

8 Body + Soul

Teenage girls and sex: do you

For her new book, Peggy Orenstein interviewed teenage girls who spoke frankly about their sexual behaviour. She tells [Barbara McMahon](#) that today's parents have little idea about the new sexual landscape and how their daughters feel about it

Most parents sit down and talk to their daughters about sex and there is embarrassment on both sides, followed by relief when the conversation is over. In her fascinating new book, *Girls and Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape*, the author Peggy Orenstein argues that "the talk" is not enough, and that parents have to do more to shape their daughters' burgeoning sexual identities.

While there have been seismic changes in the educational and career opportunities open to young women, there is still no level sexual playing field, Orenstein points out in her book, which was an instant best-seller and a major talking point when it was published recently in the US (it will be published here in October).

In a culture awash with sexual imagery, many young women struggle under the tyranny of being "hot", she says. A focus on virginity is encouraging girls to minimise the significance of other sexual acts, such as oral and anal sex. Online porn is having a troubling effect on young people of both sexes, leading young women to believe that sex is a performance and that it largely exists for the benefit of boys and men.

Young women are confused about their right to sexual pleasure and, often, their partner's satisfaction is a measurement of fulfilment. "Girls feel entitled to engage in sexual behaviour, but they don't necessarily feel entitled to enjoy it," she says.

The California-based author offers advice on how parents can help their daughters to navigate the "complicated new landscape" of the book's title.

She interviewed 70 girls and young women aged from 15 to 20 and consulted dozens of psychologists, professors and other experts. "The girls that I talked to, they were educated, they had opportunities, they were the beneficiaries of the feminist movement. If these girls are toppling over in their personal lives, you can't deny that there's a problem," the author says.

Much of what she discovered during her research was surprising and frequently upsetting. "Half the girls had experienced something along a spectrum of coercion to rape," Orenstein reveals.

Many girls believe that whatever else they might be — artists, scientists, newscasters, politicians — they must, as females, project sex appeal, she says. They live under a constant social media onslaught that urges them to shape themselves according to impossible standards of beauty and to commodify themselves as "brands" based on their sex appeal.

"Whereas an earlier generation of women saw that as something to protest against, what's complicated now is that girls are told to see it as a source of power and confidence," Orenstein says.

Young women constantly told her that it was their own business if they dressed in cropped tops and mini-skirts. One 17-year-

old girl declared: "I'm proud of my body and I never feel more liberated than when I wear skimpy clothes." In the next breath, however, she told the author that when she gained a few pounds she did not want to wear suggestive clothes because she feared boys would call her "the fat girl". Young women at colleges and universities told Orenstein that they often had to pass a "prettiness" test, supervised by boys, to gain entrance to parties.

"Some of them embraced a highly sexualised image and some felt they had no choice. Some were anxious about what they thought was the constant public judgment of their bodies and some of them were defiant. The emphasis is always on creating this product of the self. Every girl knows that she's going to get more likes for posting a bikini shot of herself than in a parka," says Orenstein.

"It's hard to talk about because it makes parents like me sound like fusty old hand-wringers. If it meant that girls were more in control of their sex lives, that they were treated with more reciprocity and they enjoyed themselves more, I'd say go ahead and wear your skimpy clothing. But that's not what's happening. We know that self-objectification and self-sexualisation [have a] negative impact on girls, cognitively."

Role models such as Kim Kardashian, Miley Cyrus and Beyoncé are not helping, she thinks. "They're shrewd strategists, spinning commodified sexuality as a choice, one that may be profitable but is no less constraining, ultimately, either to female artists or to regular girls."

Sexting was another issue that girls were anxious to talk about. "Boys and girls sext each other equally voluntarily, but when you look at coercive sexting, girls are twice as likely to be coerced," says Orenstein. "They get badgered. 'Oh come on, just show me your unbuttoned jeans or lift up your shirt.' They want to show off, they're trying to get somebody's attention, their friends are doing it — there are all kinds of reasons. For some girls who are coerced into sexting, it's more distressing to them than real-life sex. That may be because it's replicable — he can show it to everybody."

The internet has made porn more accessible than at any time in history, especially for teenagers.

"Kids look at porn, in part, as an instruction manual, even though it's about

as realistic as pro wrestling," says Orenstein. "Girls would ask me all the time, 'My boyfriend wants to know why I don't make all those noises like porn stars during sex,' and I would say, 'Because it's a movie!'"

If young people are constantly exposed to certain themes, they are more likely to pick them up and they become part of their sexual scripts, she says. The rise of anal sex among teenagers and the fashion for hairless bodies is directly related to the availability of porn, Orenstein believes.

Oral sex is a commonplace practice among teens, she says. Girls told her that they use fellatio to improve relationships, to be popular and as a way to avoid intercourse. "Oral sex is like money or some kind of currency," an 18-year-old called Sam told her. "It's how you make friends with the popular guys. I guess it's more impersonal than sex, so people are, like, 'It's not a big deal.'"

Sam, Orenstein says, is typical of the young women she interviewed. She is on target to achieve her academic and professional goals, considers herself a feminist and says she comes from a long line of strong female role models. Yet her sex life so far consists of giving oral sex to boys and neither receiving — not expecting — anything in return. When Orenstein pointed out this contradiction, the teenager replied: "I guess no one ever told me that the strong female image also applies to sex."

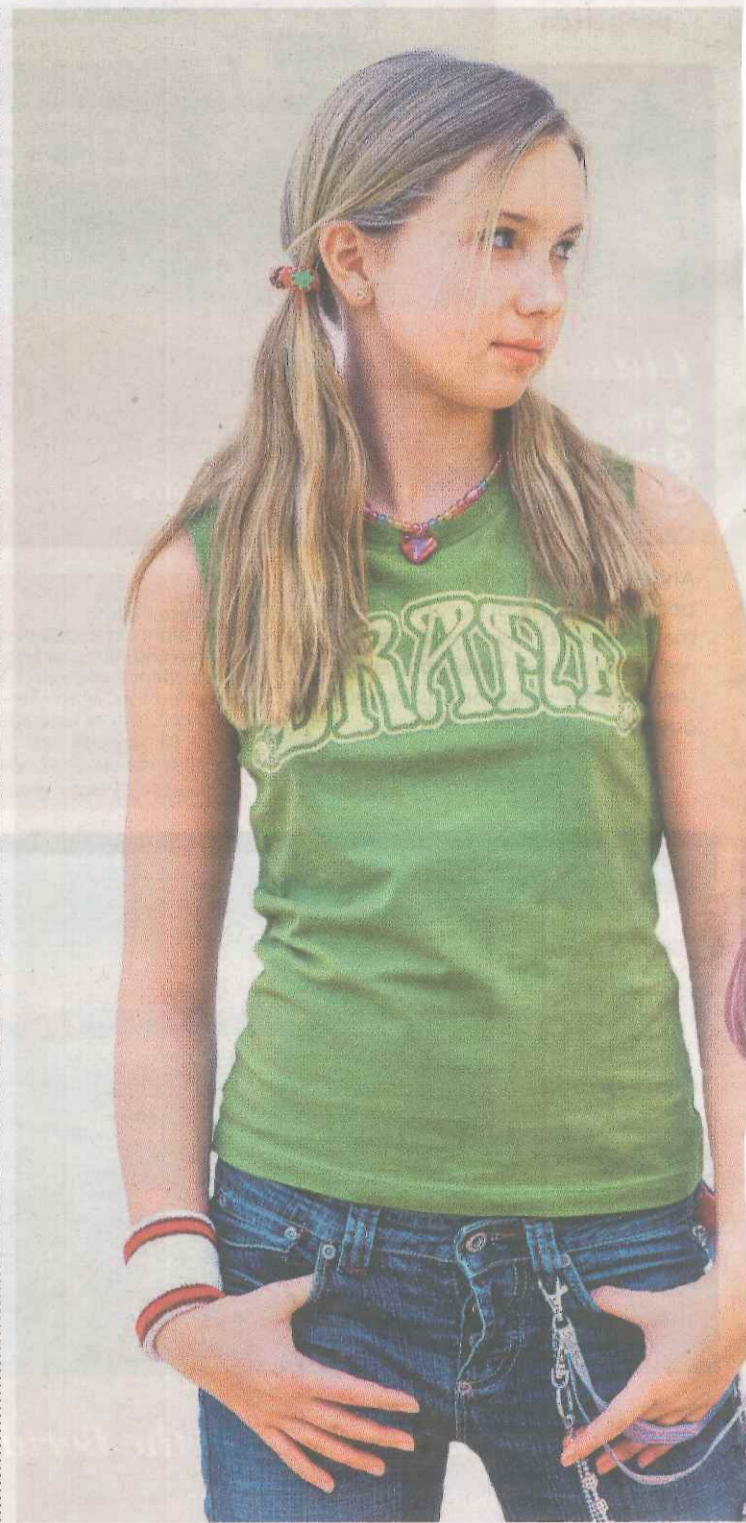
Another interviewee, Anna, described oral sex as being about young women wanting to please. "If you go back to a guy's room and are hooking up with him, you feel bad leaving without pleasing him in some way. But, you know, it's unfair. I don't think he feels badly for you," she says.

"Sometimes girls would say it was easier to do it and get him to shut up than to say no. Others liked the feeling of power they had in that moment of controlling a boy. Most of them thought oral sex was no big deal but I think a penis in my mouth is a pretty intimate situation," Orenstein says.

Orenstein is at pains to point out that young people have always experimented with sex and "it's not exactly the fall of Rome out there", but about 70 per cent of young people aged 16 to 24 say they wish they had known more before their first sexual experiences, especially about relationships and the emotional side of sex.

In sex education classes or during "the talk", children learn that boys have erections and ejaculations and girls have periods and unwanted pregnancies. "There is no mention of clitorises or pleasure. Fewer than half of teenage girls have ever masturbated and then we expect them to go into a sexual relationship? We are so silent about girls' pleasure and girls' anatomy and so fearful of it that it is almost taboo. It's almost like we give them a psychological clitoridectomy," Orenstein says. "It's as if we believed, somehow, that by hiding the truth from them that sex can and should feel fabulous, they won't find out and so will stay 'pure'."

What if the opposite were true, she asks.



"What if understanding one's physical responses could actually raise girls' expectations of intimate encounters?"

She jokingly suggests that we should all move to the Netherlands, where children talk more freely about sex to their parents and teachers. Two thirds of Dutch teenagers aged 15 to 17 with a steady boyfriend or girlfriend are allowed to have sleepovers. "It's not a free-for-all — the Dutch actively discourage promiscuity in their children, teaching that sex should emerge from a loving relationship," she writes.

Orenstein, whose daughter is about to turn 13, says she wrote the book to start a conversation. "As parents, we can't just sit down and have the talk — it's about ongoing conversations. And if you can't talk about this to your daughters, maybe a friend can — or show them this book," she says. "We're not helping girls to be ready for sex and it's not about saying yes or no; it's about making choices that end in joy and integrity instead of shame and regret."