

# Have girls gone wild?

Sharon Lamb reviews the themes that really matter when teenage girls present for therapy with issues around sex and sexual identity – the myths we should avoid and the questions we might helpfully ask

Teenage girls and sexuality is an incredibly hot topic. Every year, at least one major news magazine chooses this topic as its front-page story and several TV news magazines 'investigate' new trends in this area. Perhaps this is why it's so important to keep talking about real girls and sex, the real girls that counsellors listen to, real girls struggling with real problems about sex and sexual identity in a culture that seems to overvalue them for their sexiness in the teen years.

## Myths and stereotypes

This article will talk about some of the more common themes we psychotherapists see in therapy when working with adolescent girls: girls 'gone wild'; the girls who submit to powerful boyfriends; girls with disabilities; and girls questioning their sexual identity. At the outset, it's important to try to describe what might be 'normal' sexuality for the teenage girl. Then it's important to acknowledge that we have no good definitions of such. We know that sex and sexuality is constructed differently in different cultures and across time, and that the norms of one culture may be unacceptable and shocking to another. What psychological theory tells us is that all human beings have the capacity for sexual pleasure. Human beings both desire and seek to be desired and this seems an essential aspect of sexuality. Sex can be for procreation, for pleasure and for intimacy. It can also be used to harm and exert power over another person. (There are so many good resources about sexual abuse and rape in adolescence that I won't talk about these in this article.)

### Raging hormones?

We also know that sexual interest is present in some form or other from birth onwards, even if heightened sexual interest occurs at adolescence. The overblown description of randy adolescents and their 'raging hormones' is one of the myths and prejudices therapists need to confront when trying to understand 'normative' sexuality in teens.

Although we know that children have sexual interest, explore, and play sexual games<sup>1,2,3</sup>, most of the general public believes that an 'onslaught' of hormones occurs at adolescence and that this 'power surge' begins sexual development. Such fiercely biological explanations of sexual development most likely reflect Western culture's current inclination to explain much of psychology through biology. Biology makes a contribution for sure, and yet culture, as in all things, shapes biological

gives and helps us to make meaning of the biology – which also shapes the experiencing of biological changes'. A discourse about biological urges at adolescence in some ways excuses teens from responsibility. When hormones 'rage', as this myth tells us they do, teens are out of control and so must be controlled.

Belief in this myth can cause several problems in psychotherapy.

- Therapists may miss asking about a slew of other sexual experiences that occurred earlier in life, and which may have had enormous influence on the sexual person this adolescent is becoming.
- Therapists may also convey to a teen that he or she will have a difficult time controlling sexual urges.
- Therapists may also convey that preoccupation with sex is normative, which is fine for those teens who may be preoccupied with sex, but may make others feel left behind.

My hunch about one of the reasons why a few psychotherapists love to see teens as bundles of raging hormones is that they enjoy that image, vicariously re-living a fantasised adolescence they most likely never had. In so doing, however, they can overlook the vulnerability and confusion that pervades adolescence as teens think about themselves as sexual people and begin to make choices to act on their feelings.

So, one of the first things that psychotherapists must think about when treating adolescents and adolescent girls is to question their own thinking about teen sex and shrug off any wish to vicariously experience an exuberant sexuality that they might imagine. They must also shrug off a general feeling that sex equals danger and examine whether or not there are stories to tell from childhood that may or may not have an influence on the sexual development of the adolescent in front of them.

### All girls are interested in sex?

Another stereotype that is supported by the media and which follows the 'raging hormones' myth is that every teenage girl a therapist sees is interested in sex. Just like adults, teens come to us with varying interests and experiences with regard to sex, so much so that it's wrong to assume any 'normality' in this regard. Is a girl who goes through high school without much thought of sex a 'late bloomer'? She could be. She could also be someone who is anxious about sex and suppressing thoughts about it. She could also be a person who has blossomed but

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simply hasn't thought about it much in terms of her own life and activities. Too busy for that. And when we hear about 45 per cent<sup>5</sup> of girls masturbating, and 55 per cent of teenage girls having sex, and 55 per cent of girls performing or receiving oral sex, we have to also think about the rest: the 55 per cent of girls who haven't masturbated, 45 per cent who haven't had sex (defined as intercourse), and 45 per cent who haven't performed oral sex<sup>6,7</sup>.

### Hetero equals normal?

Finally, we all must check ourselves against heterosexual notions of normativity. For example, asking teenagers about sexual interest rather than asking a girl if she is interested in boys or has a boyfriend indicates an openness to hear about all sexual interests, and we know that sexual interest in the teen years can be quite diverse. It can be a big deal for a teenage girl to come out to a therapist or to speak about her questioning her sexuality, and so literature in the waiting room can also indicate that a therapist, whether heterosexually identified or not, is open to discussing sexuality.

And while we are checking ourselves for signs of homophobia and myths about raging hormones, we might also take a look at the TV, music videos, and movies that adolescents are watching today. Here, we'll see a model for teen girl sexuality – the girl 'gone wild'. She's different from the bad girl of yesteryear who suffered for her sexual indiscretions. She's a bit of a role model I'd like to explore here.

### Girls gone wild

Even though teenage girls gone wild may to some extent be a media invention, the media has an effect on how girls see themselves. In fact, in the US, where sex education has generally been severely curbed to teach primarily about abstinence and diseases, a teen girl's major source of sex knowledge might come from the media. The media tells girls that sexy is powerful. In fact, there's been a co-opting of the phrase 'girl power' by marketers and media to mean the power to attract male attention, and, sometimes, the power to 'do' sex as a 'player' would. This 'player' mentality often translates to using people and proving oneself through meaningless and daring sex. The reason this behaviour feels powerful or attracts girls as a means to power is because it's identified with a stereotypical male sexuality, a sexuality that means having the freedom and power to just be about oneself and pleasure, to get notches on one's belt in terms of how many people one has 'done', and to affect a casual attitude about sex.

One advantage to creating such a power persona of sexuality is that girls can feel some sense of accomplishment – in that they can conform to a strip-tease, pole-dancing, girl-gone-wild image fairly easily. Just like in the world of beauty, marketers package a certain image and introduce products

to obtain that image, and, rather than only making girls anxious about achieving a narrow standard of beauty, they also give them some short-lived self-esteem when they can approximate the image through fashion, hair, make-up. If these images only produced anxiety, girls would stop buying glamour magazines and the make-up and fashion they sell. In the same way, conforming to a media image of a sexy object, an object for guys, introducing porn-like moves into one's repertoire and dressing in eye-catching ways is not very difficult – and girls are indeed rewarded with attention when they do. This attention is particularly appealing if it's one of the only ways a girl can get or is getting attention – if she is invisible at home or in the school, or if she feels she lacks talents, accomplishments, or other achievements that might garner a bit of attention or self-esteem for her.

### Disadvantages to the gone-wild image

There are two disadvantages to gaining self-esteem and attention in this way.

- One of these is that when girls are encouraged to invest in this image-based sexuality, they can neglect building their characters and skills in other ways. They live in a world that will teach them that if they can create a pleasing sexual image, this is what they are most valued for. But it's a power that doesn't go much further than attracting attention, and certainly is difficult to take with them into their 30s, 40s and 50s.

- The other disadvantage is that girls who create this persona, and can do the acts and walk the talk, are often quite divorced from their own bodies and pleasure<sup>8,9</sup>. Sometimes it's difficult when a counsellor hears a girl say that giving a blowjob is not sex and not an issue to her. Counsellors may misinterpret this to mean that a girl allows herself to be exploited by a boy. But instead, it's an indication of how sex has become so closely connected for girls with being an object; and thus, in doing something to someone else, they're not feeling sexy, and they're not doing sex.

To be only an object for others is a dissociative act, not an embodied one<sup>8,9</sup>. Time and time again, when presented with a teenage girl in my office who is sexually active and sleeps with a variety of guys, I've discovered that she doesn't have orgasms. She only gets to know her body from the outside, as it is pleasing to boys and men. Over time, I've learned to ask, 'So is sex for you something like a performance?' and 'Is what's exciting to you mostly the pleasing of him?'. Sometimes, just asking opens their eyes to the possibility that sex could mean something more to them.

Another good question is to ask if sex for her is 'intimate'. Does she feel close to the person she has sex with and, if she does, how and why? If she doesn't, have there been moments when she's

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experienced that intimacy? Is that something she wants in a relationship? Why or why not? Might intimacy be something she is running away from? Fran, 19 years old, separated the two kinds of experiences she has had: the sex with hot guys she's hooked up with at parties; and the cozy, teasing little make-out sessions she has had with boys she was interested in. She said she preferred the latter and that, with the former, she has often cried when it was all over. There's an aspect to being a party girl that is defensive, in that the girl who performs well, has fun, plays people and doesn't have expectations of people can't be disappointed. She needs nothing and she convinces herself it doesn't mean anything, sometimes despite her tears.

This is not to say that the 'right' kind of sex or more valuable kind of sex is in relationship with other people. This is to say that, in all human interactions, the best experiences tend to be ones that involve mutuality and some caring, not the ones that involve using someone else for one's own ends or pleasure or status. And in this way, when we encourage 'wild' girls to look for mutuality, even friendship, rather than the old-fashioned notion of romance, we are protecting them, perhaps even more than when we urge them to use contraceptives.



RISE/GETTY

### Absent girls and powerful boyfriends

Teens want to be in charge of their lives. They hate the idea that they might not have enough information or might be too impulsive to actually make good decisions. If girls are drinking or doing drugs and then having sex, they are disconnecting themselves from the decisions they need to make. While it used to be that 'good girls' needed to be swept away<sup>10</sup>, today many girls use drugs and alcohol to absent themselves from the tough decisions they need to make around sex and sexuality.

For as much as a teen will argue with her parents about her being in charge of her own life and old enough to make her own decisions, it's quite ironic how frequently the same girl will yield all power to a boyfriend.

### Absenting oneself from making choices

Lydia, for example, was 15 when a cool boy at school – Ryan – took an interest in her. She was shocked and impressed that she could be attractive to him. He never treated her very well, but it seemed, when she discussed him and their relationship in therapy, that it never occurred to her that she could *not* be with him – simply because he had chosen her. She absented herself from the choice to be his girlfriend, and every day after school, when they went to his home and secluded themselves in his bedroom, they had sex.

It's so difficult for therapists to ask teens about the actual sex they have – most would prefer to just acknowledge that there is sex and give a brief encouragement to use contraception. But in cases like this one, it's so important for a counsellor to try to get an idea of what's going on. 'Do you like what you do?' could be a question. And 'How exactly does it happen that you end up having sex every day after school?' A therapist might just ask, 'Does he, or did he, ever ask, or did it just happen and then keep happening?' I did ask the last question, and in Lydia's case it just happened, and kept just happening. She said she didn't really enjoy it but it also seemed that she enjoyed that this boy wanted to do it with/to her.

In working over time with Lydia, it became clear that this boy was mean to her, calling her names and teasing her about her looks. He also started demanding sex when she tried to avoid it. Asking her 'What would happen if you ever said no or that you didn't feel like it that day?' produced a very good conversation. She replied that he'd do it anyway or break up with her. She wanted to stay with him, she wanted a boyfriend it turned out, and she wanted it to be a boy as cool as Ryan, but she also wanted him to be a different kind of a person.

The work in situations like this is difficult because a therapist doesn't want to turn into the parental voice of authority, for this might encourage dishonesty in the therapy session, or guilt. In fact, work with adolescents always involves issues of

autonomy. Thus in sexual situations, the teen's issues about voice, independence and choice as well as issues regarding longing to be with someone, as well as to give oneself over to someone else, are paramount. A therapist can't just tell a teen to develop a voice, to speak up, to make better choices. Instead, the whole of the work has to be around voice and choice and begin with helping her to identify what she might want from a partner, from sex. She can then address what she doesn't like and what she isn't getting. This internal voice shows the presence of a self and needs to be there before she will be ready to take some action on behalf of herself.

### Exchanging desires for popularity

Another client I worked with was 'made over' by an older male friend, who then introduced her to a partying high school life, teaching her to 'play' people. She became popular, but rather than this Pygmalion falling in love with the woman he created, he started an arrangement where, whenever either of them wanted to have sex, the other had to oblige, no strings attached. Francesca felt that she had to abide by these rules because without him she 'would have been nothing'. Before she had a soul or a self to sell, she made a little girl's pact with the devil, exchanging her own desires and needs and a healthy sexual development for popularity.

These girls who hook onto powerful boyfriends are not only enacting a very female role with regard to their sexuality, allowing men or boys to lead them and developing their sexuality in relation to his needs, but they are also enacting an adolescent role. Adolescents are indeed ambivalent about asserting their independence. Because of this, working with a girl to help her develop autonomy in many aspects of her life can then affect her relationship with her boyfriend. Most importantly, the therapist's reflection of her nascent self paves the way for her seeing her relationship with him as a choice. This reflection is done through actual verbal reflections or interpretations of what the therapist believes she is really feeling or thinking, and through repeated questions about the girl's own desires which address her as an agent, a subject rather than an object.

### Sexuality and homophobia

The above examples have focused on heterosexual relationships, and that may very well be particular to my practice or it may indicate that some of the more problematic sexual concerns brought into psychotherapy by adolescents occur in heterosexual contexts. On the other hand, one somewhat common concern of teens is whether some experience, fantasy or thought proves that they are gay. Sexual confusion may even be normative for adolescence<sup>11</sup>.

Same-sex attraction is bound to occur as girls experiment with different forms of intimacy. The term 'man crush' seems also to be a way that a

heterosexual adolescent boy can acknowledge admiration without facing the stigma of a non-heterosexual identity. Although society has fewer stigmas attached to same-sex sex or teens identifying as gay, they still exist, and the homophobia that exists may be a little harder to detect. Most therapists provide a nonjudgmental space in which a teen can explore these feelings, but few will also go on to help a teen explore her homophobia or the homophobia she has picked up on from the world around her. When politics and sexuality are so entwined, there may be pressure on a girl to label herself or claim an identity rather than going with the flow of developing sexuality. Sometimes the label is a freeing act, but other times it might feel like a secret burden that isolates a girl from her family and community. A therapist needs to not only explore the meaning of the label but also help a girl stay connected to her friends and family even if she is questioning or not out to them yet.

### Disability and disadvantage

To see girls as uniquely disadvantaged in the world of teen sex is to support a worldview of females as the weaker sex, as easily harmed, as always a potential victim. While it is true that females are at greater risk for rape, and at greater risk for objectification/sexualisation – all acts that turn them into passive objects – they are also sexual agents, with desires, creating their own identity narratives around their sexual development. In *Sex, therapy and kids*<sup>5</sup>, I took some time to consider, with psychotherapist Stannard Baker, a particularly vulnerable kind of girl, one who is developmentally disabled (DD). Believing as Stan does that developmentally disabled teens also need freedom to find their sexuality, to experience pleasure, and to seek intimacy, I thought it important to include a whole chapter on this group in my book.

What makes DD teen girls so vulnerable to sexual exploitation is that they are very lonely. We live in a culture that isolates DD persons from the rest of us, and teens in particular can become quite starved for attention while at the same time curious and interested in all the sexual material they see in the world around them. Just as non DD girls might confuse sexual interest with a boy's wish to be in a relationship with them, this can be more than a hope for a DD girl; it can be a misreading of a situation based on the disability. It is important to provide sex education to DD teens and to include social skills training regarding talking about sex, saying no and saying yes, consent and mutuality. And, in some ways, it's important to do this separate from their families. Although a DD teenage girl may need to rely on her family in more ways than another teen girl does, her desire for independence may be just as strong.

What we apply to the DD teen girl really sets the example for all girls in terms of exploitation. We

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ought never to see the risk as so great that we forget about the joy, delight, intimacy and fun that also may await them as they become sexual people.

### Boys are vulnerable too

One final thought with regard to teen sex in general. Boys too come to their sexual development with all sorts of preconceptions about how boys should be and act. While we worry about the 'epidemic' of girls performing oral sex on boys, why is there no concomitant worry about what this means to teen boys and their developing sexuality? We picture 'players', selfishly out there for sex, with little interest in intimacy or real people, with little anxiety about their looks, their performance, with little concern about the sometimes awkwardness of sex. In some make-believe world where girls are always victims and boys are always offenders, the public thinks this may be another example of boys ruling over girls. But girls may be offering up a version of sex and themselves to boys that plays into what boys believe they should be – and all pre-packaged versions of teen sexuality should be addressed.

### Concluding remarks

If there's one thought to leave with counsellors in regard to working with adolescent girls who bring in sexual concerns, it is to remember the context. Girls live in a media/marketing-saturated environment that encourages earlier and earlier self-sexualisation<sup>12</sup>, a sexualisation that we know is associated with depressive symptoms, eating disorders, diminished sexual health and lower self-esteem<sup>13</sup>. The world around them also is responding to this environment with greater sexism and attitudes that sexually objectify women<sup>14,15</sup>. Sexual harassment by boys is a regular part of school life<sup>16</sup>. Many girls have also experienced sexual abuse and the trauma associated with it in their early years. The statistics regarding sexual abuse, rape and harassment are shocking, but we don't want to endorse a 'sex is dangerous' approach. Instead, the exploration of a healthy sexuality particular to the girl, her culture and her personal experience seems a must for the counsellor working with girls in her practice. ■

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