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The Secret Lives of Girls: What Good Girls Really Do--Sex Play, Aggression, and Their Guilt

Sharon Lamb

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From playground games of "chase and kiss" to rough-and-tumble soccer games, from slumber party stripteases to romantic fantasies behind closed doors, author Sharon Lamb coaxes out girls' true stories with uncommon sensitivity and focus. The result of more than 125 fascinating interviews with pre-teens, teenagers, and adult women, "The Secret Lives of Girls" reveals the ways that girls use their minds and bodies for private sexual play, mischief, and hidden aggression.

To truly understand what little girls are made of, Lamb suggests, we must listen not only to what they say to us but also to what they don't say, taking into account their hidden selves and the lives that we adults don't see. Yes, girls are known to be "good," but they manage to act out in decidedly ungirlish ways and, despite many parents' fears, be the better for it. What's most remarkable about Lamb's conclusions is that we needn't join the chorus of voices deploring a "girl-poisoning" culture for damaging our daughters. Instead, Lamb finds reason to celebrate girls' resilience in the face of pressures to conform -- and she does it by listening to them and to the women they have become. "The Secret Lives of Girls" explores such in-depth key issues as:

Using aggression wisely -- when girls need to walk away or to settle verbally, and when to fight. Girls needn't grow up afraid of their own toughness and power. Building self-esteem, self-respect, and the ambition to achieve -- anger and aggressive feelings can be the impetus for creative and productive work. Eighty percent of female executives of Fortune 500 companies identify as having been tomboys. Participating in highly physical sports -- karate orboxing, or team sports like soccer -- teaches girls to feel that their bodies are competent, and that they deserve to take up space. Recognizing daughters as sexual beings -- their love of sexy dress-up, their yearning to understand their bodies and their sensual desires. Accepting some kinds of sexual play -- teaching the difference between fun and bullying; setting a positive and supportive tone from birth through the grade school years.

From tomboys like "Julia," who runs with the boys in the streets of New York to "Abby," who led a "naked parade," the girls who share their stories here describe a hidden but fascinating world made up of more than girlish innocence. "The Secret Lives of Girls" is a welcome and much-needed addition to the literature on girls' lives and culture. It celebrates girls' hidden strengths, play, and needs, and opens a door for parents that can teach them how to understand their daughters better and help them grow.

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