After years of social gains and with bright futures within reach, why are things still so difficult for middle school girls?

STORY BY LORY HOUGH
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JONATHAN KOZOWYK
September, The New York Times came out with a story with a promising opening paragraph that made me happy: “Girls have been told they can be anything they want to be, and it shows. They are seizing opportunities closed to previous generations — in science, sports, and leadership.”

And then I read the second paragraph: “But they’re also getting another message: What they look like matters more than any of that.”

The piece came on the heels of a slew of recent research that showed a rise in depression and anxiety and a dip in confidence for girls, especially as they enter middle school. Friends were telling me stories about their struggling daughters, particularly around social media and feeling left out. Around the same time, a group of us saw the movie Eighth Grade, about an apprehensive 13-year-old girl enduring the last week of middle school. As we left the theater, several of the women immediately started talking about their own middle school experiences — how uncomfortable they felt, how horrible it was. They talked about scenes that resonated with them.

I remember thinking: Wait. Have things really not gotten better for girls? My friends were in middle school 25, 30 years ago. As The New York Times article pointed out, girls today are seizing opportunities previously unavailable to them. They are more likely to sign online petitions and volunteer. They are doing better academically, outperforming boys in English and language arts, and often in math. Women outnumber men in college, especially women from low-income and minority families. Kayla, the protagonist in Eighth Grade, was smart, creative, and kind.

So why was she also painfully awkward and seemingly friendless? Why haven’t things gotten better for middle school girls? And why, I wondered, are we still having these conversations?

I started talking to academics and developmental psychologists. To guidance counselors and parents, to friends and coworkers and middle schoolers. I pulled out some of my books from the early 1990s, when I first dipped into this subject, when girl struggles were first being studied in depth. When headlines in The New York Times read, “Confident at 11, Confused at 16.”

Almost no one I talked to, including Bo Burnham, the director of Eighth Grade, was surprised that despite the progress made — the better grades, the better opportunities — middle school girls were still suffering. Some even felt it was getting harder.

“I’m not surprised, no,” Burnham says. “There’s been a lot of progress made, but the cultural pressures are still insane. And culture is what leads you at that age, I think.”

Especially, it seems, for girls. “Girls in middle school are hitting the culture in very ferocious ways,” says Niobe Way, Ed.D.’94, a professor of developmental psychology at New York University and author of several books, including Deep Secrets.

It’s more like a collision, actually. Although girls and boys are both affected negatively as they move into adolescence, boys tend to lose their way later, and often in less self-directed ways. (This, I know, could be its own feature story.) For girls, the transition to middle school is usually when they start to grasp what society really expects from females.

Burnham saw this when he was prepping for his movie, as he watched hundreds of adolescents’ vlogs online. Girls tended to talk about their souls, boys about things like video games.

“I think our culture forces girls to ask deeper questions of themselves earlier than boys,” he says. “I feel like our culture asks boys ‘What do you like to do?’ and asks girls ‘Who are you?’ I think there’s an immense interior mental pressure put on girls, so ‘deep’ is kind of their starting point. You can’t not be deep when you’ve been buried. It’s also a very specific time in life, and girls are mentally and emotionally maturing a bit quicker at 13 maybe.”

Lyn Mikel Brown, Ed.D.’89, a professor at Colby College and author of several books on female development, says part of this is “the kind of increased perspective-taking that happens at early adolescence, when girls start to see how others see them and the importance of performing as the right kind of girl.” Who they once were when they were 8, 9, 10 — confident, sure, spunky, even bossy — “isn’t okay, and what they thought was true is no longer true.”

Simone de Beauvoir wrote about this in The Second Sex back in 1949: “Girls who were the subjects of their own lives become the objects of others’ lives. Girls stop being and start seeming.”

The pressure that comes from this understanding, this transition from subject to object, disorienters — and changes — many girls as they move out of elementary school and into middle school. In 1991, when the groundbreaking study Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America was released by the American Association of University Women (AAUW), 60 percent of elementary-age girls said they were happy the way they were; 67 percent of boys said the same thing. By middle school, those numbers had dropped for both genders, but significantly for girls overall: to 37 percent, with 56 percent for boys. (The report found that black and Latinx girls fared much better: 59 percent of black middle school girls said they were happy the way they were;
“I think there’s an immense interior mental pressure put on girls, so ‘deep’ is kind of their starting point. You can’t not be deep when you’ve been buried.”

BO BURNHAM, DIRECTOR, EIGHTH GRADE
54 percent for Latinx girls.) Unfortunately it hasn’t gotten better. In 2018, pollsters from Ypulse and the Confidence Code for Girls found that between the ages of 8 and 14, girls’ confidence levels fall by 30 percent. At the lowest point, at age 14, boys’ confidence is still 27 percent higher than girls.

Professor Martin West found similar confidence drops for girls when he surveyed 400,000 California students to see how social-emotional learning develops from fourth grade to senior year. While girls have a higher level of self-management and self-awareness compared to boys, he found that their self-confidence begins lagging in sixth grade and only starts to increase in high school — almost the opposite of boys that age.

“Boys’ confidence in their ability to succeed academically peaks in sixth grade and then declines steadily through 11th grade,” West says, citing the report, “but the total drop in confidence between fourth grade and eighth grade for boys is less than one sixth as large as the drop for girls. And girls’ confidence continues to fall at a faster rate than that of boys through 11th grade.”

It’s why we start hearing once self-possessed girls saying “I don’t know,” in contrast to boys, who start to say, “I don’t care.” (In fact, Way writes in her new book, The Crisis of Connection, boys do care, especially about friendships, which more resemble the plot of Love Story than Lord of the Flies.) Brown made the “I don’t know” connection while she was studying gender issues at Harvard in the late 1980s and early 1990s with former Ed School Professor Carol Gilligan. She was also working on a seminal book, Meeting at the Crossroads: Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development.

“Girls were wondering, Is it safe to say what I really think? I’m not sure. Better to hedge my bet and play ignorant,” Brown says. “We heard a big increase in ‘I don’t know’ responses at early adolescence from girls who were pretty open and outspoken just a year earlier.”

This struggle to stay connected to their selves, to say what they think and feel, has been referred to as girls “losing their voice” although Brown prefers a different word to describe this major transition.

“I like ‘crisis’ rather than ‘loss of voice,’” she says. “We found girls really struggle and often resist at this time, and they don’t lose their voices as much as they take them underground.” This “crisis of connection,” as Brown and Gilligan call it, forces girls to make a choice.

“Can they stay with themselves and what they feel and think and know and go out of sync with the world,” Brown says, “or get in sync with the world but not with themselves?”

When this happens, the struggle can be too hard for girls to understand at this point in their development, Mary Pipher writes in Reviving Ophelia. “They become overwhelmed and symptomatic.” One way this shows up: anxiety and depression. A 2017 study in the journal Pediatrics found that between the years 2005 and 2014, adolescent depression rose steadily, but particularly for girls. For boys, the prevalence of a major depressive episode increased from 4.5 percent in 2004 to 5.7 percent in 2014. For girls, it increased from 13.1 percent to 17.3 percent.

Chessie Shaw, Ed.M.’98, a counselor in Massachusetts, sees the anxiety at her middle school, especially once girls reach seventh grade.

“Seventh grade is when I have seen some girls start to question their academic abilities and intelligence. This is especially true in math and science. It’s also when a lot of anxiety and self-harm behaviors come to light,” she says. For example, “I definitely see the most cutting in seventh grade. It’s often around feeling that they aren’t doing well enough in school or that they aren’t ‘good enough’ in some way.” By the end of eighth, some girls regain their confidence, “however, for another smaller group, it’s when real mental health difficulties start to entrench — suicidal ideation and attempts, experimenting with alcohol and drugs and sex.”

She sees a lot less of this self-destructive behavior with girls of color — a pattern that is consistent with the 1991 AAUW research. “There is definitely relational aggression between girls of color, but it doesn’t appear to result in as much anxiety and self-doubt as in white girls,” she says. “Students of color who participate in the Metco program — a Massachusetts program that sends kids from underperforming to higher performing school districts — seem to have a strong support group in each other. I wonder if this outside-of-school support group is what, in part, shields them from some of the depression.”

So is it actually harder to be a middle school girl today? Rachel Simmons, author of Odd Girl Out, thinks that in some ways it is, in part, paradoxically, because of the gains women and girls have made.

“We hope for girls to be smart and brave and interested in STEM fields, but we still expect them to be sexually attractive and have a witty and appealing online presence,” she told ParentMap in 2018. “No matter how many achievements they accrue, they feel that they are not enough as they are.... We haven’t really upgraded our expectations; we’ve just added on to the old ones.”

These expectations pile on the pressure. “Add this ‘role overload’ to the fact that girls continue to need to please others first and be likable,” Simmons says. “Girls are still raised with a psychology that is trained to think about other people before themselves. This all is a real recipe for unhappiness.”

The 2018 Ypulse Confidence Code poll found that more than half of teen girls feel pressure to be perfect, while three in four worry about failing. Between ages 12 and 13, the percentage of girls who say they’re “not allowed” to fail increases by a stag-
“Girls in middle school are hitting the culture in very ferocious ways.”

NIobe Way, Ed.D.’94
which brings us to what truly has changed for middle schoolers since we were kids: social media. Given that girls spend more than 90 minutes a day on social media, compared to boys at 52 minutes, according to Common Sense Media in 2015, it’s not surprising that reports have surfaced citing the negative impact social media could be having on adolescents, especially girls. Beyond the reports, it’s also what I’m hearing from friends helping their kids navigate technology. There are fewer complaints from parents with boys. They’re there, but more have to do with playing Fortnite and less about the anxiety that develops after reading group texts that border on bullying or feeling left out after looking at photos on Instagram. Feeling excluded certainly isn’t new, but back when I was that age, if you weren’t invited to the mall, you rarely found out, or you found out days after. And perhaps most crucial: No one else shared your humiliation because only the people involved knew about the slight (or perceived slight). Nowadays, seeing photos online of your friends at Starbucks without you is immediate and very public. All of your other friends see it, too. Cell phones, writes Simmons, have become the new bathroom wall.

Emily Weinstein, Ed.M.'14, Ed.D.'17, an Ed School postdoctoral fellow who studies the digital lives of young people, says this has a real impact on adolescent relationships.

“Teens in my interview studies describe how the real-time nature of social apps means that a Friday night can be immediately ruined,” she says. “If you learn by word of mouth on a Monday that your friends hung out without you, you probably still enjoyed your own weekend. In contrast, learning about exclusion in real time on Instagram can doubly disrupt your social connections because it makes you feel disconnected from the people who left you out and it can interfere with your experience of connecting with the people who you’re actually with.”

Today’s apps are also more demanding than they were, even just a few years ago. As Burnham told NPR when talking about his early career making YouTube videos, “When I was on social media, it was like, MySpace, which was, OK, post a profile picture of yourself and list some of your interests and list your friends. And now it’s Instagram, Twitter. ‘What do you look like? What are you thinking?’” he says. “Those are really baser, deeper, stranger questions. And the way kids interface with it, I think, changes the way they feel about the world and themselves.”

Shaw says this goes beyond just feeling left out, especially with everyone curating what they post online by picking only their best photos or altering photos with fun, flattering filters.

“Of course selfies are designed to make the subject look in their best light,” she says. “Seeing a picture online can feel even worse than if the uninvited happened upon them in person.”

Social media also allows people to say and do things they might not in person.

“The alleged ‘beauty’ of social media is that you can be anything and anyone,” Shaw says. “However, how it plays out for most kids is feeling it’s OK to say and do lots of things one would never do in real life. Most boys would never ask girls to lift up their shirts in real life. However plenty do online. Most girls would never say such mean things about a classmate to their face, but they do online.”
There are also a lot of veiled insults and inside jokes that get shared, she says. “Because the poster has a much larger audience on social media, any little mean joke can balloon into a much bigger event and can quickly go from involving five or six girls to almost the whole grade. There are also lots of group texts with sometimes up to 50 kids on them. Kids will delete and block each other and say mean things to each other constantly on these chats. When a parent or I say something like, ‘Just take yourself out of the chat,’ they won’t. The chat is too much a part of their social life. If they left it, they feel like they wouldn’t have any friends, so they endure the comments and constant fights.”

As one mom of two middle school daughters acknowledges, giving up popular apps isn’t easy.

“I believe that Instagram is evil for middle school, and yet I understand that not having access to social media can hamstring a teen socially,” she says. Although her eighth-grader’s coping strategy when she sees photos and feels left out is to put the phone away, she can’t seem to stay away. “Oftentimes she just blindly scrolls through liking everyone’s stuff because that is what you are supposed to do and how you get likes back,” she says. “She also rarely posts her own pics. Her profile is nearly empty. It’s too stressful for her, and her fear of rejection or embarrassment is intense. I get that; I’m the same way.”

Another mom reluctantly agreed to let her daughter get an app called musical.ly, which lets users make videos set to music. She thought she was shielding her from Instagram and Snapchat issues.

“I can remember one morning when she was getting ready for school. I went in to check on her and she was sitting on her bed in tears,” she says. “As we talked and I dug deeper, I realized she had been on musical.ly, seeing a girl in her grade making a video.” To her daughter, this girl was perfectly dressed with hair and makeup just right. Her daughter “went on about how she didn’t have cute clothes or wasn’t as pretty or fit or popular as this girl. As a mother, this broke my heart.” And all of this happened before the school day even started.

Social media itself isn’t to blame for how girls today are feeling. I know that. It’s not the apps themselves that are the problems—it’s how they are being used. I also know they can be used in positive ways, especially for girls who normally feel silenced. Elsie Fisher, the actress who plays Kayla in the Eighth Grade movie (and who was in eighth grade when the movie was filmed), told Vulture last summer that while the Internet gives space to cyberbullies, it also gives space to people who don’t feel confident taking space.

“It can be used for amazing things,” she says. After I watched Eighth Grade, I thought about the spaces that Kayla created: floating through school, nervous and self-conscious, and at home, alone, confidently making self-help videos. Was this ability to create two selves a bad thing?

Burnham doesn’t see it that way.

“There certainly is something sad about not being able to embody the ‘you’ you want to be in real life,” he says, “but I’m glad Kayla has a place where she feels comfortable being confident, or pretending to be confident, which to me is just as good. I think we adults often think of the Internet as a place where kids are severely judged, which is true, but it is also often the only safe space kids have to express themselves honestly, whatever that word means.”

Weinstein agrees with Burnham.

“My interpretation was that Kayla was figuring out who she wanted to be, and she was in the process of learning how to express that identity,” she says. “While Kayla didn’t initially feel comfortable raising her voice in offline settings, her YouTube channel provided an outlet to start practicing. And then this practice did transfer to her offline life. Remember the karaoke scene?”

In that scene, which Burnham has said he consistently likes the most, Kayla volunteers to sing karaoke at a birthday pool party with the cool kids that her dad basically gets her invited to. It was her triumph, her resister moment, her time to resurface her voice, even if she was ignored by the other kids.

And that brings us to the good news for middle school girls: Things often start to get better by high school. “When I ask teens and young adults if they ever feel left out related to their social media use, one vein of responses I hear is that they used to feel this way, when they were in middle school or new to social apps,” Weinstein says. “Even older high schoolers describe the experience as something that was more of an issue for their past selves, back before they figured out who their true friends were or how to navigate FOMO”—fear of missing out.

And there are definitely resisters—the girls who collide with culture after elementary school but find a way to stay confident and sure. The girls who don’t go underground, or at least find a way to burrow back. As Brown says, “They’re [Parkland activist] Emma Gonzalez. That’s who they’re looking to. They’re not playing the game. And although girls and women are still making their way through inequitable systems,” the system is shifting of late with the #MeToo movement and the Women’s March.

Waddy sees more resistance now, too.

“The one encouraging thing I’ve seen is more and more of my students becoming passionate about these types of social justice issues,” he says.

And, as Brown points out, “more than ever, we see women having one another’s backs, and that’s a huge shift. Girls are watching and trying to make sense of it all. The important thing is that they see there are different perspectives and points of view and that the power is shifting. That’s freeing.”