Understanding Behavioral and Emotional Problems in Girls

DEBORA J. BELL, SHARON L. FOSTER, and ERIC J. MASH

"What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice and everything nice; that’s what little girls are made of..." (Mother Goose nursery rhyme)

"There are no good girls gone wrong, just bad girls found out"
Mae West, American Actress (1892–1980)

Historically, girls have evoked images of sweetness and light, purity and beauty. In this fairytale land of youth, girls are angels and princesses, characterized by positive adjustment and certainly not by behavioral or emotional problems. However, as Mae West observed, in reality female children and adolescents are much more complex, with both positive and negative aspects to their development and adjustment. Unfortunately, the complexity has been understudied in the developmental psychopathology literature. Compared to the amount of research attention given to boys’ development and adjustment, girls have been relatively neglected. This lack of attention has obvious negative implications for our ability to understand girls’ development and our efforts to promote optimal development and to remediate problematic development.

Recent research on disorders of childhood and adolescence such as conduct disorders (Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD; Hinshaw, 2002), anxiety disorders...
mood disorders (Rudolph, Hammen, & Daley, in press), and other disorders (Mash & Barkley, 2003; Mash & Wolfe, 2005) indicates that the epidemiology, expression, developmental pathways, and causes of these problems in girls may differ from those for boys. Increasingly, the field of developmental psychopathology is recognizing the special aspects of female development, behavior and adjustment needed to understand psychopathology in girls (Crick & Zahn-Waxler, 2003). To date, however, an integrative conceptual framework for understanding different forms of psychopathology in girls is lacking. Much important knowledge about girls’ behavior problems is relatively new, and has not been presented in a single source. The aim of this volume is to compile the best and most current knowledge and research findings regarding behavioral and emotional problems in girls through childhood and adolescence, organized within a developmental and contextual framework. We believe that the time is ripe for a volume like this and that it will be an invaluable resource to students, mental health researchers, and practitioners as they conceptualize and address behavioral and emotional problems in girls.

OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

This book includes chapters written by some of the leading scholars in developmental psychopathology, many of whom have focused specifically on girls in their own research. The chapters cover a broad range of disorders, problems, and life experiences that affect girls’ adjustment, including disruptive behavior disorders, emotional problems, developmental and learning disorders, health-related problems such as eating disorders and illness, and negative life experiences such as abuse, violence, and homelessness. Some of the topics, such as mood and anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and sexual abuse, have traditionally been considered “girl problems” and are obvious choices for a book on girls’ adjustment. However, disruptive behavior disorders, typically considered more problematic for boys, “aren’t just for boys anymore.” The chapters on ADHD, conduct problems, and substance use and abuse focus on how girls act out throughout childhood and adolescence. Beyond simply focusing on problems that are most prevalent for girls, or only on differences in problem behaviors between boys and girls, the chapters in this book focus on how girls express and experience diverse forms of problematic behavior and adjustment, as well as theory and evidence regarding etiology, developmental course, correlates, and outcomes of problem behaviors among girls in particular.

A notable strength of the chapters in this volume is their use of a developmental psychopathology framework (Pennington, 2002). Information about girls’ problematic adjustment is grounded in an understanding of girls’ typical development, and in the context of biological, psychosocial, environmental, and cultural issues. This perspective has decided advantages over simply examining sex differences in behavioral and emotional adjustment. Literature in developmental psychology clearly shows that boys’ and