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## CHAPTER ONE

# Hopes, Dreams, and Fears

**FROM THE MOMENT** their daughter is born, moms and dads sense the unmistakable call to protect and guide her toward a fulfilling life. Their optimism for this beautiful child almost always shows on their faces—but so, too, does the weight of the task ahead. And the challenges in our increasingly sexualized culture are many, and, in some ways, multiplying. That’s why we have written this book, *Girls Uncovered: New Research on What America’s Sexual Culture Does to Young Women*. We want to guide parents so they in turn can guide their girls safely through the challenges they will face to achieve their potential and enjoy full health, hope, and happiness.

The guidance we’re offering is born out of our own lives, both professionally and personally. We are obstetricians who have delivered hundreds of baby girls. But we have also taken care of these girls as they grew into young women and we have dealt firsthand with the sexual issues they have confronted.

We both have raised or are raising daughters, so we have, like other parents, had to apply what we know with those we love. These are not simple issues for either of us, and we will not be offering the usual bromides and pat answers. We will instead provide you with solid, research-based information in an easily digestible format so that you can help your daughter safely navigate today’s sexual culture.

As doctors and parents with years of experience and research, we’ve concluded that the standards of today’s sexual culture—namely, that

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young women engage in sex with many partners, starting at a relatively young age—simply aren't in young women's best interests. The new sexual norms for young people don't lead to the outcomes that young women consistently say they want, as measured by virtually any indicator of health and well-being. We want to sound

the alarm, not in order to limit young women's sexual lives and futures, but in order to enhance them—indeed, to rescue them.

Sometimes it seems as if your daughter doesn't want to be rescued—but she does. Most parents wonder at times whether their children are bothering to listen to them at all. It takes a lot of patience, skill, and forgiveness to communicate with an adolescent. Is all the effort worth it? When you're faithfully attempting to pass on your hard-won wisdom, your child may respond with an infuriating look that says, "I know all this, I don't like your telling me this now, and I don't ever want to hear it again."

Your effort is worth it, but communicating with your daughter is hard work. It takes time. And it will come as no surprise that none of us has enough time these days, and we all have a thousand excuses why we can't take the time to hang out with our children or why a meaningful conversation can wait until tomorrow. We've all been there. It is reassuring to know our failure to be at one important recital or ball game will not send our daughters down the wrong road. But the fact is, if we don't purposefully, intentionally spend time with a daughter now, if we don't build into her a commitment to connect into our family life, the fulfilled woman we desire to see in a few short years may never emerge.

And just on a practical level, time spent with your daughter now may help you avoid even greater expenditures of time and money later—on unhappy items such as family counseling, drug or alcohol rehab, health problems, and so on. An old commercial for automobile air filters featured a repair man saying, "You can pay me now, or pay me later." When it comes to safeguarding the well-being of our daughters, it's much wiser to pay a little bit now rather than a lot later.

But of course time and money are the least important reasons to connect with our daughters. We want to see our precious daughters flourish. Most Americans can agree at least on the basics of what that flourishing looks like. Pollster Frank Luntz points out that 54 percent of Americans

say that having a loving family is highly important. Also highly important to us are good health (50 percent), financial security (43 percent), and happiness (33 percent).<sup>1</sup> All this doesn't just happen. We must help build into our daughters the habits that can facilitate this good future.

So you want your daughter to be a grounded person and to discover "who she is," not who pop culture tells her she should be. Trends or peers often offer only a shallow or even counterfeit picture of reality and what type of person she should become. A girl who grows up without sound guidance is vulnerable to making poor decisions and setting unworthy goals.

You, however, can have a dramatic impact on your daughter's future—really. Scientific surveys clearly reveal that more girls say their parents influence their behavior than girls say peers, media, or any other sources are influencing their lives. This parental guidance is vital if we want a child to grow into a successful and fulfilled person. By the way, talking the talk is not nearly enough; we must also walk the walk. Our actions must match our words. Young people seem to have a sixth sense for detecting hypocrisy. It is almost no use urging our daughters to live healthy lives if we are not willing to pursue healthy habits ourselves.

A major study of college women highlights this fact. Norval Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt, in *Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right: College Women on Dating and Mating Today*, interview women from intact families and report: "Several women reported that they learned about guys and relationships not so much by talking with their parents, but by observing them. One woman said her ideas come 'probably mostly from my parents and seeing the way my dad treats my mom.'"<sup>2</sup>

Parents with children who are about to become teenagers know that it is a scary time. They hear of teenagers in other families involved in drugs, binge drinking, and promiscuity. They hear of unplanned pregnancies. They hear of unhappy girls who are wasting their time, led astray by peers. They rightly worry about all these things.

In our offices, both of us have seen the unhappy result of these behavior choices hundreds of times. Joe treated a twenty-one-year-old woman who had been engaging in sex since she was fourteen. She had had eight to ten "partners" by this time and was coming in with a severe gynecologic problem that was a result of her sexual encounters. Through the years many other young women with similar stories followed this young woman through his office with difficult problems needing treatment from multiple sexual contacts. Freda saw a fourteen-year-old girl who had been

sexually active since age twelve with a total of fourteen boys. But the girl said this behavior was okay because, “I only have sex with my boyfriend.”

But we want to encourage you. This is a book of hope. Many parents do not fully understand the sexual culture their daughters face today and how they can help these young women to navigate it well. There are things you can do *now* to minimize the chances of your daughter making poor choices ahead. You can increase the odds that your child will achieve her potential. What are those things?

The research is very clear. Studies of people who have grown up to be healthy, caring, and responsible adults—the kind of people you want your daughter to become—reveal some fairly specific behaviors their parents engaged in that contributed to the good outcome in their lives.

*Simple things can have an enormous impact for good on our children.*

The Search Institute, which has been studying such people for years, has developed a list of forty “building blocks of healthy development” that it calls “Developmental Assets.” First on the list for every age group is the ability of the family to exhibit high levels of consistent love and support for the children.<sup>3</sup>

Just what such support might look like is laid out in the largest longitudinal study ever done on adolescents—the “National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health,” or just Add Health.<sup>4</sup> Add Health reports that children are more likely to be healthy, happy, and engaged in good behavior (avoiding risky behavior) if their parents are physically present with them at specific times: when they get up, when they come home from school, when they eat dinner, and when they go to bed.<sup>5</sup> This is not rocket science, but it is challenging to “be there” for our children, given the many things that tug at our time and energy.

Researcher Luntz confirms the findings of the Search Institute and the Add Health study. He offers some parental behaviors that can help children develop well. First on his list is having dinner together.<sup>6</sup> Again, simple things can have an enormous impact for good on our children. We will delve into them much more extensively in a later chapter.

While helping your daughter can sometimes seem tiring, you probably have an unexpected ally: your daughter. Despite all the stereotypes about teen rebellion, teens *are* listening.<sup>7</sup> Young people who enjoy a good connection with their parents and communicate well with them are not only less likely to be involved in sex but are less likely to be involved in alcohol and drug abuse, violence, and so on.<sup>8</sup> So even when your daughter

gives you a dumb, stupid, or blank look, just keep talking. You are probably influencing her behavior more than either you or she may realize.

This is *good* news. Parents' desires for their children and their important role in helping those dreams become reality dovetail perfectly with what young women tell researchers they desire for their own lives. These desires of young women include their academic goals, their career goals, their family life goals, and their overall aspirations for life.

Occasionally desires like these are addressed in large, nationwide surveys, as a way of monitoring the development of youth across the United States. One such study, called "Monitoring the Future,"<sup>9</sup> surveys high school seniors about their educational, career, and life aspirations, yielding some interesting insights.

Many high school girls are ambitious. They expect to have a professional career. About one in four say they want a job that requires a doctoral degree, while another 40 percent say that they want to have a professional career, such as nursing or engineering, that does not require a doctoral-level degree. More girls than boys want to have a career as a professional. Only 1.6 percent of girls say they aspire to be a full-time homemaker, though of course there is nothing wrong with this choice. And most girls do not see their careers as temporary, only filling the time until they are married and have children. Some 95 percent of girls say it is quite important or extremely important for them to be successful in their chosen field.

More than 80 percent of teen girls say they would continue to work in their chosen field even if they had enough money to live comfortably. Fewer boys report they would do the same. These results show how driven American girls are about having careers—especially ones that demand large quantities of time and education.

And how do these young women plan to prepare themselves for those jobs? It turns out that these girls take their academic success very seriously. More girls than boys claim they consistently try to do their very best work in school. These girls have high goals for their education and career and are actively laying the groundwork to achieve them.

What about their goals for marriage and family? High school senior girls, it turns out, feel as strongly about succeeding in that part of their life as in their careers. More than 90 percent say that it is important for them to have a good marriage and family life. Only about 5 percent say that they do not want to be married at all. And more than 80 percent say it is likely they will stay married to the same person for life.

What about kids? Most (70 percent) agree that being a mother and raising children is “one of the most fulfilling experiences a woman can have.” Only a very small minority of surveyed girls (around 6 percent) say it is unlikely that they will have children. The most popular answer these girls give for the number of children they want is two, but more than 40 percent want *three or more* children.

Do these success-oriented goals for career and family decline as girls become young women and enter college? You might suspect so, but the evidence shows otherwise. Academic and career goals remain very important. For the 2007–2008 school year, many more women than men were enrolled in graduate school. Women received more master’s degrees and a similar number of doctoral degrees. Additionally, women account for a greater proportion of the increases seen every year in enrollment into graduate schools.<sup>10</sup> In the early 1980s, only about a third of medical school graduates were women. In 2009, about half were.<sup>11</sup>

What about teen girls’ aspirations for family life? One national survey of 1,000 young women in colleges across the US reveals that they retain the family goals they held in high school.<sup>12</sup> More than four out of five say that marriage is an important goal. Almost every young woman (96 percent) agrees that if she does get married, she wants her marriage to last a lifetime. And most (86 percent) *expect* that their marriage will endure. Another large national study asked women aged twenty to twenty-four how many children they expect.<sup>13</sup> Almost half expect to have two children, while almost a quarter foresee having three. Very few say they will have no children at all.

So teen girls and young women have very ambitious plans through high school and college. They expect to perform well in school and to establish themselves in a stable career, all without sacrificing marriage and family life. Thus, parents’ desires for their daughters and daughters’ desires for themselves are very similar.

But what is happening to those dreams? Are girls attaining the goals they have set for themselves? In many cases, the answer is no. The US Department of Education reports that about 6 percent of girls drop out of high school. When the girls are asked why they did so, 28 percent cite pregnancy and 25 percent cite motherhood.<sup>14</sup> When you look at the eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old girls who successfully completed high school, fewer than 50 percent are enrolled in college.<sup>15</sup> Of those who do enroll in a four-year program, about 17 percent drop out within two to three years. “Personal reasons,” cited by more than 60 percent of these girls, is by far

the most common answer given for dropping out of college.<sup>16</sup>

A breast-feeding consultant told Freda that she saw a postpartum mother who was fifteen years old. The teen mother said that she wanted to become an obstetrician-gynecologist. The consultant noted later that this teen didn't seem to have a clue about how much more challenging she had made it for herself to achieve that dream by having a baby at age fifteen.

Why do the dreams of so many young women get crushed? It's true that sometimes dreams die because of unavoidable life events, such as a devastating auto accident. Sometimes unrealistic expectations do the job, such as a person with clumsy hands wanting to be a neurosurgeon. Far too often, however, these dreams fail to come to fruition because of choices that could have been made differently. This is what makes us so sad—and is one of the primary reasons for this book.

One dramatic example of a young woman's dangerous choices comes from the book *Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right*. A young woman says, "I think hooking up with different people and seeing what you like and don't like is a good idea. Because eventually you're going to have to . . . marry someone and I'd just like to know that I experienced everything.' Although it is admirable to take risks and learn from one's mistakes, these women would probably find it difficult to explain how having your heart broken a few or even many times in your early years—or trying to separate sex from feeling, as in hooking up—is good preparation for a trusting and happy marriage later on."<sup>17</sup>

*Your role in helping your daughter reach her goals is critical.*

And of course early hookups and break-ups are *not* good preparation. The divorce rate is frighteningly high. Data we will show later point out that people who have had multiple sexual partners and who cohabit before marriage are more likely to divorce if they do marry. Many unmarried teen and college women are therefore engaging in sexual behavior that may be harming one of their key desires—a lasting marriage.

Your role in helping your daughter avoid such problems and reach her goals is critical. These desires and goals are exciting. They don't just happen, but for girls even to have these thoughts at least gets them started on the right track. Though raising a girl is complicated and sometimes heart-rending, be encouraged. A few core activities you can build into your family life will increase the likelihood that your girl will enter adulthood with a strong foundation that can lead to a truly happy life.



And that strong foundation will reach deep, well below the surface. We're not just talking about developing the positive behaviors that will enable her to reach the goals that you both desire—as good as those behaviors may be. We're talking about inner strength, resolve, and commitment. Interestingly, scientists tell us that your daughter's brain is being molded during these important years, for good or ill. Involved parents are actually positively influencing the physical development of their daughter's brains. Such healthy brain molding will help your daughter to acquire healthy habits for life. While we will discuss this much more later, we simply want to point out that you can do a lot more for your daughter than simply provide her with a veneer of good behavior. What you do can go deep. It can change the very structure of her brain as she grows.

So when that little girl was placed in your arms, you were given a great responsibility. You looked into the eyes of a new and beautiful person with her own unique design and potential. For many of us, however, our joy at such times is mingled with fear. How will this vulnerable person turn out, and how can I protect her?

The gift of a daughter is an exceptional opportunity. In many ways this little one is a blank slate for you to write on. What you write will affect her for the rest of her life. If you write poorly, your daughter may be an incredibly happy and successful person anyway. However, if you write well, you remarkably improve her chances for and may pave the way for her to more easily achieve the happiness, health, and fulfillment both she and you desire. Let's get started on writing well.