



GUIDING OUR GIRLS

A recent Sunday Times report on teenage girls seemed to paint a picture of unremitting unhappiness. Anna Selby found a different story in the Independent sector.



Just before the last round of exam results, India Knight, predicted in an article in the *Sunday Times*, that the newspapers would soon be full of photographs of jubilant girls, yet again wiping the floor with boys in terms of their academic achievements.

Given that girls “started streaking ahead by 1999”, this prediction was on pretty safe ground. But this was not actually Knight’s point at all. Her story was, in fact, no paean of praise for high-achieving girls. Rather, it was a sorry catalogue of the pressures teenage girls suffer nowadays and the resulting pandemic of emotional and

psychological distress that come in their wake, with a recommendation that they stop punishing themselves so relentlessly. “Relax. Be happy,” is the message. We’d all agree with that, but as many of the examples were from the ‘top social class’ in a Scottish study, how well do Knight’s theories hold in the broader UK Independent sector?

The fact is that, while girls can get eating disorders and depression, by and large the vast majority of girls who attend private schools do not seem to fit this description at all. They seem – dare we say it? – reasonably happy with their lot.

“Our girls are happy,” says Dr Helen Wright,

Headmistress of St Mary’s Calne, firmly. “Of course, that doesn’t mean they don’t have ups and downs... but we work to spend time with them, to give them reassurance and encouragement. People make the mistake that child development is linear, that we step further away as they get older.”

Dr Wright is a great believer in the value that adult mentoring beyond the nuclear family can provide. Here, she feels, there is a strong role for Independent schools to play: “When you become a teenager you hit a period of real change and uncertainty and you need more adults around you, not just your parents but strong role models... what we should be doing is showing young people how to get in touch with who they are. We have workshops on relaxation because if our girls get things in balance, it will all work better for them.”



HERE COME THE GIRLS: From top, clockwise: St Mary's Calne girls let off steam; confident young women from Francis Holland School Regent's Park; fun run, St Paul's Girls'; experiments and enjoying the spring sunshine at Putney High School.



Nobody, though, would deny there are pressures on teenage girls. One of these, Knight identified, was the academic pressure to succeed. "The end of the 90s," says Vicky Tuck, Principal of Cheltenham Ladies College, "was a turning point and we started measuring pupils, comparing them to others. There was a far greater focus on results. It got harder still with the introduction of A*s. The impact of all this has been significant and there was a kind of loss of innocence and freedom. It's tough and we know we have to balance the pressures with lots of warm, worthwhile, caring activities."

In a large school like Cheltenham Ladies' College, surely things will go wrong occasionally? "From time to

time, a girl will feel she's not coping or she's under unbearable pressure to do well,' says Mrs Tuck, "In this, the recession hasn't helped, and girls feel they mustn't let their parents down."

How do most parents react when confronted by this scenario? "Most parents are terribly sensible and tell their daughters they just want them to do

their best, but the majority of my girls are down-to-earth... taking it all in their stride."

Clarissa Farr, High Mistress of St Paul's Girls' School, refutes the negativity of Knight's vision. "It's excellent that girls have high ambitions," she says. "Bright children will aspire to be the best that they can be. India Knight's 'housewife on valium' is not a role model our girls aspire to. We encourage their ambitions, but within a healthy and balanced context, and we monitor them carefully so that they don't become overloaded."

Whispers of an academic pressure – stress-eating disorders cycle at St Paul's are wide of the mark, she counters: "Any school that claims never to

have had an anorexic has its eyes closed. But we put a lot of effort into making the girls delicious and varied food – lunch is a big feature here. And we encourage a diverse range of physical activities as part of a healthy lifestyle. I go out with the runners, for instance. The alarmist picture painted [*in the Knight article*] is of very circumscribed, self-

regarding beings. I don't see that. I see sensitivity, energy, strong ambition and wanting to address the big issues and get out there to make things better in the world."

One of India Knight's most distressing observations concerned the growth of self-harm. This covers a number of problems, from pulling out hair at the roots or eyelashes, to 'cutting'.

Judith Brown, Director of Pastoral Care at Woldingham, believes, however, that the incidence is minimal. "It has become a mainstream issue in the media," she says, "but it doesn't conform to the picture here." The level of personal support appears to be key. From Year 10, all girls can choose their own personal tutors they feel at ease with, giving them an informal extra layer of guidance.

"They often just drop in for a cup of tea and a chat or to talk through personal issues, when you can help them prioritise or give reassurance," says Mrs Brown. "Then, as an extra layer of support, we have a counsellor who comes in one evening a week and will talk to the girls about serious issues or things that are just bothering them, such as friendship issues or homesickness. We also have a 'wellness room' in the main house where the girls go to chill out. There's mood lighting, a mural of a tropical beach and relaxing music. And we

THE VAST MAJORITY OF GIRLS IN THE INDEPENDENT SECTOR SEEM – DARE WE SAY IT? – REASONABLY HAPPY WITH THEIR LOT



HERE COME THE GIRLS:
From top, clockwise: St Mary's Calne girls with the school's dogs; St Paul's girls enjoy a healthy lunch; a Royal Masonic Girl's pupil plays cat's cradle; Shrewsbury girls have fun rowing.

offer a relaxation programme in there, too, with everything from Indian head massage to skin care and herbal remedies."

Technological developments have also brought unwelcome innovations, such as pro-anorexia sites and Internet and text bullying, together with 'We hate X' sites and so-called 'honesty boxes'.

"Right from the moment they come to us," says Julia Harrington, Headmistress of Queen Anne's School, "we work on emotional intelligence. We talk to the girls about how they treat each other, how they see themselves and how to deal with people being nasty to them." This type of counselling is vital, it seems. "Because life has changed so much. Girls are taking in constant Facebook and Internet information and demands are being put on them to respond – all without them having the emotional maturity to deal with it." According to her, "They have to deal with pressures like reaching puberty earlier, celebrity culture and body images and being socially 'out there'. To counter this, they need a safe environment where they can make mistakes. This is where all girls' schools can help."

Young girls are also constantly bombarded by unrealistic body images from the media. "Our ethos," says Diana Rose, Head of the Royal Masonic School for Girls, "is to be interested in girls as individuals. We go out of our way to resist

the media pressure on girls to be 'perfect' according to some false celebrity image. We do a lot in PSHE on body image and we have a values programme designed to reinforce moral standpoints and principles to make girls strong enough to say 'no' to such pressures." Following through, there's no branded clothing on mufti days. This is a sensible rule that could be adopted by many schools.

Wendy Griffiths, Headmistress of Tudor Hall, agrees that celebrity images need to be challenged with more positive role models. "We do this by highlighting successful women in sport, the

IF THEY LEAVE US EXPECTING TO BE THE PERFECT WIFE, PERFECT MOTHER AND PERFECT CEO, WE HAVEN'T PREPARED THEM

business world and from academia," he says.

Sara Hankin is Mistress of the Girls' House at Shrewsbury and is very conscious of the pressures girls face. She, her deputy and matron all live in and are at hand if problems occur. "Being here in Shropshire helps to keep things in perspective," she says. "There's no pressure to be London clones with a skinny look and the right clothes, striving for a particular identity... girls don't all dress the same; they're not the same body shapes. It's better that way and the girls buy into that. They're good

in their own skins. Of course there are some who feel under pressure but we talk to them and try to get them back on an even keel. We have a counsellor, and we've trained up volunteers in listening skills."

Both professional counsellors and trained peer support are growing trends. "In common with many schools," says Vivienne Durham, Headmistress of Francis Holland School in Regent's Park, "we have an effective peer mentoring system, with sixth formers specifically allocated to every new class, so all girls have

somebody to turn to who isn't a teacher." And Stephanie Pattenden, her opposite number at FHS in Sloane Square agrees. "We have a highly regarded 'big sister' programme that arranges special events such as breakfasts for younger pupils. We

also run a confidential post box service. For more serious issues, the school counsellor is available and it is not unusual for a discreet mentoring programme to be set up to support any girl who is going through an unsettled phase."

Perhaps it's just that we are all so much more aware these days. One of the most helpful tools for parents has been introduced by the Girls' Schools Association, the website www.mydaughter.co.uk. It deals with self-esteem and image, relationships and friendships, Internet safety – and, of course,



managing stress and pressures.

Ultimately, vigilance and sensitive communication underpin the schools' responses. "Schools and parents are more aware of the pressures and have extensive support systems in place," says Dr Denise Lodge, Headmistress of Putney High School. "But they must be sensitive and there must be trust between girls and teachers. Early sensitive support is crucial if something is going wrong – you can't be heavy-handed. We all work together to prevent health problems happening and discuss them in a balanced way, from Year 7.

How do they do that? "We look at current affairs and the girls soon know which newspapers are celebrity obsessed and which are more balanced. The girls have tutors with whom they can discuss any personal problems and there's a school council to raise issues. We're pretty fit at Putney and we balance work with physical activity or other leisure activity. And we let the girls know it's perfectly okay for them to care about how they look. They all dress up wonderfully for the leavers' ball and boogie away with the staff boogying with them!"

And isn't this yet another false media dilemma? Bimbo or bluestocking? Young women – and young men for that matter – have always cared about how they look. At last year's Girls' Schools Association conference, President, Jill Berry from Dame Alice Harpur School, defended the girls' right to be attractive. "Caring about physical appearance and fashion and wanting to feel good about how you look doesn't have to be a betrayal of

some feminist ideal. I love new shoes but it doesn't make shallow. Girls can have fun and be taken seriously at the same time."

Mrs Berry believes that preparing girls for the real world is a vital part of their education. "We know that generally the girls in our schools want demanding careers rather than just jobs and, given that the vast majority of them will choose to have families too, they have a challenging future ahead. If they leave us expecting to be perfect wife, perfect mother and perfect Chief Executive, we haven't prepared them for the reality of this challenging future. Many of our girls want it all. I think our job is to prepare them as well as we can to cope with the complexities and the challenge of the balancing act they will inevitably face in the future. We do this in our schools when we offer them a huge range of opportunities and they find even at junior school that they can't do the recorder and netball and choir all during the same lunchtime. They have to learn, with our support, about pacing themselves, about commitment, about being realistic in their expectations of themselves. Aim high, but don't make yourself miserable by aiming for perfection in everything."

So, girls shouldn't try to be perfect, but they shouldn't stop aiming high either. It's clear that, in the Independent schools sector, they can emerge as strong women *and* have fun along the way.

"We want the girls to aspire and do marvellous things," says Dr Wright of St Mary's Calne. "The sky's the limit and it's intelligent education to help them believe in themselves." ■

PACE YOURSELF TO SUCCEED

JESSICA ELLIOT, 22, went from King's School Rochester, where she had been both an academic and a music scholar with three As at A level to Oxford, where she has just been awarded a double first in classics and modern languages. Her achievement is all the more remarkable, as throughout her school career she was caring at home for both her seriously disabled mother and grandmother. She felt the stress sometimes but learned to manage it, as she explains below.

"I would never advise a young girl to drop her focus on academic high achievement.

Of course, I cannot blithely claim that unhelpfully termed 'mental disorders' are not a potential result of excessive strain. It would be like stating that potential muscle damage is not something that comes with the territory of an athletic career. However, my view is that whilst athletes know immediately to take the weight off as soon as signs of physical stress appear, people in general, especially young people, are far less likely to rest when there are signs of mental strain. Over-achieving girls can be expressed metaphorically as highly fit 'athletes' running excellent track times and conducting superlative training, but without anyone standing on the sidelines advising on what to do if they come off the pitch with a twisted ankle or aching shins. Most of these 'athletes' just keep running at the next training session – worsening their injury, upsetting their results, pushing them to run harder. Totally understandable, but totally avoidable."

