5th grade, Girls Speak Out)

“Popular kids are trying to grow up real fast. They’re into getting boobs and wearing make-up.”

(7th grade, Girls Speak Out)

- While teens count on friends for advice, girls at this age find that their peers have limited knowledge and experience. A best friend can offer reassurance, but rarely a solution.

“Sometimes I can talk to my friends about my problems but they are, like, always silly.” (4th grade, Girls Speak Out)

- “Excluded” girls face the anxiety of being outside groups with which they would like to identify.

“It’s hard to go into a group that’s been around for years.”

(5th grade, Girls Speak Out)



- Girls report both overt and subtly nuanced hierarchies of racial, ethnic, cultural, and social discrimination. These issues have the potential to impact self-image.

“They make fun of us because we’re different. They make racial comments.”

(6th grade, Girls Speak Out)

- Girls in the study associate teasing and bullying with boys. Specifically, the most hurtful dimension of teasing for the girls seems to be appearance-based.

“Some boys rate my body and my face and make fun of my eyes and the color of my skin.” (4th grade, Girls Speak Out)

- Girls describe boys as very different from girls; they call them unreliable as friends, and note that their physical presence, their attitudes, and their behaviors are all incomprehensible.

“Boys don’t understand what girls do. Girls understand almost everything about you.” (4th grade, Girls Speak Out)

- Misinformation about sexuality from the media, advertising and marketing, friends, or even their families is a problem among girls in this age group.

“Sex equals pregnancy.” (8th grade, Girls Speak Out)

“Boys are gaga over girls with breasts.” (4th grade, Girls Speak Out)

- Girls express extreme anxiety about relationships with boys. They also envision themselves as victims within those relationships.

“Sometimes it’s hard being a girl because every day girls are getting abused.” (5th grade, Girls Speak Out)

“Boys might touch you where they’re not supposed to.” (6th grade, Girls Speak Out)

These attitudes and concerns are supported by the responses in the SmartGirl.com online survey when girls were asked, “At what age is it appropriate for a girl to have her first romantic relationship?” The 8- to 12-year-old respondents place this possibility ahead of them into the teen years. See the table below for a view of their responses.

THE APPROPRIATE AGE FOR THE FIRST ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP

APPROPRIATE AGE	8-9 YEAR OLDS	10-12 YEAR OLDS	8-12 YEAR-OLDS
Total Number	284	798	1,082
6-7	2%	0%	1%
8-9	2%	1%	1%
10-11	3%	8%	7%
12-13	7%	23%	19%
14-15	11%	23%	20%
16-17	24%	19%	20%
18-19	19%	9%	12%
20+	17%	9%	12%
No Answer	15%	7%	9%

Source: SmartGirl.com national online survey, December 1999–January 2000

The clustering of responses in the ages 12 and above categories makes it relatively clear that girls ages 8–12 generally do not wish to accelerate their first romantic relationship any more than is necessary. However, girls ages 10–12 did choose a lower appropriate age for their first romantic relationship than 8- to 9-year-old girls. The difference indicates that as girls get older, they lower the age limit that is suitable for their first romantic relationship.

The Academic Realm

Society values school achievement. Parents, teachers, and the girls themselves aim for rigorous goals and performance, often as predictors of successful futures. For the 8- to 12-year-old girls interviewed in the focus groups, school is primarily an arena for socializing and secondarily an opportunity for academic development. Many girls describe their school performance as important to self-identity. When expectations don't meet outcomes, or, sometimes, even when they do, girls report that they experience stress.

`“I worry that I won't get good grades. And if I don't, my mom says I'm not trying my hardest.”`
`(5th grade, Girls Speak Out)`



`“They spank us if we get all P's. Fail. Fail. Fail.”`
`(6th grade, Girls Speak Out)`

Despite the stress and tension, the good news is:

- Many girls seem to understand that parental concern is an expression of support.
- Girls generally feel capable of managing the academic realm.
- The girls have aspirations of their own, particularly for college study and careers.

`“I'm going to college no matter what. No one in my family finished college. I want to be different than my family. I want to make a difference in my life.”`
`(5th grade, Girls Speak Out)`

The girls seem to see school as directly related to their futures. As a result, academics empower girls to believe that they have some control over their adult lives. In the SmartGirl.com online survey, the aspirations of 8- to 12-year-old girls are as follows:

WHAT WILL YOU DO AFTER HIGH SCHOOL ?			
FUTURE	8-9 YEAR OLDS	10-12 YEAR OLDS	8-12 YEAR OLDS
Total Number	284	798	1,082
College	90%	94%	93%
Career	73%	77%	76%
Marriage	63%	69%	67%
Have Children	59%	64%	63%
City Living	32%	37%	36%
Small Town Living	31%	28%	29%
Not Work	4%	3%	3%

Source: SmartGirl.com national online survey, December 1999–January 2000

Highlights worthy of note in the table above are:

- **A high percentage of girls ages 8–12 aspire to a college education (93%).**
- **A high percentage of girls 8–12 aspire to careers (76%).**
- **The desire among girls ages 8–12 for careers appears to exceed the desire to marry (67%) and have children (63%).**
- **These aspirations show relative constancy throughout the 8- to 12-year-old age span.**

The Dynamics Of Gender Identification and Physical Development

The Girls Speak Out: Teens Before Their Time study found two dynamics, *gender identification and physical development*, cutting across all three realms, and presenting issues in all three.

Gender Identity Dynamics

In the *Girls Speak Out: Teens Before Their Time* study, it was found that girls ages 8–12 are beginning to define what being female means to them. They tend to sort the definition into issues of *behavior* and *appearance*.

- “Girl behavior” is generally defined as being “nice” and being responsible.
- Being “nice” consists of behaviors that are somewhat placid and pleasing to others.

“Not sassy, but not dull.”

(5th grade, *Girls Speak Out*)

- Girls speak of their own responsibilities at home, often in contrast to the absence of responsibilities in the lives of boys. They seem glad not to be in the “lazy” category of boys who do not help at all with household chores.

“Boys don’t have to help in the house.”

(3rd grade, *Girls Speak Out*)

- Girls place great importance on their appearance. They are affected by their own and others’ perceptions.

“Being nice is being pretty.”

(3rd grade, *Girls Speak Out*)

“Well, it’s like if you’re cute and everything, people just like you better.”

(3rd grade, *Girls Speak Out*)

These girls accept being girls, know how they are “supposed” to behave and look, and, generally, are comfortable with these expectations. However, they feel anxious about gender issues that one would expect to arise in the lives of teenagers, not girls ages 8–12. Understanding their gender requires management of the complicated expectations of being a young girl versus being an older teenager. Girls in this age range not only lack the emotional ability to deal with these issues, but also often do not understand them either.

“Sometimes I feel ugly. I wonder if I should use makeup.”

(4th grade, *Girls Speak Out*)

“The perfect girl is stylish, very pretty and acts nice. Everybody likes her.”

(3rd grade, *Girls Speak Out*)



- Weight is of particular concern. Girls as young as eight speak about dieting and watching calories.

"I want to be thinner."

(4th grade, Girls Speak Out)

"Being Britney Spears would be nice because you could wear a bikini without a big fat tummy sticking out all over the place."

(3rd grade, Girls Speak Out)

"I've been counting calories. I'm doing 1,000-1,200 calories a day."

(5th grade, Girls Speak Out)

Girls in this age range consider images of women and older teens as models for themselves when they physically may not have the ability to resemble such images. Girls feel the stress of not being able to meet their own expectations of what society wants them to be, leading them to seek "adult" ways to change or "improve" their appearances. They may feel content with their definition of a pretty girl, but their misunderstanding of trying to be a pretty, mature female unsettles them. In response to the statement, "I like the way I look," 75% of 3rd graders agree, while 65% of 4th and 5th graders agree. Only 56% of 7th graders agree. (Source: *Girls Speak Out: Teens Before Their Time*).

This decline in self-approval as the girls approach the teen years is worthy of serious concern.

Physical Development Dynamics

The girls in the *Girls Speak Out: Teens Before Their Time* study react to physical development as yet one more pressure to become more like teenagers and to give up girlhood before they are ready for that transition.

"What happens? What changes? How does it feel?"

(3rd grade, Girls Speak Out)

"I'm scared of my breasts getting too big too young."

(4th grade, Girls Speak Out)

- Though many are menstruating and reaching puberty earlier than their mothers had, they are afraid of puberty's onset, especially of the sexual issues associated with it.

"I feel disgusted because when people get changes in their body, people look at you funny and then you go home crying."

(5th grade, Girls Speak Out)

- Questions left unanswered by significant adults in their lives leave physical development and sexuality a mystery and another source of anxiety. The (mis)information they have is frightening them.

“I’m nervous because I don’t know what is going to happen.”
(5th grade, Girls Speak Out)

- The majority of the girls speak of sports and dance with great enthusiasm; these physical activities appear to be central in their lives.

Researchers also learned that girls feel a real need for an environment that provides accurate and appropriate information concerning changes that are about to happen to them. Unfortunately, they do not perceive that this environment exists; they do not perceive parents, health classes, or the Internet to be reliable. As a result, they often see images in the media and pop culture as informative and aspirational, yet not reflective of their own experiences.

Conclusions/Implications

The pervasive finding of *Girls Speak Out: Teens Before Their Time* is that stress and anxiety reign when the pressure to grow up fast conflicts with a girl's inability to cope with "teenage" feelings. *Physically*, girls' bodies are maturing earlier than ever before. *Cognitively* they are acquiring information about the world at an accelerated pace due to environmental influences like traditional media and new media. Since they appear older, society, peer and family expectations, as well as their own inquisitiveness lead them to adopt "matching" teenage *social* behaviors. The dilemma is that these same girls do not have the *emotional* maturity, nor do they have the information, to match their accelerated aspirations and expectations. That's when the stress sets in.

Girls feel pressured to behave more like "teens" than young girls, even though they don't quite understand what that means and are not emotionally ready for this change. This pressure is evidenced by anxiety about relationships with peers, relationships with boys, physical maturation, and family relationships. These girls want and *need* to speak out. They would be very grateful, they say, if they could speak about these issues in supportive and understanding environments that contain adults who will listen and help them get answers to personal questions. They want accurate, detailed, and appropriate information, and want to be able to rely on their mothers and other family members as confidantes because they are still strongly attached to their families at this age. It is important that family members acknowledge the phenomenon of developmental compression; at the same time, they should not prevent the girls from growing up.

The information explored in these studies is intended to be shared and used to educate all people who live with and work with girls, including parents or caregivers, teachers, and youth-serving organizations. It is our hope that sharing this information with the girls themselves may help them to know that they belong to a community of peers who face similar worries and concerns. For those family members who live with girls and those people who work with girls, this information should assist them in understanding and addressing the struggles of girls growing up today.

