

(RG and Thrive logos to appear at top)

An Evening with author Peggy Orenstein

November 15, 2012

Key Themes and Take-Aways

- The need be aware of the “Kardashian-ization” of girlhood and thoughtful, impactful responses to it
- Corporations are marketing increasingly to kids and babies -- we need to help our girls become media literate critical thinkers
 - KGOY = kids getting older younger
- Understanding the difference between sexuality and sexualization
 - Sexuality is cultivated from ‘within.’
 - Sexualization comes from ‘without,’ or externally. It’s about believing women’s role is to be desirable and desired.
 - When girls play sexy too early, they can’t connect it to real erotic feelings. They grow up and don’t learn to own their sexuality.
- Fight fun with fun: <http://peggyorenstein.com/resources.html>
- Parents must model the healthy self-concept they want to see their daughters develop.
- There is an increasing trend of objectification of girls at earlier ages. This can cause mental health issues such as eating disorders, body image and depression. The princess motif in modern girl culture can prime these issues at an early age.
- A pillar of raising strong girls is learning conflict resolution.
- Girls and boys need to have friendships at young ages that parents and educators encourage. This helps both sexes immeasurably later on.

Full Event Notes

Introduction and welcome by Carrie Kirkpatrick (CK), founder of [Raising Girls](#), and therapist Sarah Long (SL), founder of sister organization [Thrive](#). Program partner thank yous: JH High School/TCSD, Teton County Library, Valley Books, Our Common Ground, Equipoise Fund, Womentum, survey respondents.

CK: I conducted a focus group with parents who read Peggy’s books and condensed all the thoughts. I will represent the parents’ perspective tonight, and Sarah will represent adolescent girls’. Through a recent survey we received way more input than we can cover tonight, but we’re grateful to have that information for future programs.

SL: I am honored to have Peggy Orenstein (PO) here tonight. I love [Cinderella Ate My Daughter](#), which helped inspire me on a personal project. PO is also the author of *Flux*, *Schoolgirls* and numerous articles featured in New York Times. In her books PO explores

gender identity, early sexualization and self-esteem. Please give a warm welcome to PO!

PO: Hi. Were any of you at the lunch today? It was fabulous! After last night's dinner I am so ready to move here. What strong, smart women in this community!

CK: I read *Schoolgirls*, which was written in 1994. A lot has changed. What are you encouraged by and what are you alarmed about?

PO: It's interesting to look back, I wrote it at such a different time in my life. So much has changed in me. I was really young; I wrote it from the perspective of being a girl myself. I followed a group of 8th grade girls for a year. Back then I often got yelled at for not having a hall pass (laughter). Now I'm a Mom. It's a really different perspective to write as a parent myself. You cross some rubicon when you have a child and I feel a maturity in myself between the two books. I sound more like who I am in *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, 18 years later. In terms of the culture, it's interesting. Many strides have been made. I spoke with Marley Vaughn today, who was telling me that she went to school here and used Title Nine as a way to start the girls' soccer teams. There was no soccer for girls and they wouldn't let her play on the boys' team. What a huge difference. That was the mid 90's. Title Nine is one of the huge success stories not only for girls but also civil rights legislation. The number of girls that have become athletes is hundreds of thousands thanks to Title Nine. Girls are going to college more now and taking more leadership roles. And yet there is something else. To define yourself from the outside in, not the inside out. Girls Inc. looked at girls age 8-13 and surveyed 10,000 girls and the concern about appearance and popularity was trending upward. This topped their concern over their schoolwork. It's a paralyzing expectation to be perfect. Still had to be pretty, skinny and also captain of the athletic team and editor of the yearbook. The girl version of being the perfect mother. When I think about it in the commercial culture, I think about in the 90's how we talked about girl power. That was celebrating ability over body. Now it's Girlz power. With a Z like the Bratz dolls. Commercial takeover of ability over body. It puts appearance as the road to empowerment. Self-absorption and narcissism being the same as self-confidence. My 7-year old daughter got a-make-your-own messenger bag. Some of the iron-on patches were "spoiled" and "brat" and she asked me why do I want to use these words Mom? I deflected with the typical, "I don't know and here's a cookie." (laughter) Another way to think is the "Kardashian-ization" of girlhood. That power comes from being spoiled.

SL: Where is this coming from? Just the media?

PO: An interlocking set of things. In my work, I look at the culture more than what is going on with families. The marketing culture has skewed way younger. Marketers used to target parents. The first time children were marketed to was when the Mickey Mouse club began. It burst the whole thing wide open. At that time kids were one big marketing entity. Over the years they have segmented many times. In the mid 80's they developed "t'ween." It can be defined as broadly as ages 7-14, which is an age range that does not have a lot in common. They keep making the categories smaller and younger. I saw an article where they were talking about a

new market for 18 months and under, and that these babies were so market savvy (laughter). Sure enough, about a year later Disney created “Disney Baby,” which marketed to kids under age 2. Their first initiative was to go into maternity wards in hospitals and offer a Disney onesie if you sign up for an email list. “We’ve hit a homerun if we hit new moms.” It’s really predatory and it’s coming way before they can understand it. KGOY = Kids getting older younger. More sophisticated products for younger kids. Barbie was for 10-12 year old girls. Now if you are 6 and still playing with Barbie, you are a baby. Little kids looking to big kids to be cool. To be hot. That is one way it’s going down to younger ages. The number of screens kids have access to right now is higher than ever. It’s everywhere and doesn’t turn off. It’s creating a culture that is more image-conscious.

CK: Sexualization. So much here to be on guard about. When do you draw the line? When are we as parents asleep? It’s subtly happening year after year. What do we need to watch for with sexualizing girls at an earlier age?

PO: If we are talking about older girls, it’s important to understand the difference between sexuality and sexualization. And to understand it ourselves. These girls are walking around in short, little dresses and tummy shirts, then you start thinking you are the “1950’s mom” by judging them. You want a pro-sex perspective. I want my daughter to have a joyous, healthy sex life. But not now, ‘cause she’s nine (laughter). What is it that I am grappling with here? Those two got mixed. Sexuality is cultivated from ‘within.’ Sexualization is a performance, it comes from ‘without.’ Believing women’s role is to be desirable and desired. Culture tells girls to be desirable. It helps open the door to have those conversations. I have looked at princesses and what they teach. After Disney princesses, they (the marketers) then want you to go to flesh and blood princesses like Miley. She used to wear a promise ring saying she’d be a virgin until she is married. Then on her 15th birthday she did a Vanity Fair spread where she is half-naked and looks just out of bed with a man. At 17 she did a stripper squat on a pole and at 18 there was penis cake. It’s this virgin-whore thing. Sexualization as a rite of passage.

SL: What are the ramifications?

PO: None! (laughter) Just kidding, just trying to lighten the mood. When little girls play “sassy,” I say it’s “sexy” with training wheels. When they play sexy too soon, especially when they can’t understand, they can’t connect it to real erotic feelings. They grow up and don’t learn to own their sexuality. For older girls the risk is that they make poor choices. That they perform for boys and engage in sexual activity that isn’t getting them what they want emotionally. I am contracted to write a book about girls, sex and desire so I am thinking about this topic a lot. One researcher asked girls how a sexual experience felt, and many responded with information about how they looked during the experience. That’s a problem.

CK: Exactly, selling it versus feeling it. Switching into a positive self-concept. What are the things parents should be talking about in terms of the culture? What gets a girl positive self-concept?

PO: Lots of things. We have to look at ourselves with these body issues. Especially with negative body image, weight issues, how you talk about your body in front of your daughter. If your jeans are feeling tight just keep it to yourself. How we look is the currency of exchange between women. During a research project I would go back and forth between these schools and each week I had a tendency to reconnect with the girls by commenting on their shoes, clothes or hair. As an experiment, I decided I would only say something about who they are. How was your play rehearsal? Your soccer game? This line of questioning felt really unnatural. Try it, see how it feels. If we just lessened those image related comments by a third, it would help girls. And men are tremendously important. A more positive body image is linked to relationships with a male father figure. It also impacts if girls stay with and stick with non-traditional fields of study. Women routinely credit their father's belief in them for their ability to persist in life. There is something about that male regard. When talking about media stuff, it's a three-pronged thing. The first is collective. We are repeating 1992 right now. In '92 we had the "year of the woman," a record 4 female senators. It's a record 20 in 2012. Still not that many, but getting there. In '92, "girl power" was kicking in. In the wake of Cinderella Ate My Daughter, there was a ground swell. JC Penny was selling, "I'm too pretty to do my homework," t-shirts. Someone did an article about it and they had to pull the shirts immediately. One thing, which falls more to the third prong, is that social media has been a double-edged sword. It has its problems but also ways to combat body image. One girl decided to go up against *Seventeen* magazine. Petitioning *Seventeen* to do one spread a month that wasn't photoshopped. Then they did a whole contract with readers. This worked through girls' social media. On an individual level we want to be our kids' allies. If you want to give your daughter more choice about what it means to be a woman by saying 'no' all the time you are deluded. Combat fun with fun. When girls are little, they need a joyous way to be a girl not connected to media. To build an alternative femininity. When my daughter was into the princesses, we read about Greek gods. For Halloween she went as Athena goddess of war and wisdom. She still got to wear a tiara on her head, but the costume had a better archetype. They have these boxes, the culture box and the family box. The culture box is huge for our girls! Limit this box as much as we can for as long as we can. When we do say no, then it can be respected.

CK: What about parents who say that I was into Disney princess thing and look at me now, I'm a lawyer. It's no big deal.

PO: American Psychological Association put out a report that looked at sex. It focused on an increasing trend of objectification of girls at earlier ages. When any of those things is present it makes girls vulnerable to the mental health issues we worry about with girls like eating disorders, body image, and depression. The princesses were priming them. When you have that little girl as a parent, the first time you hold her you don't want her to have any limits because she is a girl. For a while you can protect her. Then she goes off to preschool. In two weeks she's memorized by all the princesses. The princess references are all over town. The grocery store cart would say 'hello princess' or the drugstore would give her a pink balloon, assuming it was her favorite color. The dentist said she should get in his princess chair and he would

'sparkle her teeth.' I do remember playing princess, but I don't remember this 'every day for three years' as a child. It started in 2000. What happened back then is Disney got a new CEO. He saw all these girls coming to shows dressed as princesses, but not in Disney-licensed gear. Remember when Disney movies would come out for a short time, then go back in the vault and all the merchandise would go away? The CEO said 'let's market the princesses separate from the movies.' This was hugely controversial within the company. Cinderella can't have tea with Belle! If you look at any item with multiple princesses on it, they are all looking in different directions because they aren't supposed to know who the others are there. God forbid Ariel gives Jasmine a little support! (Laughter) The first year Disney did \$300M in business. Ten years later, they are a \$10B business. They put princesses on everything. They actually have seeds for gardens and grapes to eat branded with princesses. It has cannibalized all other forms of play. Girls aren't going off to college in their princess gowns right? Wrong. Now they have a shoe brand and dish line.

CK: I saw 16 year old girls driving in tiaras after we booked you.

PO: I'm waiting for princess coffins. (laughter)

CK: Different for boys? Why more important for girls than boys?

PO: We were talking about different ways it affects girls. It has a cognitive impact. One of my favorite studies was done at Stanford. It took male and female calculus students and put them in dressing rooms at the mall. Half of them try on sweaters, and half try on bathing suits. Then they gave them a math test. The women who were wearing bathing suits had depressed scores. Could be they were cold? (Laughter) Didn't affect the men in bathing suits. Something about being aware of their body drains women of their resources. If we had a room of African American kids and gave them a math test and told them 'black kids do poorly on math tests,' they would live down to that stereotype. Women do the same. Another study took women who were in advanced calculus. One group watched 4 commercials that were all neutral (about dogs or something like that). The other women watched 2 commercials that were neutral and 2 showing women sexualized. Then they took a career aptitude test, and those who had watched the commercials degrading women showed less interest in pursuing those careers in math and science. It blows my mind. There is enough research to show this is true. This really has cognitive impacts.

CK: Guys say, "I look at men with abs and don't feel this way."

PO: Young men are moving a little towards where women are. But the culture of men and women is just different. I can see this in my own life. My husband could stand to lose a few pounds. He looks at his gut and shrugs. If I was that heavy it would make me crazy. It defines us women more.

CK: How do we move away from that?

PO: It's an interplay between who we are as adult women and who our girls are. Anything that reinforces who they are, talking to them clearly about sex. Giving power back to girls. Another pillar in helping raise strong girls is learning conflict resolution. When boys are little and mad at their friends, they hit them and walk away. If you are mad at your friend as a girl, you don't say anything because you don't want to hurt the relationship so you walk away. Media literacy. Power given to girls to talk back. Check out the 'About Face' [website](#). PBG. Girl bloggers. They put up ads online like a Diesel ad that takes place in a museum with thin models looking waifish. A girl wrote on it: 'in third grade I learned how to behave in a museum, and it didn't look like this.' Critical observers. Can I tell another story? I knock on the princesses a lot. But I do love fairy tales. The Cinderella story for example. The first known telling was 850 AD in China. Cinderella is in every culture around the globe. Has something universal to teach us. Let's look at the Grimm's Cinderella. Excruciatingly gory. One of the evil step-sisters cuts off all her toes, there is blood squirting everywhere. When Cinderella finally gets married she invites the step sisters to be bridesmaids and doves peck out their eyes. Fabulous for teenagers, not appropriate for young children. When I read the Grimm Cinderella story as a Mom, this is the story I read. Once upon a time there is a girl whose mother is dead and father goes on a business trip, and the step-sisters ask for jewelry. Her father brings them back jewelry, and he brings her back a hazel branch and she plants it. Grows into a tree. No fairy godmother, no horse and carriage, and Cinderella walks to the ball. A story about how mothers love transcends death to guide young women. I think we have to bring this tree back. We need to be the deep roots and sheltering branches for our girls. Give them the tools to navigate through their adolescence and adulthood. Help them find their own happy ever after. (Applause)

SL: One thing that has been coming up in discussion groups is competition. Any thoughts for our teens on how they can support each other?

PO: They need to support each other. We see too much relational aggression. Girls bully each other. They write something nasty on Facebook. They learn to do this kind of back stabbing and not to surface conflict and talk about it in a healthy way. Where do they learn that from? We model that. I think it's somewhat what happens in the course of early gender development. It doesn't get addressed. Media exasperates it. Social media makes it so that friendships never shut off. Twenty years ago, it used to be that you went home and shut the door to disconnect. Used to be insulated. Girls' text far more than boys. In both healthy and unhealthy ways. For girls it's important to have time when you are not allowed to have screens on. You don't like to hear that. All that social media can enhance and undermine intimacy. We don't know the full effect. We need to set limits so our children have some privacy and a safe zone.

CK: Younger kids, talk more with them.

PO: With older girls. Teach them that social media is not a diary. Don't put your innermost thoughts there. It's hard for them to understand the consequences of it. When we learn to talk more directly to one another we are not creating backhanded communication skills. Begins at

earliest age. Talked about doing intervention. Teaching conflict resolution used to start in middle school now it needs to start in kindergarten. How to express hurt feelings. Or you risk becoming inauthentic.

CK: Girls leadership Institute really good at this. GAP, THRIVE, other local programs.

PO: Go to my [website](#). Many good, common sense resources.

CK: We have a website that has those links too. You said you wanted to talk about gender development. How girls become girls and boys become boys.

PO: When kids are little, they don't understand gender the way we do. A psychologist talks about son Jeremy. He went to school wearing barrettes. Other boys teased him saying, 'you're a girl!' Jeremy said, 'No, I am a boy I have a penis.' Other boy was unimpressed. They thought everyone has a penis, but only girls wear barrettes. Young kids think they can choose. Like death, they don't understand the permanence of gender. If you feel that way, unconsciously, you want to stay the sex you are. They gravitate toward the extreme end of girls. Babies and easy-bake ovens. Now it's spa makeovers and princess dresses. This Diva stuff is developmentally appropriate, but is exploiting them. Kids tend to be rigid. My daughter turned 3 and would only wear dresses. They think they'll turn into a boy if they were pants. At the same time it's when their brains are most malleable. Everything little kids do, it all strengthens neuro-circuits at the expense of others. When girls play only princesses, it will impact their brain. Take this example of one study of 3,000 3-year olds. Girls with older brothers had better spatial skills. Exposure to opposite gender child changed their brain. Cross gender play strengthens their brains. It's easy to encourage. If preschool teachers encourage, the kids follow.

Audience Question: We recently entered kindergarten; it is a whole other planet. Couple things we are dealing with. One thing is boyfriends. We ask her what it means. She says, 'It means he is going to chase me around the playground.' We are trying to figure that out. We've avoided the princess obsession, but we seem to have a fashion obsession. Clothes seem to mean a lot, and I don't understand where that came from. What resources would you recommend?

PO: I can't tell you how many women say, 'I was a tomboy and I never cared but now my daughter.' Naturalized versus natural. The color pink is a good example. We think it's in their DNA. But if you go back 100 years children, wore white because you had to boil clothes. In the 1930's, department stores were using these reversed colors: boys got pink because it was pastel red, and girls got blue. Sleeping Beauty (she wears a blue dress and the prince has a pink cape) and Peter Pan (the little boy is in pink pajamas) are still using these reserved colors. What you do is try to broaden on that front. Look at fun list on my website. Create other ideas, other expressions of girlhood and creativity she can get into. Broadening her. You are not condemning. Talk in school community and in peer community. You want your son and daughter to be able to have friends that are boys and girls. My daughter had a lot of boyfriends, but she was quick to say, 'Mom they are my 'friend boys.' It was a touchy thing to retain those

friendships. Girls and boys that have friends of opposite sex and can retain that have better dating relationships. Her teachers should know about it. Pair boys and girls up in casual ways. Enhance commonality.

Audience Question: We noticed it in preschool. When the two little kids hugged and parents say, 'Ohhh so cute!' Parents, can we not do that?

PO: Yes, parents, stop saying that. Weird romantic comments they cannot understand. It's inappropriate.

CK: You have some books to sign so we'll wrap up. Please give us feedback online. There is a donation bowl out there.

SL: We have a ton of information out there on the table. THRIVE is in its early development, if anyone in the younger crowd here is interested in focus groups we'd love to have you. Thank you Peggy! (Applause)