

Juvenile Justice Vision 20/20 October 2016 Training Event
American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers
October 27, 2016
Presenter: Nancy Jo Sales

One of the dominant forces in the lives of girls coming of age in America today is social media. In the keynote presentation, Ms. Sales addressed the effect social media is having on an entire generation of young women. As told by her recent book *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers*, Sales explained what it feels like to be a girl in America today. By sharing the stories she has heard from more than 200 girls, ages 13-19, she described the shift in the way girls are growing up, a phenomenon that transcends race, geography, and household income.

Adolescence for a girl today is dominated by new social and sexual norms; where issues of identity and self-esteem are magnified and transformed by social platforms that provide instantaneous judgment. Girls are growing up in an online age that has created a culture imbued with hyper-sexuality that has normalized extreme behavior. From pornography to the casual exchange of nude photographs, this culture is filled with a new strain of sexism that sometimes twists notions of female empowerment, and a culture in which teenagers are spending so much time on social media that they are not developing basic communication skills.

In less than five years, powerful technology in the form of smart phones and tablets have transformed what it means to live a normal teenage life. Girls (and many boys) are spending an average of 9-11 hours daily on the Internet, including school computer use, much of it on social media, while more and more studies indicate that social media is “addicting”. Some consequences of teens’ obsession with social media have included increases in cyber-bullying, a significant spike in teenage sexual encounters online, and suicide.

Teens do not realize—or do not care—that posting nude photos, viewing them, or viewing pornography on line is illegal for persons under the age of 18. The most popular key words when pornography sites are being searched are “teen” and “rape”. This “split screen” life of teenagers, normal pursuits and activities on one hand and social media on the other, is having a deep effect on both girls and boys. Ms. Sales explained that exposure to pornography—online activities sometimes masquerading as social media but at the core pornography and supported by the pornography industry—is becoming and in many cases has fully become a normalized experience for teens. Yet, teens persist in engaging in social media activities, including those that could be classified as pornography. As one teenage girl explained to Ms. Sales, “Social media is destroying our lives, but if we go off of it we would have no life.”

The generation gap between teens and their parents is huge. Most parents and other older adults have little to no idea the extent of their children’s social media activities, or even much understanding of the depth and complexity of the issue. For example:

- Teenage girls are often coerced by teenage boys—call it “sextortion”—into posting nude pictures of themselves under the threat of having rumors spread about them or face other

social consequences, or are tricked by “boyfriends” into doing so with the promise that only the boyfriend will ever see the picture, which generally ends up not being the case.

- In increasing numbers, teenage girls are viewing this part of the social media culture as something that is “just part of life” or even that it is a good thing that “empowers” them as women.
- Social media companies are not accountable for what is posted, so “revenge porn” or other malicious postings will stay up on a site until the company has received enough complaints and takes them down.
- Teenage girls interviewed stated that nobody is talking to them about this issue; not parents, teachers, or other mentors or caregivers.
- Although the long-term impact of these behaviors is not known, statistics show that there has been a recent spike in alcohol use amongst young women in college, and that more college-age women are not clear in their understanding of consent, contributing to a culture where degradation, misogyny, and even rape are acceptable. The potential exists for *very* problematic additional long-term consequences, including abnormal sexual development.

Ms. Sales suggests that different societal elements can all play a role in helping teenagers. The legal and political systems can push for legislation that makes social media companies more accountable for cyber bullying, sextortion, and posting of “revenge porn”. Schools can teach media literacy and safety at a young age; statistically the average age when a child first sees some type of pornography is age 6, and an estimated 40% to 60% of teenage boys and almost as many girls watch pornography at least occasionally. Schools can also have and enforce dress codes. Health educators can re-emphasize and re-educate teens on the use of condoms and other elements of safe sex; incidents of teenage pregnancy and teenagers contracting sexually transmitted diseases are both on the rise. Parents can have the greatest impact. Ms. Sales suggested that parents:

- Educate *themselves* on social media applications;
- Know what apps their teenagers and even younger children use;
- Monitor online activity, but get blocks and filters into the *teen’s heads* and help teens to self-regulate;
- Do not let teens have their phones / tablets at night; much of the dangerous activity occurs then, when teens are bored, cannot sleep because of the “blue light” emissions from their phones, and are out of sight of parent(s). It might be necessary to confiscate devices at bedtime. Just leaving them at a charging station in a central location does not prevent a teen from retrieving a device after a parent has gone to sleep;
- Be empathic and compassionate with teens. Teens are encountering an unprecedented challenge with the advent of sextortion, cyber bullying, sexting, and the ready availability of pornography. Teens are not certain how to react, or how they are expected to react to what is becoming a normalized activity that is wildly different from those experienced by previous generations. It still remains, however, that teens need and *want* rules and limits – set them.