

Parenting

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Matters

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For Colorado Parents

Stepfamily basics

*5 common myths shared
by stepfamily newcomers*

Myth #1 - Adjustment to stepfamily life occurs quickly.

People are optimistic and hopeful when they marry or remarry. They look forward to settling down and getting on with being happy. But, because the dynamics of a stepfamily are so complicated, it takes a significant amount of time for people to create positive relationships and develop a family history. Often it takes at least four years.

Myth #2 - Children of divorce and remarriage are forever damaged.

Children go through a painful period of adjustment after a divorce or remarriage. Adults often respond to their children's pain with guilt. Somehow they feel they can "make it up" to them. This can lead to difficulties in responding appropriately to their children's hurt or by failing to set appropriate limits. Although it takes time, most children do emotionally recover. Researchers have found relatively minor differences between children of first-marriage families and those from split families in long-term studies.

Myth #3- Children adjust to divorce and remarriage more easily if either the biological father or mother withdraws.

Children will always adjust better if they have access to both biological

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Raising confident daughters

By Kathryn White

Girls are growing up faster these days. Not only are females physically maturing earlier than ever in history, our daughters are coming of age at the mercy of marketers and the media in a society obsessed with appearance.

Experts say pre-teen and teenage girls have never before been so bombarded with potentially harmful images and pressures. Health experts suggest 95 percent of young girls are incapable of achieving such super-model looks, yet too many torment themselves by trying. The question is—how can parents insulate their daughters from these worldly pressures and nurture

healthy development?

Psychologist Dr. Sylvia Rimm, author of "See Jane Win," urges parents of both girls and boys to lose the obsession with looks that are unrealistic. "If we don't de-emphasize appearance, the girls get the message from the media, and so do the boys," says Rimm. Praise your daughters for their skills and ideas rather than their appearance or neatness.

Parents can greatly impact their daughter's attitudes and performance at both home and school. Here are some strategies proven to promote and foster healthy self-images in girls:

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Navigating girls through puberty

Early maturing females more prone to high-risk behavior

Are you beginning to observe the tell-tale signs of puberty emerge in your preteen? Research findings conducted by psychologists Elizabeth Caufmann and Laurence Steinberg, published in *Developmental Psychology*, can help parents of early-maturing girls steer their daughters away from eating disorders and other high-risk behaviors.

For the 19 million 10-to-14-year olds in America, early adolescence is one of life's trickiest transitions. Children can seem both childlike and adult as they undergo the biological maturing process that results in adulthood.

The physical changes that mark adolescence are occurring sooner. For some females, puberty is manifesting as early as 8 years. On average, puberty is happening two years earlier than it did a century ago. Scientists aren't sure why, but explanations have varied from improved nutrition to environmental pollutants.

The hardest part of voyaging through puberty in this decade is simply measuring up to cultural expectations. Fifty-three percent of girls say they worry about their body weight, compared with 16 percent of boys. Between one half and two thirds of all high school girls in the United States are on a diet, many of them unnecessarily.

Stereotypical standards of beauty and social success transmitted through advertising and other mass media are often blamed for the prevalence of dieting and eating disorders among young U.S. women. But this account does not explain why some young women develop eating disorders while others exposed

to the same media do not.

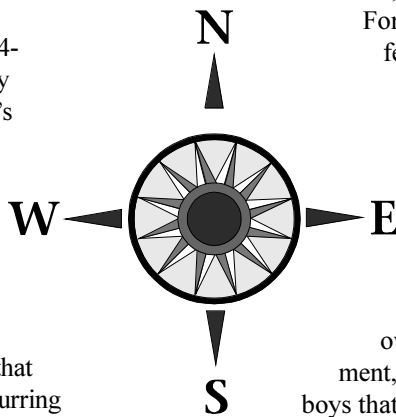
During puberty, girls are subjected to numerous physiological changes, predominant among them is a significant increase in body fat. This weight increase averages 24 pounds and leads many adolescent girls to become dissatisfied with their bodies.

Girls who mature early are at greater risk of developing eating problems because their weight gain tends to be a larger fraction of their total body weight. They become heavier than late bloomers, and dieting becomes the solution to recapturing their thinner, prepubertal selves.

For early maturing females, there are other developmental changes that coincide with physical maturation. They tend to be attracted to older adolescents that mirror their own physical development, especially, older boys that can lead to premature experimentation in sex, drugs, and alcohol.

Dating during early puberty can also compound a vulnerability to depression, which makes them more prone to developing eating problems. Many people assume that dating increases girls' self-esteem, but other studies mentioned in Caufmann and Steinberg's article have found the opposite to be true, at least among young adolescents. Junior high school girls who date have lower self-esteem than other girls. Success in dating may actually signal movement from a focus on self and autonomy to a focus on pleasing others and, consequently, to a loss of autonomy and personal control.

Although previous studies have also identified links between dieting and dating, this study is the first to examine specifically how physical involvement with a boyfriend increases the likelihood of dieting and disordered eating among adolescent girls.



cal parents. They need to be able to see their nonresidential parent and to think well of him or her. Sometimes visitation is painful for the nonresidential parent, but it's very important to the emotional health and recovery of the children.

Myth #4- Stepfamilies formed after a parent dies are easier.

People need time to grieve the loss of a loved one, and a remarriage may "reactivate" unfinished grieving. These emotional issues may get played out in the new relationship. It can be difficult for the child to think realistically about the person who has died. He or she exists in memory, not in reality, and sometimes gets elevated to sainthood.

Even when people remarry after the death of a spouse, they may want a relationship similar to the one before. New partners may feel they are competing with their partner's former spouse.

Myth #5 - Part-time stepfamilies are easier.

Stepfamilies in which the children only visit occasionally are hampered by the lack of time to work on relationships. If your stepchildren come every other weekend, there is less time for one-on-one time. Since stepfamilies follow an adjustment period (stages of development), it may take the part-time stepfamily longer to move through the process.

For more information on support services available to step families contact the *Step Family Association of America* at 1-800-735-0329, or online at <http://stepfam.org/>.

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Questions or comments?

Call us at (800) 457-2736

Comprehensive prevention strategies for teens identify risk and protective factors

By Kathryn White

Parents or other primary care givers have the greatest and long-lasting influence in their children's lives. Although adolescence is a time when parental authority appears to be overshadowed by peer influence, parents' still play a crucial role in protecting adolescents from drug use and a wide variety of other risky behaviors.

Reducing risk factors and fostering resiliency are part of a comprehensive approach to prevention in which many communities are now adopting. In the past, program planners, politicians, and community leaders sought magic bullets and quick solutions to complex youth problems. These simplistic approaches did not work. Through induction based and applied empirical research, social scientists have found that effective prevention programs need to identify and address as many risk and protective factors as possible.

The premise of risk-focused prevention is to first identify all the factors that may contribute to a potential problem. Efforts are then made to eliminate the factors that may lead to negative outcomes. In addition, the protective factors are examined. What individual or environmental safeguards exist that can enhance a youngster's ability to resist a stressful life? These protective factors are then strengthened and supported.

This approach is similar to health prevention programs aimed at reducing the risk of heart disease. If a patient has a family history of heart disease; (i.e. smokes too much, gets too little exercise, and has a diet high in fat), then by eliminating as many of the health hazards as possible, a patient can be assured of reducing his risk.

To reduce the incidence of problem behaviors among youth requires addressing risk factors at multiple levels in the child's life. Like heart

disease, multiple factors such as problems at home or negative peer pressure shape his development. For example, the presence of just one risk factor (i.e. parent with drinking problem), is not likely to create dysfunction. But when two or more risk factors (i.e. parent with drinking problem and marital discord) are present, the risks are compounded.

The presence of risk factors does not always guarantee negative developmental outcomes, but it does increase the odds or probability the problem behaviors will occur.

The other component in this ecological approach to prevention includes strengthening protective factors. Researchers have examined why, even in the face of overwhelming

conditions, some kids still exhibit a remarkable degree of resilience. The resilient and protective factors working in your child's environment may be a good teacher, a positive role model, or participation in sports. Protective factors can be created through deliberate action.

How many potential risk factors can you identify in your child's sphere of influence? Take a look at the graph below:

For more information on community based programs in your area that foster family bonding and protective factors contact *Partners in Parenting* at (800)457-2736.

Adolescent Problem Behaviors

Risk Factors	Substance Abuse	Delinquency	Teenage Pregnancy	School Dropout	Violence
Community					
Availability of Drugs	✓				
Availability of Firearms		✓			✓
Community Laws and Norms Favorable Toward Drug Use, Firearms, and Crime	✓	✓			✓
Media Portrayals of Violence					✓
Transitions and Mobility	✓	✓		✓	
Low Neighborhood Attachment and Community Organization	✓	✓			✓
Extreme Economic Deprivation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Family					
Family History of the Problem Behavior	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Family Management Problems	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Family Conflict	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Favorable Parental Attitudes and Involvement in the Problem Behavior	✓	✓			✓
School					
Early and Persistent Antisocial Behavior	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Academic Failure Beginning in Elementary School	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lack of Commitment to School	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Individual/Peer					
Rebelliousness	✓	✓		✓	
Friends Who Engage in the Problem Behavior	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Favorable Attitudes Toward the Problem Behavior	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Early Initiation of the Problem Behavior	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Constitutional Factors	✓	✓			✓

-Confident daughters from pg. 1

■ Encourage activities and experiences for girls that are traditionally reserved for boys. Provide girls opportunities to assist adults with repairs, building fences, and learning computers. Encourage the exploration of non-traditional areas of study and applaud her curiosity.

■ Resist the urge to rescue girls and provide ready answers. Research shows these well-intended impulses tend to undermine girl's confidence in their abilities.

■ Encourage girls to seek new challenges and take risks.

■ Cultivate an early interest in competitive sports and physical activities. Winning builds confidence and losing strengthens resiliency.

■ Encourage daughters to develop strong math, science, and computer skills. Consider all-girl classes if

necessary, and discuss jumping a grade if your youngster is not challenged.

■ Set high educational expectations. Help your daughters understand they don't need to be the smartest to feel smart, but assure them that you believe they are intelligent, and that "airheads" don't make it, but "brains" do.

■ If your daughter begins placing a high priority on appearance, talk to her in terms of health and energy rather than thinness.

■ Encourage girls to take leadership roles in student government, sports, and extracurricular activities.

■ Encourage new, non-traditional thinking and methods of problem solving. Foster an environment where sweat and dirt are acceptable in the pursuit of a goal.

■ Discuss the media's portrayal of girls and women on television, in the movies, in magazines, and in popular music. Does the media offer positive or negative role models for girls? Explore the messages and assumptions the media is sending. Use these discussions to teach her how to identify and analyze stereotypes.

■ Be a coach, not a judge. Be your daughter's best supporter.

The following organizations provide excellent resources for parents desiring additional information:

Women's College Coalition

<http://www.academic.org/>

The National Coalition of Girls Schools

<http://www.org/Pages/partips.htm>

Girls Incorporated

<http://www.girlsinc.org/>

-Dr. Sylvia Rimm and the Women's College Coalition were resources utilized in this article.

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