Adolescent Girls in Distress
Laura H. Choate, EdD, LPC, NCC, is an associate professor and counselor educator at Louisiana State University (LSU) in Baton Rouge. Her research interests include counseling issues and interventions for working with girls and women, eating disorders prevention and treatment, college student wellness, and counselor preparation. She is the author of the 2008 book, *Girls’ and Women’s Wellness: Contemporary Counseling Issues and Interventions*, and the 2013 edited book, *Eating Disorders and Obesity: A Counselor’s Guide to Prevention and Treatment*, both published by the American Counseling Association Press. She has published over 40 articles and book chapters on issues related to girls’ and women’s wellness, and she was the guest editor of the recent *Journal of Counseling and Development* themed issue on eating disorders prevention and treatment. She was the 2004 to 2006 editor of the *Journal of College Counseling*, and is a three-term editorial board member of the *Journal of Counseling and Development*. She is a past recipient of the LSU Phi Kappa Phi Award for Outstanding Nontenured Faculty Member in the Humanities and Social Sciences, and the American College Counseling Association Research Award. She is a licensed professional counselor in Louisiana and serves as the Vice-Chair and the Discipline Committee Chair of the Louisiana Licensed Professional Counselors Board of Examiners. She has also volunteered as an outreach presenter to over 30 groups of girls and women in the Baton Rouge community on the topics of eating disorders prevention and sexual assault prevention.
Adolescent Girls in Distress
A Guide for Mental Health Treatment and Prevention

Laura H. Choate, EdD, LPC, NCC
I would like to dedicate this book to my daughter Abigail Choate, age 7. Abby, my hope for you is that you will stay strong as you are bombarded by cultural pressures that will cause you to want to doubt yourself, silence your true opinions, and to conform to societal ideals about how you “should” look and act. You are so full of life, fearless, witty, and confident—hold onto these qualities, as they will serve you well. I am proud to be your mother and I hope these pages will help you and countless other girls to remain resilient as you swim upstream against the current toxic cultural tide.
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I have a daughter who is 7 years old as this book goes to press. In imagining what her life could be like in the next few years, I try to view the world as it might appear through her eyes. Here is what I see:

At the mall, I see push-up bras and thongs for girls my age; in the toy aisle I view Bratz dolls and Monster dolls wearing high heels, lingerie, and heavy makeup; I look at pants designed with suggestive slogans on the backseat; I dial through the television channels and see girls fighting, gossiping, and competing with one another; I read about my favorite celebrity coming out of jail and rehab; I flip through girls’ magazines that provide tips for kissing and pleasing boys. When I go online I can easily access websites teaching me how to starve or cut myself; I view a social media site filled with pictures of me taken at a friend’s recent sleepover, followed by gossip about me; my friendship groups change from week to week, and I feel pressure that I can’t keep up with all of the texts I receive. When I walk down the halls at school, I hear boys making rude comments about girls’ bodies. Parents and teachers place high expectations for academics, athletics, and accomplishment upon me, yet the messages I receive everywhere else tell me that I need to spend my time on looking good and pleasing others. On top of all of this, I look in the mirror and see a girl going through the changes of puberty. The body I see is morphing into a new shape, and I barely know who she is anymore.

After this view of my daughter’s potential future, I am overwhelmed and alarmed at the underlying messages and pressures
today’s girls are receiving at the same time they are undergoing major developmental transitions. It is no surprise that today’s girls may feel lost as they attempt to navigate the pathways of adolescence. As stated in a slogan in a recent ad campaign by Dove, the “onslaught” is coming; girls are entering a battle.

This book is intended to address many of these current cultural trends and developmental transitions and how they impact adolescent mental health. While many other authors have focused specifically on physical or mental health, this book also focuses on the socialization processes that begin in early girlhood and how these challenges can influence the development of problems that are increasing in today’s adolescent girls. While girls are achieving exceptional academic and professional levels, it is troubling that adolescent girls are increasingly vulnerable to potentially life-threatening issues such as depression, suicide attempts, self-injury, substance abuse, sexual trauma, and eating disorders, which are all on the rise in teenage girls (Hinshaw, 2009). For example, 20% of adolescent girls have experienced at least one episode of major depression before the age of 18, and this is twice the rate of boys (Evans et al., 2005; Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2011). Further, the rate of depression triples for girls between the ages of 12 and 15 (National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2012).

The suicide rate for girls is also increasing, with 1 in 10 girls attempting suicide during the adolescent period (Goldston, Sergeant, & Arnold, 2006). Further, sexual violence against girls continues to increase, as the World Health Organization’s International Report on Violence and Health reports that nearly 33% of all adolescent girls describe their first sexual experience as being forced (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002).

In this book, I argue that an important component in the conceptualization and treatment of these mental health problems is the impact of current socialization trends for girls. Several of these trends were highlighted by the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Task Force Report on the Sexualization of Girlhood (APA, 2007) and have received national attention in books written for the general public (e.g., Hinshaw, 2009; Levine & Kilbourne, 2008; Sax, 2010). Specifically, today’s girls are increasingly socialized to conform to narrowly defined ideals regarding how they should look and act (APA, 2007). At a very young age, girls receive the societal message that they must be “hot and sexy,” and that reaching this ideal is the most important avenue for achieving success and value as a woman. Further, they learn that in order to be acceptable they should behave in edgy, outrageous, and often sexually provocative ways in order to seek and keep attention.
from others. At the same time, girls receive the message that they can be and do anything to which they aspire, but a consequence of this expectation is that they are also experiencing pressure to be perfect in all areas: excel academically, be involved in multiple extracurricular activities, and achieve at high levels of athletic competence, while still maintaining their relationships and attempting to look effortlessly attractive (Hinshaw, 2009; Sax, 2010).

Throughout the book, I describe how the sexualization of girlhood and other related cultural trends are affecting girls at increasingly younger ages, leading girls to view themselves as sexualized objects and to define themselves through their physical appearance or accomplishments, thereby impeding their development of an authentic sense of self. The negative impact of current socialization experiences on girls’ identity development and self-esteem is particularly critical during adolescence, as this is the developmental period in which a unique sense of self is formed. Without a core sense of self, girls are less equipped to manage the drastic transitions that occur in girlhood and throughout the adolescent years: family changes, school pressures, peer problems (e.g., sexual harassment, cyberbullying, sexual identity), and individual development (including physical, cognitive, identity, and social developmental transitions). Without the necessary skills for coping with harmful cultural influences and these rapidly occurring changes, girls are vulnerable to the development of mental health problems.

Because of these emerging cultural pressures, multisystemic changes, and increasing problems in today’s girls, mental health professionals need a guide to assist girls in responding to these complex challenges. My primary goal for the book is to meet this need by addressing girls’ socialization experiences, detailing treatments for mental health concerns that are increasing in adolescence, and providing prevention strategies for building girls’ resilience to today’s complex life demands. To this end, the book has three objectives: (a) to provide an analysis of contemporary girls’ lived experiences through an ecological, multisystemic lens, examining macro (societal), micro (family, peer, school), and individual developmental influences and changes; (b) to describe detailed treatment strategies for problems that increasingly impact today’s girls during adolescence, including treatment guidelines that are sensitive to timely factors such as cultural pressures and the diversity of girls’ lived experiences; and (c) to highlight the necessity of early intervention for preventing these problems prior to their onset. The book includes general strategies to promote life skills for promoting girls’ resilience to cultural pressures and for
coping with complex life demands. It also infuses specific prevention interventions throughout each chapter as they are applied to particular mental health concerns.

The book consists of eight chapters, with Chapters 1 and 2 providing a multisystemic overview of girls’ lived experiences. Chapter 1 addresses girls’ socialization experiences at a macro-level. In Chapter 2, I provide an ecological, multisystemic analysis of the changes and transitions that girls will face as they enter the adolescent period, including family system transitions, peer group involvement, school changes, and individual developmental transitions. Chapters 3 through 7 address specific mental health problems that are increasingly impacting adolescent girls: Chapter 3 (depression), Chapter 4 (eating disorders), Chapter 5 (substance abuse), Chapter 6 (self-injury), and Chapter 7 (sexual trauma and dating violence). While specific prevention strategies are integrated throughout the previous chapters, in Chapter 8, I provide general strategies for the development of life skills that will enable girls to thrive in contemporary culture. Highlights from each chapter are detailed in the paragraphs to follow.

In Chapter 1, I first provide an introduction to the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) used as the book’s frame for understanding today’s girls’ lived experiences. I review the influence of media in girls’ lives, and provide an analysis of the messages conveyed through popular culture. I identify four trends from current culture that are affecting girls at increasingly younger ages. I provide specific examples from a variety of media forms and also describe how these influences are harmful to today’s girls.

- **Trend One: Look Hot, Sexy, and Older Than You Are** is currently promoted as the basis of identity and worth for girls and women. I provide examples of clothing, products, music, advertisements, movies, and television to demonstrate the current socialization process for girls emphasizing sexiness above all else as the key to success. I also review the trend toward age aspiration, age compression, and the harmful consequences to girls when they are pressured to appear older than they really are.

- **Trend Two: Be a Diva** emphasizes the current trend that teaches girls to demand what they want with an “attitude” and to behave in edgy, outrageous, often sexually provocative ways in order to seek and keep attention from others. It also includes having a “passion for fashion,” the trend toward shopping and acquiring more possessions, teaching girls to place high value on designer labels and consumerism.
• **Trend Three: Who Are You? Find Out by Plastering Yourself Online** describes girls’ intense use of social media. Today’s girls feel increasing pressure to cultivate and present the right online image, which ultimately impedes the development of an authentic sense of self.

• **Trend Four: You Can Have It All, and Do It All Perfectly** describes the pressures many girls feel to compete in all arenas—academics, athletics, extracurricular activities—while still maintaining their relationships and attempting to look effortlessly sexy. I describe how the pressure for perfection and for meeting unrealistic and often contradictory goals sets girls up for a sense of failure.

   I also describe the process through which these themes are internalized by examining cultivation theory, social learning theory, and self-objectification theory.

   In Chapter 2, I move from the macrosystems view to a microlevel perspective on three systems that often change drastically during the adolescent period. I first provide an overview of the importance of family connections in girls’ lives. I discuss several recent trends in parenting styles, including the use of technology as a way to both enhance as well as place distance in family relationships. Next I examine changes that occur at the peer level. I first provide an overview of the importance of peer relationships, then discuss recent trends in relational and physical aggression and how this impacts girls’ abilities to form authentic connections with peers. I also discuss the recent explosion of social networking and how girls’ relationships with peers and romantic partners are impacted by technology. Finally, I provide an overview of girls’ current academic achievements and successes at all educational levels, and then describe current educational problems girls face including academic pressures, sexual harassment, and the recent increases in school fighting, bullying, and cyberbullying. Finally, I highlight important developmental transitions by providing an overview of research on girls’ physical, cognitive, identity, and social development, including recent research regarding earlier pubertal onset in today’s girls.

   After the ecological systems overview in the first two chapters, I then turn to mental health problems that are increasingly common in adolescent girls. In Chapter 3 I provide an overview of depression, including risk factors, prevalence rates, and gender differences. I then review multisystemic influences on girls’ experience of these problems, and provide a discussion of effective prevention and treatment that incorporates an understanding of contemporary cultural context.
The effective treatments for adolescent girls’ depression described in the chapter include cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and interpersonal therapy for depression in adolescents (IPT-A). In addition to specific treatment guidelines, I also provide examples of prevention programs designed specifically for adolescents.

In Chapter 4, I provide an overview of eating disorders in girls, including a description of the eating disorders continuum (including anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating). I then review risk factors, prevalence rates, and gender differences. As with the previous chapter, I outline multisystemic influences on girls’ experiences of these problems, and provide a discussion of effective treatment for bulimia (CBT, IPT), anorexia (Maudsley family-based therapy), and for binge eating (dialectical behavior therapy and IPT). Specific prevention programs for adolescent girls at initial risk for eating-related problems are also provided.

In Chapter 5, I provide an overview of substance problems in girls, including a description of these disorders, risk factors, prevalence rates, and gender differences. After an overview of general factors needed for effective treatment, specific treatment approaches are reviewed including brief strategic family therapy, functional family therapy, multisystemic therapy, and multidimensional family therapy, and cognitive behavioral/motivational enhancement approaches. A review of protective factors and effective prevention programs is also provided.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to the problem of self-injury in adolescent girls. It is important for counselors to have an understanding of the risk and maintenance factors for this behavior, so as to understand the onset as well as the factors that contribute to the adolescent’s continued engagement in the behavior. Because this issue has received high levels of media attention in recent years, I also discuss media influences on girls’ experimentation with self-injurious behaviors (particularly from celebrity disclosures and demonstrations through YouTube video clips). Because dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) has the strongest research support for this issue, DBT treatment guidelines will be provided in detail. Components for prevention programs are also provided.

In Chapter 7, I provide an overview of sexual trauma in girls, including a description of types of sexual trauma, the relationship between childhood sexual abuse and later re-victimization, problems associated with early sexual experiences (including unwanted pregnancies and STDs), and risk factors for sexual assault and relationship violence. I then review multisystemic influences on girls’ experiences of these problems, including the nature of the assault, the use of
alcohol or other drugs during the assault, and a girl's available support systems. I also provide coverage of specific treatment for rape trauma, including trauma-focused CBT and cognitive processing therapy. Also included is a discussion of dating violence in adolescent girls, and prevention programs designed to enhance safe, healthy dating relationships.

The final chapter, Chapter 8, is titled: "Hope for the Future: Strengthening Resilience in Adolescent Girls." While specific prevention strategies are integrated throughout the previous chapters, in this chapter, I provide general strategies for the development of life skills for strengthening resilience that will enable all girls to thrive in contemporary culture. These skills and resources include: quality parenting; problem solving skills; coping skills; social skills and assertiveness; cognitive skills; sense of authenticity; sense of self-worth and efficacy; wellness and balance; positive support systems; positive physical self-concept; media literacy skills; and goal-setting skills for creating the future she wants for herself.

I opened this preface with a glimpse into the potential cultural atmosphere my 7-year-old daughter may face in the near future. As both a parent and professional counselor, this image highly concerns me. At the same time, it also inspires me to do whatever I can to create an empowered and healthy adolescence for my daughter and for all young girls. This task is not insurmountable, for at the same time that girls are being socialized to look and act in limiting ways, they are also poised at a time in history where the possibilities for their futures are endless. Girls are excelling academically, athletically, and professionally as never before. They possess strength for leadership and advocacy and have the potential to create a significant place for themselves in the world.

In addition to these strengths, the future is also encouraging because of the available research and resources for girls such as those provided in this book. In these chapters I have highlighted our field’s increased understanding of girls’ contexts, risk and protective factors, and skills they need to thrive. When girls develop problems, the book provides current evidence-based practices that can guide counselors’ treatment approaches. The book also provides online and print resources, effective research-based curricula, and mentorship programs that are accessible to a diverse array of girls. Therefore, despite an often toxic cultural climate, counselors can help to provide girls with the foundation they need for navigating adolescence with courage and resilience. The remainder of this book is dedicated to assisting counselors with this critical task.
First I would like to acknowledge the support of my husband Michael and my children Benjamin (9) and Abigail (7) as they encourage me in my career path. They are truly my strongest supporters and gave me the inspiration I needed to complete this book. My parents, Judy and Lloyd Hensley, were also a great support as they provided meals, childcare, and carpool runs while I completed many long writing days during the past 2 years.

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and concern about girls’ current challenges were highly motivating as I completed this book.

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Girl Power? Understanding Girls’ Socialization Through the Lens of Popular Culture

A girl’s mental health is a function of her experience of larger cultural systems operating in society, her family of origin and the values/behaviors they model for her, peer group influences, the neighborhood in which she lives, the school that she attends, her religious and/or community institutions and resources, and all of the ways in which these macro- and microsystems interact. In addition, individual biological factors related to her physical development and psychosocial factors stemming from her cognitive, identity, social, and moral development interact with and are affected by these other systems. Consequently, it is impossible for a counselor to understand a girl’s increasingly complex inner life, her physical and psychosocial development, and her overall mental health and wellness when viewing her through only a unidimensional lens.

Bronfenbrenner (1979), an influential developmental psychologist, was one of the first social scientists to note the importance of understanding these types of intersections. According to his ecological systems theory, human development and behavior are functions of the interaction between the person and her environment, so that to
understand a person, we should explore how all areas—society, family, political structure, local community, other environmental factors—impact psychological development and subsequent behavior. According to Bronfenbrenner, the ecological study of human development is the

... Progressive, mutual accommodation throughout the lifespan, between the growing human organism and the changing, immediate environments in which it lives, as this process is affected by relations occurring within and between these immediate settings, as well as the larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which the settings are embedded. (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514)

Bronfenbrenner identified four levels of nested systems, each located inside the next, that best describe the influence of person-environment interactions on human development. At the center of the systems is the individual, who is surrounded by multiple microsystems. A **microsystem** is an immediate social setting that surrounds and directly shapes an individual, such as family, peers, schools, religious institutions, and neighborhoods. At the next level, the **mesosystem** is comprised of a system of microsystems. It describes the interrelations among the major settings in which an individual is embedded at a particular point in life (e.g., the interaction among the parents, child, and members of the school system, or the interaction between the parents and a child’s peer group). The **exosystem** involves the institutional structures, settings, and practices that do not contain the individual but do have an impact on the immediate systems in which the person may be found (e.g., a child’s father loses his job because of an economic downturn, and this in turn affects the level of parenting quality and resources that the child receives). In this way, exosystems can include extended family, parent’s work location, friends of family, legal services, community social services, or local educational, medical, and employment opportunities. Finally, surrounding and permeating all of the other systems, the **macrosystem** describes overarching cultural traditions, beliefs, and values of society. Most macrosystem beliefs are informal, implicitly accepted societal prototypes that are carried out through attitudes and behaviors (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Regardless of race or class, girls are bombarded from a very young age with macrosystem values about the ways in which they should look and act. In this chapter, I focus on this current macrosystem that transmits the messages of popular culture and how this system influences girls’ socialization, development, and their subsequent mental health. As stated, this system includes unspoken, unwritten rules about how individuals in a society are supposed to act, and are
powerfully conveyed through mass media (e.g., television, music, the Internet, video devices and games, magazines, books, movies, clothing, merchandise, toys). I will provide an analysis of four themes drawn from messages affecting girls’ socialization in popular culture. The chapter covers messages girls receive from the preschool years through the adolescent period.

It is clear that girls are both exposed to and affected by media influences. For example, children in the United States are watching television at record levels, with children ages 2–5 watching 32 hours of television per week, and children ages 6–11 watching an average of 22 hours per week. When combining television, movies, and video games together, this number rises to 28 hours per week (McDonough, 2009). Another nationally representative survey indicates that among 11–17 year old girls, TV viewing takes up more time than any other activity during a typical week (Girl Scout Research Institute, 2011a). Not surprisingly, Internet use is also heavy among girls. Among preteens and adolescents, 93% use the Internet, 85% use social networking sites, 50% check their social networking profile more than once per day, and 22% check them 10 or more times per day (O’Keefe, Clarke-Pearson, & Council on Communications and Media, 2011).

Additionally, 75% of adolescents have a cell phone of their own, and when broken down by age group, 22% of 6–9 year olds, 60% of 10–14 year olds, and 84% of 15–18 year olds own a cell phone (Center on Media and Child Health, 2012). Fifty-four percent of 12–17 year olds send text messages daily (a higher percentage than those who report talking with friends face to face on a daily basis) (Pew Research Center, 2011). Further, recent statistics show that teen girls send an average of over 4,000 texts per month (compared with 2,500 texts for teen boys), which equates to roughly 135 text messages per day (Nielsen Company, 2010).

With such high levels of media communication and consumption, it is important for counselors to understand the specific messages conveyed through these sources. What are girls watching, hearing, purchasing, and consuming? One theme identified by many authors is the highly sexual content in TV programs and commercials, music videos, movies, magazines, and videogames (Starr & Ferguson, 2012). In addition, media are strong purveyors of sexualized, gender-stereotypical images and messages regarding gender and sexuality (Martino et al., 2006; Ward & Friedman, 2006). As an example, at least half of all girls watch music videos daily. Music videos are argued to be the medium through which a viewer is most likely to see representations of sexually objectified women (Grabe & Hyde, 2009). Further, the amount of popular music lyrics that degrade and sexually objectify women tripled between 1999 and 2009 (Hall, West, & Hill, 2012). Grabe and Hyde’s (2009)
study also indicates that the level of a girl’s music video consumption is linked to holding traditional gender role attitudes, stronger acceptance of women as sexual objects, and being more accepting of attitudes about the treatment of women as objects through actual sexual harassment. In addition, girls (ages 12–14) who consumed more music videos were also more likely to place high value on physical appearance and to view themselves as sexual objects. This in turn increased their likelihood of experiencing negative body esteem, dieting behavior, depression, anxiety, and lowered math confidence (Grabe & Hyde, 2009).

There is also evidence that media consumption is related to actual sexual behaviors. When adolescents are not sure where to turn to get their questions answered about their sexuality, it seems many girls turn to the media as a “sexual super peer” (Brown, Halpern, & L’Engle, 2005). Brown et al. found that girls who reach puberty earlier than their peers were more likely to be drawn to popular, sexualized media in order to glean information about their emerging sexuality and to understand what is considered normal. Among 12–14 year old girls, early maturing girls were more likely report that they regularly view sexual content in movies, television, and magazines, view rated-R movies, and listen to sexual content in music. As both girls and boys view sexualized media, they are also more likely to imitate the behaviors they watch. O’Hara, Gibbons, Gerrard, and Sargeant (2012) analyzed the movie-watching patterns of 12–14 year olds and then surveyed them 6 years later. The adolescents who watched movies with more sexual content at a younger age were more likely to say that they had been influenced by what they watched, initiated sexual activity earlier than peers who had watched less sexualized content, and were more likely to report that they had imitated the sexual behaviors they had seen in the media.

In addition to influencing sexual attitudes and behaviors, girls’ viewing of media images directly and negatively impacts their self-esteem and body satisfaction. For example, girls who watch more television are more likely than others to equate their physical appearance with their overall self-esteem (Girl Scout Research Institute, 2011b). This belief, in turn, can place her at risk for the development of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating practices. In support of this link, Grabe, Ward, and Hyde (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of studies in this area, and their results indicate that media use is directly related to girls’ and women’s body dissatisfaction, the internalization of the thin ideal, and disordered eating attitudes and beliefs.

While most studies in this area examine links between media consumption and girls’ sexualized appearance and behavior, other primary socialization trends for girls have also emerged in recent years, such as those promoting the importance of consumerism, a
diva attitude, a carefully crafted online presence, and the ability to appear and act as perfectly as possible. These and other messages will be described and analyzed in later sections of this chapter. In efforts to assist counselors in understanding the recurring messages that girls receive and how they have an impact on today’s girls (Grabe & Hyde, 2009), the purpose of this chapter is to (a) present messages conveyed in popular culture through an examination of examples that comprise four themes; (b) understand the process through which these messages are internalized by using the framework of cultivation theory, social learning theory, and self-objectification theory; and (c) provide a rationale for the ways in which the current macroculture directly influences and also interacts with microsystem factors such as the family, peers, and school to influence girls’ development and mental health.

The themes presented here are drawn from an analysis of clothing, television, movies, music, and toys from current girls’ culture. I also cite other authors who have effectively described examples of trends in the current macrosystem (e.g., American Psychological Association [APA] Task Force on Sexualization of Girlhood, 2007; Hinshaw, 2009; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Levin & Kilbourne, 2008; Oppliger, 2008; Orenstein, 2011; Sax, 2010, and some of my previous work in this area: Choate & Curry, 2009; Curry & Choate, 2010). The four trends and examples follow.

**PRESSURE ONE: LOOK HOT, SEXY, AND OLDER THAN YOU ARE**

In today’s popular culture, girls are bombarded with the message that their value and worth will be based on their physical appearance, and their sexual appeal will be the most important avenue to achieving success and popularity. The primacy of sexual appeal is emphasized to the extent that girls learn that a “hot and sexy” appearance should be pursued at all costs (APA, 2007). This pressure is now affecting even the youngest of girls, as they learn from an early age that “hot and sexy” is the norm for girls and women.

As noted by Hinshaw (2009):

Definitions of sexy and pretty have narrowed enormously in recent years—with the ever escalating demand that girls turn themselves into sexual objects. For a girl to fit the acceptable look now requires almost superhuman commitment to dieting, waxing, applying makeup, and shopping, and for some girls, plastic surgery has also come to seem like a minimum requirement. These trends begin at frighteningly young ages. (p. 9)
Both research and books for the public have critiqued this current trend. For example, books like *So Sexy So Soon* (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008), *Packaging Girlhood* (Lamb & Brown, 2006); *The Lolita Effect* (Durham, 2008), *The Triple Bind* (Hinshaw, 2009), *Girls on the Edge* (Sax, 2010), and *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* (Orenstein, 2011) describe the sexualization of girls and the harms associated with this media trend. The APA brought widespread attention to the issue of early sexualization with its 2007 Task Force Report on the Sexualization of Girlhood. According to the report, the sexualization of a person is defined in the following ways: (a) when a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; (b) when a person is held to a narrowly defined standard that equates physical attractiveness with being sexual; (c) when a person is sexually objectified, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than being seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or (d) when sexuality is inappropriately imposed on a person (APA, 2007).

These conditions are increasingly frequent and prevalent in popular culture (Lamb & Brown, 2006). Girls are portrayed according to limiting gender stereotypes regarding their appearance and are measured against a narrowly defined standard of physical attractiveness as a determinant of their identity and worth (Choate & Curry, 2009). Various media, from toys, clothing, TV shows, and movies, emphasize the idea that girls from a very young age should appear as “hot and sexy” as possible (Lamb & Brown, 2006; Oppliger, 2008).

For example, both large-scale department stores and specialty girls’ clothing stores sell tank tops with words such as “Hottie” and “Future Porn Star” in little girls’ sizes. Popular retail stores sell t-shirts that promote the value of being “Hot” by selling “Cuties vs. Hotties” and “Hello my name is Hottie” printed on pajamas. Lingerie for young girls is now the norm, with thong underwear decorated with slogans such as “wink, wink,” “eye candy,” or “feeling lucky?”; even the question “Who needs credit cards?” is written on the crotch of a popular pair of girls’ underwear. Mainstream stores sell padded bras in young girls’ departments starting at size 30AA, and Abercrombie and Fitch recently marketed padded pushup triangle bikini tops for girls as young as age 7. Much media attention is also given to the recent trend of highly sexualized Halloween costumes for girls, and to the popularity of “Juicy” girls’ fashions, with the word “Juicy” emblazoned on the backside of little girls’ sweatpants. The sexualization process even starts at birth, with widely popular “Heelarious” high-heeled shoes marketed for infants in sizes 0–6 months. Offered in exotic animal
prints with the tag line, “Her first high heels,” these and other examples have led some commentators to coin the phrase “prostitot” or “pimpfant” for current girls’ fashion, implying that dressing children in sexy clothing is part of having a “hip” baby, toddler, or young child (Oppliger, 2008).

In addition, television shows and movies for young children regularly feature characters with sexualized features (e.g., commonly female characters such as those on Thumbellina and Winx Club appear with bare midriffs, heavy makeup, and hour glass figures). As an example, the 42-year-old series Scooby Doo, now airing on Cartoon Network, has been recently updated to make its female characters more sexualized. Velma, the “smart” character known for her glasses and ability to solve mysteries, now wears red bows in her hair and spends most of her time on the show aggressively pursuing a romantic relationship with Shaggy, only to be rebuffed by him. Daphne, too, pursues a romantic relationship with Fred, who rejects her advances because he wants to remain friends. Instead of pouring their energies into solving mysteries, the female characters worry about looking and acting in a way to secure male attention (e.g., in one episode, Daphne sports a string bikini to get Fred’s attention when he seems attracted to another girl).

As part of being hot and sexy, girls are also socialized to appear and act older than they actually are. Merchandise, clothing, and media programming often encourage girls to dress and act like older teens, to sell her an image of an older teen, not of a girl her age. The term “tween,” referring to the age range between middle childhood and the teenage years (usually ages 9–12) was developed as a marketing concept in the 1980s when advertisers discovered that the top age of toy users had dropped from the age of 12 to the younger age of 8. To keep girls interested in toys and merchandise longer, toy companies began to offer products that would promote girls’ identification with older girls’ lifestyles (Lamb & Brown, 2006). This message is encouraged by marketers who promote age compression (marketing products intended for older teens toward younger girls), age aspiration (marketing to girls’ desires to look/act like older teens), and the idea of Kids Are Growing Older Younger (KAGOY) (Schor, 2005) intending to capture girls’ brand loyalty in their earliest years so that they might become cradle-to-grave consumers (Lamb & Brown, 2006). According to one brand management executive cited in Lamb and Brown, “If you don’t target the consumer in her formative years, you’re not going to be relevant through the rest of her life” (p. 17).

Along these same lines, Juicy Couture dolls are marketed to and are popular with very young girls, promoting the brand to young girls
and capturing their loyalty early with their newly released babies’ and children’s wear lines, while older girls are drawn to the purses, fragrances and fashions of Juicy brand products. The Victoria’s Secret “Pink” line markets lingerie and products (even stuffed animals) to younger girls with the intent of introducing them to their brand and holding onto them as they become adolescents and young adults.

Popular television series also attempt to hold onto girl viewers as they age. A highly popular TV series and product line including books, clothing, video games, DVDs and feature films, Winx Club features attractive adolescent girls who transform into beautiful fairies to save the world from villains. The fairies all have great friendships, use magic to help others, while also wearing bare midriff tops, short shirts, thigh-high boots or high heels, and have long, flowing hair and makeup. The complex message for girls is that they learn that they can be superheroes, but they must also look like sexy, magical fairies in the process. Because the show features both adolescent girls as well as cartoon fairies, younger viewers are attracted to the clothing and makeup of the older girls as well as the fairies, while presumably older girls will stay interested in the show and product line longer because of the age of the actors on the show.

Dolls have also been repackaged to appeal to both younger as well as older markets. For example, the popular Dora the Explorer, a young girl with t-shirt, shorts, and tennis shoes, has now been remodeled as a tall, thin adolescent girl, wearing a dress, leggings, ballet flats, and a pearl necklace. This new Dora is the basis for a toy that can grow longer or shorter hair with the touch of a button; another Dora toy is a head-only figure that is used for applying makeup and creating new hairstyles. In this way, marketers hope that girls will embrace the new, older Dora (whose defining characteristics are more about external beauty) and will stay interested in her as they enter the middle childhood years. Along the same lines, Barbie, developed by Mattel in the 1950s, was first marketed to 9–12 year old girls, but is now primarily marketed and advertised to 3–5 year olds. However, the same Barbies are marketed to the preschool set as to older girls, with the intent of keeping girls interested in Barbie as they age. For example, Mattel has developed a Lingerie Barbie line and a newly released Tattoo Barbie, advertised with “Ken” tattooed across her lower back. While these dolls might pique older girls’ interests, they also teach preschoolers the importance of sexy lingerie and tattoos as part of being fashionable and successful.

Other highly sexualized dolls also influence girls in their message that they should appear hot, sexy, and older than they are. Monster High dolls, Mattel’s biggest product launch since Hot Wheels was
released in 1968, are dolls that feature heavy makeup and sexualized fashions, but who are also monsters (e.g., modeled after werewolves, vampires, Frankenstein), loosely based on the popularity of vampires with adolescent girls. They are the basis of upcoming movies, a TV series, and a clothing line. One of the dolls is named “Clawdeen,” marketed as needing to spend a lot of time and effort plucking and shaving her unwanted hair so that she looks good in her fashions. Interestingly, the idea of waxing and shaving is becoming increasingly popular with preteens and adolescents; as an example, a national chain of waxing salons recently sponsored billboards that offered bikini and facial wax specials for all girls under the age of 15, while the show Toddlers and Tiaras regularly features girls as young as 5 receiving eyebrow waxes, spray-on tans, and wearing false teeth in order to win glitz pageant competitions (Toddlers and Tiaras, 2012).

Before the release of the Monster High dolls, the Bratz dolls were the most popular dolls for young girls, even outselling Barbie in recent years. Bratz, known for their long hair, heavy makeup, short skirts, fishnet stockings, stiletto heels, and feather boas, are highly sexualized representations of adolescent girls, but are also targeted to younger girls (with its “Baby Bratz” line), teaching girls to “hit the town and dance the night away” and to “know how important it is to be seen!” To attract additional girls, Bratz has recently released a “Bratzilla” line to compete with the Monster High dolls.

There is evidence that these toys and dolls do influence girls’ views of themselves and others. When researchers showed 6-year old girls a pair of paper dolls (one that was highly sexualized with makeup, bare midriff, and high heels, and the other wearing fashionable but modest clothing; see Activity 1), the girls chose the sexualized doll as the one they would prefer as their ideal self, and as the one that they believe would be most popular. In contrast, they chose the regular doll as the one that they most actually look like and as the one they would prefer to play with (Starr & Ferguson, 2012). Even by age 6, girls have already learned that looking “hot and sexy” is something to aspire to and that will lead to popularity and attention from others, even though the sexy doll did not seem to look like them or appear more fun or interesting for play.

In sum, the current macrosystem message for girls primarily suggests that developing a sexy image is of utmost importance to girls’ identity and success. As part of being valued as “hot and sexy,” girls also learn that they must appear older and more mature than they are. In addition to messages about their appearance, girls also receive macrosystem messages about how they should act, as discussed in the following section.
Activity One. In Starr and Ferguson’s study, 6-year-old girls were shown these two images and were asked which one they would like to be like, which one would be most popular, which one they actually look like, and which doll they would prefer to play with. Try asking some younger girls these questions as they view the images and ask them why they think as they do. How do these answers compare with Starr et al.’s findings? What do you think are the most relevant influences on the way girls answer these questions?

Source: Dollz Mania’s ChaZie Dollmaker, dollzmania.net/ChaZieMaker.htm
PRESSURE TWO: BE A DIVA

The term “diva” is frequently used in popular culture not only to refer to celebrities known for their tendency to be demanding, entitled, and to engage in provocative behavior, but it is also used to reference all girls who are highly emotional and insistent about what they want. The new diva attitude still requires that girls act nice and polite to others, but at the same time encourages girls to demand what they want, to believe they deserve to be pampered, and to own the right merchandise. With labels like “diva” and “drama queen” regularly tossed out as labels for girls, “Diva” or “Princess” emblazoned on onesies, and t-shirts for girls printed with slogans such as “Professional Drama Queen” and “Spoiled Princess Soccer Club,” it is not surprising that many girls grow up learning to act like a diva, with designer fashions, sense of entitlement, and a “bad is the new good” attitude (Sax, 2010).

One important aspect of being a diva is to have an attitude that is driven by a desire to have the “right” things, which currently include designer clothing and a “passion for fashion” (also the tag line for the Bratz dolls). Girls receive the message that they should “shop till you drop,” engage in “retail therapy,” and acquire the latest fashions in order to be happy. The importance of this passion is currently being marketed to girls through the phrase “girl power,” which equates power with the ability to acquire and consume merchandise. In other words, to be powerful as a girl, one must also be powerful as a consumer; as stated by Harris (2004), today’s emphasis on girls’ consumerism “… commodifies girls’ culture and connects the achievement of a successful identity as a girl with looking the right way and buying the right things” (Harris, 2004, p. 17).

As examples of the trend emphasizing that empowerment comes from shopping (Douglas, 2010), current fashion and beauty magazines that have been modified for adolescent audiences (e.g., Teen Elle, Teen Vogue, CosmoGirl), as well as many television shows popular with young adolescent viewers (e.g., Gossip Girl, The OC, or reality shows like Teen Cribs, Keeping up with the Kardashians), also send the message that owning designer brands and the right merchandise are necessary for success and happiness. In addition to girl power through consumerism, media images simultaneously promote idealized images of beauty and success that influence how girls think they should look. In a recent national survey, most girls ages 13–17 say that the fashion industry and or the media place a lot of pressure on teen girls to be thin, and 48% of girls in the survey say they wish they were as skinny as the models they see in magazines (Girl Scout Research Institute, 2009).
In addition to a “passion for fashion,” the diva attitude also encompasses having a desire to be the center of attention and to be as famous as possible. More girls desire to be famous today than in the past (Girl Scout Research Institute, 2011a) and this is fueled in part by the popularity of reality television and Internet sites such as YouTube or Facebook, wherein a girl who posts a video clip or image that goes “viral” can become an instant celebrity. As girls observe the current celebrity culture of pop stars and the clips that are widely viewed, they see how acting out in edgy, rebellious, impulsive, and often sexually provocative ways can become the easiest avenue for gaining attention from others. Young women on reality shows are revered for sexually acting out and for fighting with one another. Further, as girls view the Diesel clothing ad campaign “Be Stupid,” they see girls acting out in risk-taking, sexually provocative scenes (encouraging girls to be “risky” and “stupid” in order to be popular). The television program Gossip Girl often posts advertisements featuring adolescent girls in sexually suggestive poses, promoting the show as “parents’ worst nightmare,” “a nasty piece of work,” and “mindblowingly inappropriate.”

Girls also learn that they can gain attention for criminal behavior or for mental health problems. Young female celebrities such as Lindsey Lohan and Paris Hilton receive high levels of media attention for their arrests, jail time, and rehabilitation programs. Several others have garnered additional attention for their highly publicized criminal behavior, eating disorders, self-injury, and substance use disorders. While on the one hand it is positive that these celebrities are openly discussing certain mental health problems, the culmination of these stories is harmful, in that the overall message for girls is they can gain fame through acting rebelliously, dramatically, and through engaging in high-risk behaviors (Sax, 2010).

A third aspect of the diva attitude is that girls learn to view one another as competitors. From an early age, the message they receive is that they should watch out for other girls: “they are your competitors, not just your friends” (Lamb & Brown, 2006, p. 44). For example, the most popular show among older children and teens is Pretty Little Liars (TVCom, 2012) in which girls compete with one another for their beauty, popularity, and ability to keep secrets from one another. In popular reality shows like Jersey Shore, Real World, and competition shows like The Bachelor and Project Runway, young women compete with one another for attention and a romantic partner. Surveys indicate that girls are paying attention to these messages: Girls who watch
reality TV (compared with those do not watch these programs) are significantly more likely to agree that:

- “By nature girls are catty and competitive.”
- “You have to lie to get what you want.”
- “Gossip is a normal part of relationships between girls.”
- “Being mean earns you more respect than being nice.”
- “Girls often have to compete for guys’ attention.”
- “It’s hard for me to trust other girls.”

Often as part of their competition with one another, today’s girls are also more likely to be physically aggressive toward others, and particularly toward other girls, than they were in the past (Garbarino, 2006). While girls’ aggression is sometimes viewed as a sign of empowerment (e.g., girls are more likely to express themselves openly and fight back when they perceive they have been wronged), at the same time their behavior is an indication that they lack the skills for using positive coping strategies to deal with perceived rejections and insults in an adaptive manner.

This shift toward female competition and aggression is seen as a reflection of the glamorization of physically aggressive women. Women and violence is portrayed as an aspect of the diva role in the entertainment industry through films, music videos, television programs, teen magazines, and video games (e.g., Lara Croft in *Tomb Raiders*). These images result in a normalization of female physical aggression (Prothrow-Stith and Spivak, 2005). According to Garbarino (2006), as girls grow up viewing television programs with verbally and physically aggressive female characters, girls learn to become desensitized to violence and to accept female aggression as normal and expected. Therefore, girls learn that not only is today’s diva image one of fashion, beauty, celebrity, and competition, but it can also involve an aggressive attitude and the idealization of physical violence. According to Dellasega and Nixon (2003):

Role models for today’s teens are not powerful women who have succeeded because of their persistence and kindness to others, but rather superstar singers acting like sexy schoolgirls and movie stars firing machine guns or using martial arts on opponents while wearing skintight jumpsuits. No wonder young women find themselves in a state of extreme confusion, unsure of how to relate to either themselves or others. (p. 3)
In sum, the diva persona comprises fashion-consciousness, a sense of entitlement, provocative behavior, and even physical aggression. The macrosystem messages regarding acting like a diva are primarily geared toward how girls act in person. Next, I will turn to the pressures girls receive about online activities that occur not live but in cyberspace; nevertheless, their online image comprises an important part of girls’ reality.

**PRESSURE THREE: WHO ARE YOU?: FIND OUT BY PLASTERING YOURSELF ONLINE**

Through almost constant use of the Internet, cell phones, and all social media, pre- and adolescent girls in essence live in a cyberbubble (Sax, 2010). The vast majority of preteens and adolescents have a cell phone and use the Internet, and this number will grow larger now that Facebook has announced plans to launch a preteen version of the site. However, many underage users are already using social networking sites. According to statistics in Consumer Reports cited by Orenstein (Too Young for Status Updates, 2012), 50% of parents with 12-year-olds said that their child already has a Facebook account and that most of those surveyed had lied about the child’s age so that he or she could open the account. It is not surprising, then, that 38% of past-year users of Facebook are under the age of 13, and 25% are under the age of 10.

While the potential dangers of children’s unsupervised use of the Internet in general and for social networking in particular have been well documented, less has been written about the effect of the ubiquitous cyberbubble on girls’ development and mental health. The cyberbubble tends to emphasize the appearance of popularity rather than actual relationships, as counted by the number of social networking friends one has (currently an average of 351 friends for adolescent girls, Girl Scout Research Institute, 2010), tagged pictures, “like” statuses, and comments made by others. In essence, the expression of a girl’s thoughts, feelings, and relationships is posted so that the world can see the activity (and inactivity) of her electronic life.

In addition to developing a face-to-face presentation based on her newly forming identity, today’s girls are also required to assemble a social networking image that is the ideal combination of witty phrases, pictures, products, and “likes.” As girls feel pressured to appear camera ready at all social events and to distill their lives into soundbites that can be posted online, girls become in essence a “micro-celebrity... having to carefully manage everything they say and do because they
know it can end up online within a matter of minutes” (Sax, 2010, p. 65). This can create what Turkle (2011) terms a “presentation anxiety” regarding a girl’s image on social networking sites. This anxiety causes her to spend hours of her life compiling her social networking pages, ensuring that she presents the right image. Presenting a “cool” online identity can be highly confusing for girls who are in the midst of trying to formulate an actual identity. Instead of expressing her authentic thoughts online, she “subtly adjusts what she is writing to suit what she thinks her friends want to read. After a while she might become the girl she is pretending to be” (Sax, 2010, p. 38). Not surprisingly, in a survey of 13–17 year old girls, 74% agreed that most girls their age use social networking sites to make themselves look “cooler than they are” (Girl Scout Research Institute, 2010). As a microcelebrity in her own social circle, her public and private lives are blurred, and she experiences the pressure of having to avoid social mistakes, always concerned about saying and doing the right thing.

This trend is also harmful in that being constantly connected is exhausting for today’s adolescent girls, who feel pressured to follow hundreds of friends’ status updates, pictures, and cell phone texts, often to the extent of neglecting their in-person relationships (Turkle, 2011). In addition, it can make them more body conscious and anxious about how their appearance is judged by others. For girls who are concerned about others’ approval, checking Facebook provides a barometer about how much they are liked or how appealing they are. Research suggests that the more girls care about their looks, the more they check their Facebook profiles, and the more they check their Facebook profiles, the more they care about their looks (Orenstein, 2012). In one national survey of 600 Facebook users age 16 to 40, 51% of users reported that seeing photos of themselves and others on Facebook makes them more conscious of their body and weight, and 44% said they are always conscious when attending social events that photos of them might get posted on Facebook. This finding leads researchers to caution that Facebook might be fueling a social comparison and body conscious mentality among users (Center for Eating Disorders at Sheppard Pratt, 2012). While this study included both adolescents and adults, it is conceivable that the percentages would be higher if only adolescent girls were included.

In addition, if girls want to be popular on social networks, they learn that displays of sexiness in their pictures are a primary avenue toward attaining that popularity (Hinshaw, 2009). Through social modeling of this practice, teens and preteens are encouraged to post suggestive photos of themselves, so as to be highly tagged or rated on such sites as
Facebook but also on sites such as Facethejury.com or Formspring.me. There is also an increase in adolescents’ use of sexting in recent years. According to a 2012 study of high school students, 28% of the sample reported having sent a naked picture of themselves through text or email, and 31% reported having asked someone else for sext. More than half of the students (57%) had been asked to send a sext. Girls (68.4%) more often than boys reported having been asked to send a sext. Girls who engaged in sexting behaviors were more likely to have had sexual intercourse and to have experienced a higher prevalence of risky sex behaviors (multiple partners, using drugs or alcohol) (Temple et al., 2012). It is important to note that while adolescents might be posting or sexting pictures to gain attention or popularity, these same girls may inadvertently send the wrong message about their willingness to participate in sexual activity (Oppliger, 2008). Clearly, sexualized images of girls posted through cell phones or online increases the risk of others viewing them as sexual objects and increases their vulnerability to sexual victimization (Curry & Choate, 2010).

Online use that can lead to inauthentic identity development, presentation anxiety, body monitoring, and vulnerability to sexualization are negative aspects of this cultural trend. However, most girls claim that social networking and texting helps them stay closer to their friends (Girl Scout Research Institute, 2010). While this is one positive aspect of online use for girls’ friendships, heavy online communication is also related to relational aggression and cyberbullying. During the past decade, a large body of research has centered on this aspect of girls’ friendships, termed relational aggression (RA): the act of hurting others through manipulating or harming their relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Underwood, 2003). Since the inception of the term by Crick and her colleagues, researchers have demonstrated that RA is used significantly more by girls than boys and is a relatively normative conflict style in girls’ peer groups (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). According to Underwood (2003), girls’ use of RA is powerful because it threatens the asset girls’ value the most during this time: losing acceptance by friends and romantic partners.

Cyberbullying is a type of RA that takes place using electronic technology (e.g., devices and equipment such as cell phones, computers, and tablets, as well as communication tools including social media sites, text messages, chat, and websites). Examples of cyberbullying include mean text messages or emails, rumors sent by email or posted on social networking sites, and posting embarrassing pictures, videos, websites, or fake profiles (Stopbullying.gov, 2012). According to the 2011 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Eaton et al., 2010), approximately
16% of 9th to 12th graders say that they have been bullied online, although this is likely to be an underestimate of the problem due to underreporting and ever-changing technologies. Several authors claim that cyberbullying is becoming increasingly common because it is faster to use than other methods, reaches more people, and the bully never has to face the victim (Dellasega & Nixon, 2003; Ophelia Project, 2007; Simmons, 2002). Cyberbullying decreases the responsibility and accountability aggressors feel for their actions, it can free aggressors to say things they might not otherwise say, and victims are even more negatively affected because they don’t know who the aggressors are (Blair, 2003). Cyberbullying is also related to the previously discussed findings that girls report feeling as if other girls can’t be trusted and that gossip and cattiness are normal parts of girls’ relationships. If girls do not express their feelings toward one another openly, or are socialized to believe that being mean to others is a normal part of being a girl, then RA and cyberbullying behaviors will likely continue as part of girls’ online experiences.

It is clear that girls experience pressures to look and act in a certain way, both online and in person. The next pressure explores how all of the previous themes interact in such a way that girls experience pressure to conform to all societal expectations simultaneously.

**PRESSURE FOUR: YOU CAN HAVE IT ALL, AND DO IT ALL PERFECTLY**

As reviewed previously, girls are socialized to look hot and sexy, to act like a diva, and to be dedicated to maintaining an active online image. These goals in and of themselves are impossible for most girls to achieve, but in addition, girls learn that they must also excel in academics and sports, and that they must make all of their efforts appear effortless. Indeed, if a girl looks as if she is trying too hard, then she is viewed negatively (Hinshaw, 2009). In his book *The Triple Bind*, Hinshaw identifies the bind for today’s girls: to excel at what have traditionally been considered “girl” skills—care taking, relationship building, cooperation, empathy, and finding and keeping a boyfriend; along with displaying high levels of what have traditionally been considered “boy” skills—becoming a competitive athlete and scholar through assertiveness, competitiveness, and commitment to being a winner at all costs. To add to these two traditional pressures, girls must also become perfect, having and doing it all, whether she becomes a professional athlete, tenured professor, reality show star, or future CEO. According to Orenstein (2011), she must be both Cinderella and
Supergirl, aggressive and agreeable, smart and stunning, all the while undergoing paralyzing pressure to be perfect. The nonprofit organization Girls Inc. commented on the pressure for girls to be “supergirl” in 2000 with the publication of the report, *The Supergirl Dilemma: The Pressure on Girls to Be Perfect, Accomplished, Thin, and Accommodating*, noting that these expectations for girls are unrealistic and can result in negative outcomes for girls.

The pressure for perfection teaches some girls to work tirelessly in today’s fast-paced culture to multitask her way toward the goal of meeting unrealistic and contradictory goals, setting her up for a sense of frustration and failure. For example, if a girl learns that she should be highly concerned about others’ feelings and do whatever she can to maintain her relationships, how can she simultaneously be highly competitive on her volleyball team, competing against her teammates and friends for the top spot on the team? If a girl’s strengths are rooted in her ability to connect with and care for others, how can she nurture this strength while also fighting to be the “winner” both academically and athletically? She is wondering, can she be expected to be a Diva, Bachelorette, or Real Housewife while also running a Fortune 500 company or becoming the next U.S. president?

In response, many girls are learning that they must overlook these contradictions in order to do it all, and to be it all. In her book, *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters* (2007), Courtney Martin writes about the pressures that current girls and women have learned to place on themselves:

> We are the daughters of feminists who said, “You can be anything” and we heard “You have to be everything.” We must get A’s. We must make money. We must save the world. We must be thin. We must be unflappable. We must be beautiful. We are the anorectics, the bulimics, the overexercisers, the overeaters. We must be perfect. We must make it look effortless. (p. 18)

Susan Douglas (2010) also wrote about this conflict as becoming the price for success that girls (and future women) realize they must pay:

> We can excel in school, play sports, go to college, aspire to—and get—jobs previously reserved for men, be working mothers, and so forth. But in exchange we must obsess about our faces, weight, breast size, clothing brands, decorating, perfectly calibrated child-rearing, about pleasing men, and being envied by other women. (p. 16)
These pressures to measure up in all areas can be exhausting for girls, particularly if they perform out of fear of being rejected or viewed as unacceptable if they do not live up to supergirl expectations. The accumulation of these pressures and the belief that she must achieve these standards of perfection can lead to negative consequences for today’s girls, as explored in the following section.

CONSEQUENCES OF CURRENT TRENDS
FOR GIRLS’ DEVELOPMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH

As illustrated through the preceding themes, girls are socialized to reach the unrealistic current ideal for females, and few will be able to measure up to this standard. In a culture in which girls have power in ways that they have never been able to enjoy before, there is also pressure on them to look and act in ways that are disempowering, contradictory, and inauthentic to their developing sense of self. Instead of thriving in this new world of “girl power,” many girls are struggling and are developing mental health problems as they encounter the stressors of adolescence. It is important, therefore, for counselors to understand the processes through which these macrosystem pressures are experienced in earliest girlhood, internalized by the pre-teenage years, and then manifested as mental health symptoms in the adolescent period. Three theories offer a framework for conceptualizing the way that girls learn and internalize cultural pressures. First, Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1998) posits that the mass media projects a system of messages, images, and dialogues that construct a portrayal of reality for viewers. For those who are frequently exposed to this system, the message accumulates over a period of time, so that viewers adopt these same media perspectives as their own perspective on reality. As a result, viewers learn to internalize media views as their own beliefs and value systems (Gerbner, 1998).

While Cultivation Theory explains that media does strongly influence the beliefs of its viewers, Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (1991) discusses more specifically how the belief system is learned. In the case of adolescent girls and gender role stereotypes discussed throughout this chapter, girls learn which behaviors are considered appropriate or inappropriate for girls, as well as those behaviors that will bring about desired rewards (e.g., if I look and act this way, I will be noticed, accepted, and have value). Social learning occurs through modeling (through viewing female sex models on television, which are also reinforced in her family and peer group), her lived experiences (e.g.,
opportunities or situations in which she is rewarded or discouraged from engaging in certain behaviors), and direct instruction from others (e.g., magazine articles tell her that if she dresses in a certain outfit, it will be certain to get a boy’s attention). In other words, she learns of macrosystem pressures and expectations for girls, tries them out in real-world settings, and, based on the feedback she receives, she will adopt the attitude and behavior as part of what it means for her to be a girl.

Cultivation and Social Learning Theories are applicable to media influences on children’s development in general, while Self-Objectification Theory is helpful to explore the specific process through which girls internalize cultural pressures regarding sexualized appearance and behavior. Self-Objectification Theory (Frederickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998) asserts that if girls learn that sexual appeal will result in their social success, they learn to see themselves as sexual objects (APA, 2007; Choate & Curry, 2009). As they absorb these messages from the larger culture, girls may also have personal experiences that serve to reinforce these pressures. As girls are exposed to this same consistent message from macro- and microsystems, they begin to adopt these cultural attitudes as their own standards for self-evaluation and worth. Girls gradually begin to view themselves in an objectified manner, evaluating themselves in the third person (e.g., “How do I appear to others?”), critically judging their bodies and general appearance against idealized cultural standards. In turn, when a girl self-objectifies, she is likely to engage in excessive body monitoring, feelings of preoccupation with others’ evaluations, and a feeling of being constantly “checked out” by others, particularly becoming aware of the “male gaze” (Frederickson et al., 1998).

McKinley explained self-objectification as consisting of three components: body surveillance, body shame, and control beliefs. Body surveillance refers to the pressure a girl feels to monitor her appearance, repeatedly checking to make sure she looks her best, and becoming overly concerned that she will be evaluated negatively by others (McKinley, 1999). Body shame occurs when a girl perceives that her body does not meet the media’s standards of beauty, thinness, or sexiness. When she experiences body shame, she will not only feel negatively about her body, she feels like she is a bad person because she does not meet beauty ideals (Choate & Curry, 2009). Control beliefs refer to a girl’s attitude that she should work her hardest in order to control her appearance and to do whatever it takes to achieve cultural standards of beauty.

Research indicates that the self-objectification is found in girls as early as age 11 (Lindberg, Grabe, & Hyde, 2007) and has been
demonstrated experimentally with 6-year-old girls (Starr et al., 2012, as reported previously) and in 13-year-olds who engage in frequent music television viewing (Grabe & Hyde, 2009). Further, it is linked to negative psychological consequences that serve to impede girls’ performance in a variety of domains including academic performance, career aspirations, and personal development (Davies, Spencer, Quinn, & Gerhardstein, 2002; Frederickson et al., 1998; Halpern, 2006; Hinshaw, 2009; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Tolman, Impett, Tracy, & Michael, 2006). It is concerning that when a girl is focused on body monitoring, self-control, self-evaluation, and concerns about how she is being evaluated by others, she has fewer resources available for other life activities. As she attempts to focus on her daily routine, her ability to concentrate becomes fragmented with feelings of being evaluated negatively by herself or others (Choate & Curry, 2009; Davies et al., 2002; Frederickson et al., 1998).

Harms to Academic Performance

Self-objectification can have a negative impact on girls’ academic performance when girls are distracted, causing a decrease in their available mental resources needed for challenging academic tasks (Frederickson et al., 1998). When her consciousness is fragmented, a girl has decreased opportunities to experience peak motivational states (known as *flow*, Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Also, spending many hours watching music or YouTube videos, texting, checking and posting on Facebook, and multitasking while using these forms of media is related to negative social outcomes in girls 8–12 years old. Researchers found that girls who frequently multitask with digital devices were actually more likely to report not feeling normal, feeling less social success, sleeping less, and having more friends with whom their parents perceive as bad influences (Pea et al., 2012).

A classic study by Frederickson and colleagues (1998) also demonstrates how self-objectification can distract from academic performance. In a sample of college students, participants were asked to try on either a swimsuit or a sweater and observe themselves in a full-length mirror (with no observers present). The women in the swimsuit condition performed worse on a subsequent complex math test compared to the women wearing a sweater, even though there were no differences in ability between the two groups at the outset of the study. The males in the study performed equally well under both conditions. While this study was conducted with college students, it is not hard to
extrapolate that when an adolescent girl engages in body surveillance, self-evaluation, self-control behaviors, and concern about others, judgment of her, her mental resources are not fully directed to the required task. If she is overly concerned about what others are thinking about her appearance, she may be less likely to participate in the classroom setting and will be distracted from her academic performance. In turn, it is likely that she will not perform to her fullest potential in academic or future professional environments (Choate & Curry, 2009).

Another line of research that is related to women’s internalization of gender stereotypes are stereotype threat studies. Stereotype threat occurs when a person’s group membership is made salient at the time a cognitive test is being administered, so that stereotypes about one’s group, such as “girls are not good at math” are activated for that individual. The test taker is then threatened that she risks being judged by those stereotypes, or that the negative stereotype could provide a plausible explanation for her performance (e.g., “I worry they will think I am not good at math just because I am a girl”; Davies et al., 2002). Several studies found that young women asked to view gender-stereotypical commercials (e.g., clips of women who are only concerned about appearance and become overwhelmed with business-oriented tasks) actually performed worse on a math test when compared to women who did not watch those types of commercials. Although these studies measure the short-term effects of stereotype activation in women, it is plausible that these gender stereotypes are activated many times per day in girls when they frequently view popular media. As described previously in the chapter, because girls spend more time viewing television and using digital devices than any other activity, they are reminded of how current culture views girls’ and women’s worth and abilities on an all-too-frequent basis. If girls begin to believe pervasive gender stereotypes, they may be hesitant to enroll in upper-level math and science classes in both high school and in college (Halpern, 2006), which may in turn limit their future educational and/or career opportunities.

Harms to Mental Health

Self-objectification is also closely related to body dissatisfaction and negative body image, which is in turn associated with poor self-esteem, early smoking onset, unnecessary cosmetic surgery, and poor body esteem and eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating disorder (Stice & Shaw, 2003; Tolman et al., 2006; see Chapter 4,
Self-objectification and negative body image are also highly associated with anxiety and depression, which is increasing in adolescent girls in recent years (Rudolph, Hammen, & Daley, 2006; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2012; see Chapter 3, this volume). As mentioned in a previous section, a recent study by Grabe and Hyde analyzed the relationship between adolescent girls, music television viewing and their psychological well-being, and found that music television is directly associated to self-objectification, which in turn is related to body esteem, dieting, depressive symptoms, anxiety, and confidence in math ability (Grabe & Hyde, 2009).

Another potential consequence of girls’ self-objectification is sexual harassment and victimization (see Chapter 7, this volume). When both girls and boys are frequently exposed to sexualized media messages regarding women’s value and worth, they begin to adopt these attitudes and learn to see girls and women as simplified types or objects, not as people. As this occurs in the early years of childhood, it becomes increasingly acceptable for children to treat girls and women with less respect, compassion, and empathy, and to act toward them in disrespectful and sexually degrading ways (Lamb & Brown, 2006). This can lead to the normalization of sexual harassment for both boys and girls. Unfortunately, girls regularly experience sexual harassment as part of their daily lives at school. For example, according to the most recent American Association of University Women [AAUW], Hill, and Kearl report (2011), fully half of students experienced some form of sexual harassment during the 2010 to 2011 school year and 87% of these students said it had a negative effect on them. Girls are more likely to be sexually harassed than boys (56% vs. 40%) both in person and via electronic means. Thirteen percent of girls said they had been touched in an unwelcome, sexual way, 9% were physically intimidated in a sexual way, and 4% report that they were forced to do something sexual at school.

Further, girls are more likely than boys to say they have been negatively affected by sexual harassment and were most affected by unwanted sexual comments, gestures, and having sexual rumors spread electronically about them. Girls were more likely than boys to report that these behaviors caused them to have trouble sleeping, to not want to go to school, to feel sick or nauseated, to find it hard to concentrate to study, and to change the way they went to or came home from school (AAUW et al., 2011). It is not difficult to imagine that frequent experiences of sexual harassment and its negative outcomes have a cumulative effect on both perpetrators and victims of harassment. Based on widespread harassment by peers and potential romantic partners, students may
become desensitized toward viewing girls only according to their sexual appeal and what they have to offer sexually. In turn, both boys and girls may experience increasing difficulty in determining what constitutes consensual and nonconsensual sexual activity in their developing romantic relationships during the adolescent years.

In today’s culture in which girls are socialized to be sexy in order to be acceptable or valued, girls may even confuse sexual harassment with the acceptance that they seek from others (Grube & Lens, 2003). When sexualized attitudes and behaviors are normalized through the media images they view and the relationships they observe, girls will be less confident in labeling or reporting offensive behaviors as sexual harassment. This may in turn influence their future decisions to report more severe forms of unwanted sexual behavior, including sexual assault and rape (Choate & Curry, 2009).

Finally, girls who self-objectify may also learn that the best way to achieve acceptance and to be noticed is to present themselves to others in an overly sexualized manner (either in person or online). Younger girls are learning to appear and act older than they are (see “Pressure One”), and generally this will involve a sexualized self-presentation. While girls may not be aware of the message that their appearance or behavior sends to others, this places them at risk for sexual victimization by predators. Particularly for girls who experience early pubertal onset, many girls may not have the developmental capacity for clearly understanding the dangers of potential exploitation and victimization. Concerned parents, counselors, and mentors are needed to assist girls in seeking affirmation from positive sources (and from providing it for themselves). They are also needed to provide guidance as they help to protect girls from high-risk online presentations and in-person activities.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview of the macrosystem for girls as it exists in current Western societies and to discuss how the system impacts girls throughout their early years and into adolescence. Today’s girls are learning that their appearance should be “hot and sexy,” their actions should be diva-like, and their online presence should be even “cooler” than they are in person. Adding to these expectations, girls also learn that they should be “supergirls”—smart, athletic, kind, competitive, and beautiful. Clearly, these macrosystem messages can be complex and even contradictory for girls as they are in a developmental period in which they are trying to establish
a sense of identity. These pressures can become an impediment to the development of a girl's authentic sense of self, affecting her ability to learn who she is and what she believes apart from what others expect of her. This is of great concern during adolescence as girls begin to prioritize their time and activities, focusing on what they perceive to be most important. While conforming to cultural norms, they might ignore the development of other important life areas such as spirituality, creativity, true friendship, or community service. As described in the previous section, this can lead to limited self-development, an over-focus on appearance, and negative academic or mental health consequences for girls who feel trapped underneath all of these pressures.

The four pressures discussed in this chapter will also be explored and integrated throughout the forthcoming chapters on the treatment of mental health concerns in adolescent girls. In the next chapter, I will turn from these macrosystem issues in order to highlight the microsystems that directly impinge on girls’ lives—their families, peers, communities, and schools—and how these systems interact with an individual girl’s physical and psychosocial development.

CASE EXAMPLE

Caitlyn is a 13-year-old girl who lives with her newly divorced mother and two younger brothers, ages 4 and 8. Before the divorce, she was a good student and was active in a local soccer league. She had always been excited to meet new people and try out new things, but now she is reluctant to do anything with her family. She is upset with her parents about the divorce and has a conflictual relationship with her mother, especially now that her mother frequently asks her to babysit her two younger brothers in the afternoons and evenings. She has stopped caring about school, her grades have dropped, and since her mother is unable to drive her to and from soccer practice, she has had to quit the team. Now when she is home, the only thing she likes to do is spend time in her room watching television and movies, visiting Facebook and texting her friends on her smartphone. Because her family leaves her alone when she is in her room with her door closed, she is free to watch whatever she wants on television and has unlimited access to the Internet. She loves to watch reality television shows and to follow her favorite celebrities on Facebook and Twitter. She loves to see how they dress and how they manage to get attention. Even when she is babysitting her brothers, she keeps her phone and laptop close by for texting and posting online. She feels anxiety when she cannot be near her computer or phone.

(continued)
The more time she spends online, however, the more she becomes dissatisfied with herself. Her mother is not aware of this, but she has started hanging out with a new group of girls at school and online after school. The girls tend to wear the latest fashions, including sexy lingerie and suggestive t-shirts, and they are also interested in boys who are in high school. These friendships have caused her to start becoming more self-conscious about her body. Caitlyn has recently started her period and has developed full breasts, which she likes, but she has also gained weight in her stomach, hips, and thighs, which she hates. She feels ashamed of her lower body, and she has tried several diets and exercise routines to help her lose weight. Her friends have told her about some diet pills that they can obtain for her, and she wants to take them so she will be as thin as the actresses she sees on TV. Her mother is always complaining about her own weight and is always on a diet, so Caitlyn and her mother sometimes compare their diet strategies.

Despite her negative view of her body, Caitlyn thinks she will feel better if she can wear lingerie and clothes like her friends. She knows that this is what older boys notice, and she really wants some older boys to pay attention to her the way that they do with her friends. Her mother has agreed to buy her these new clothes, but only if Caitlyn will babysit to earn the money for purchasing the items. Her mother doesn’t like her dressing this way, but lately she is too tired to fight with her and just wants some peace in their relationship.

Caitlyn has also started spending lots of time at night posting flirtatious pictures to her Facebook page and in even posting some sexually suggestive statements in an effort to get noticed by a boy in high school that she is now interested in. One night he texts her, and they text until 4 a.m., all while her mother believes she is sleeping. She does not know how she will act the next time she sees him, because they have never actually met.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Which of the media messages described in this chapter seems to be having an impact on Caitlyn?
2. Which of the four macrosystem themes or pressures has Caitlyn internalized, and in what ways does this put her at risk?
3. Does Caitlyn need counseling, or is this just normal teen behavior? If you were her counselor, how would you want to intervene with her? What does she need in order to thrive?
RESOURCES

www.sparksummit.com
This website addresses the sexualization of girls and women. It also helps empower girls to take a stand against sexualization of girls in mainstream culture.

www.girlsinc.org
A non-profit organization that encourages girls to learn how to excel academically, physically, mentally, and financially. It also encourages girls to explore careers in the math, science, and technology fields.

www.poweredbygirls.org
A great tool to use to encourage media literacy by promoting media activism in girls.

www.missrepresentation.org
This site focuses on countering stereotypes and negative attitudes toward women in mainstream culture.

www.about-face.org
A site to teach girls and women media literacy skills to equip them with tools to resist harmful media messages.

www.braincake.org
A website that encourages girls to pursue interests in math, science, and technology careers and activities.

www.rachelsimmons.com
A website that has great resources and blogs for girls to explore to help deal with difficult issues in their lives. It also gives recommendations for books about different challenges and situations girls may experience.

www.hghw.org
Hardy Girls, Healthy Women promotes health, well-being, and independence in girls and women, and offers links to resources and programs for girls.