

Girls today are doing great, and he can prove it

By Gail Rosenblum, Star Tribune

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How are our girls? Would you believe never better?

Mike Males believes it, and he's preaching that message to anybody willing to listen. All he needs now is a strong set of fins to propel him upstream. That's because Males, a sociologist, author and senior researcher for the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice in San Francisco, says popular culture prefers to keep tweener and teen girls in familiar boxes labeled vulnerable, shallow, mean, violent and depressed.

"Girls are doing spectacularly well," said Males, who spoke to a packed house this month at a lecture sponsored by the University of Minnesota's Konopka Institute for Best Practices in Adolescent Health. The event, which brought together social workers, public health and safety officials, teachers and others who work with girls, was held at the Wellstone Center in St. Paul.

Males admits to being a provocateur and has a penchant for using more exclamation points on his youthfacts.org website than you'll find in a 12-year-old girl's diary: "Teen beating videos!" "Enough MySpace!" "The children! The children!"

But he's also a dedicated researcher who has the children's best interests at heart. "I can't tell you how disturbed I am that commentators continue to spread unwarranted alarms about girls that are simply unfounded, and the negative impact this has on both the image of and policies directed at girls," he says.

He doesn't dismiss the challenges, whether eating disorders, substance abuse, bullying or pornography. "But these problems exist throughout adult society, as well," he said. "To generalize these problems to all girls is simply wrong."

Drawing on decades of research from agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institutes of Health and the FBI, along with long-term surveys of youth behavior, Males said American culture is, well, myth-taken about girls in a number of ways.

Violent deaths of girls aren't up; they dropped by one-third between 1976 and 2005, as did pregnancy rates. Girls are experiencing the lowest levels of depression today yet recorded, and they are far less likely to be taking medication for depression than in the 1970s. College enrollment is up, up, up, with young women now earning half of the physics, business, law and medical degrees.

Even Internet predators are "another phony panic," Males said, pointing to 2000 and 2005 data conducted by the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. The study of 3,000 Internet users between the ages of 10 and 17, and more than 600 interviews with federal, state and local law enforcement officials, found no concrete evidence that increased visibility puts most teens at greater risk. "The Internet provides a buffer between predators and youths that doesn't exist in physical society," Males argues.

He also pulls out Bureau of Justice Statistics charts revealing that teen dating violence has been declining sharply for more than a decade.

So, in the words of the 10-year-old in my house who spends recess playing football with the boys: "What the heck?"

Why such a discrepancy between belief and reality?

Males says it could be because of racial stereotyping, (these shifts are occurring amid unprecedented racial diversity in this country); or sexism (we seem more comfortable with the idea of girls being "innately vulnerable"), or simple data manipulation. A new book, "The Triple Bind: Saving Our Teenage Girls from Today's Pressures," for example, correctly reports that suicide rates among girls ages 10 to 14 increased 76 percent between 2003 and 2004. In real numbers, though, the jump was from 56 to 98 deaths, among nearly 10 million girls of that age group. While not dismissing the profound grief experienced by those families, Males said that "a high-schooler is three times more likely to suffer a parent's suicide than the other way around."

The biggest sin in his mind? Omission. We know the ugliest demon our girls face, Males said. We just don't want to talk about it.

"Violence in the home is the Number 1 cause of injury to females," Males said. "This issue is too important to trivialize, but the media gloss right over it."

Nationwide, more than 100,000 girls were victims of physical or sexual violence in their homes in 2006, with parents or caretakers the usual culprits. In Minneapolis, police received nearly 20,000 domestic-violence-related 911 calls that year, five of them where the attacks were fatal.

The young victims from those homes may likely carry lifelong scars. The only way to buck the trend is to accept that we need to look inward. It's a little like swimming upstream, but Males is willing to try.

"There is no way that I should dictate how an entire generation of girls is doing today," he said. "But we do need to be quite a bit more rigorous about how we conduct our research."

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