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Smoke Signals

Why are more girls than boys lighting up? And what can we do about it?

Anne Georg

"Girls want to be bad asses. We're sick of being victims," proclaims Lisa*. She wears her teenage rebellion boldly, like the short-cropped, spaghetti-strap top she's wearing in flagrant contravention of the school's dress code.

"It's not like the Westerns in the '50s when men were the bad guys and women were damsels in distress. Girls want to have the bad image," adds the 14-year old, defiantly sucking on her cigarette. Michelle*, a non-smoker, enthusiastically agrees. Also 14, she wishes she could rebel by smoking, but she can't inhale and doesn't really like the smell of cigarettes. Still, she happily joins her friends while they smoke and vehemently supports their right to do so. At lunch hour Lisa, Michelle and a handful of their friends regularly cross the street from their Calgary junior high to hang out at "the trees" in a park. It's their smoke pit and it's in clear view of the school. About half the kids are smokers — and there are no boys.

The girls say that's because far fewer boys than girls at their school smoke. They say boys smoke to try to be cool so they can fit in with the girls. "We smoke because it's something we can do together. We have a cigarette and talk. Girls have more depression than boys and smoking relieves stress," says Lisa, looking to her friends for agreement. They nod, and add that even having their periods is stressful.

Samantha*, a petite blonde in full makeup and impeccable clothes, doesn't join the girls for a cig nearly as often as she used to. She's cut down from half a pack to a couple of Players Light a day. A veteran in this group, Sam's been lighting up since she was 12, either bumming smokes or buying them with her babysitting money. She started smoking in grade seven because she wanted to look sophisticated and fit in with the older kids. Two years later, she admits she's hooked, but knows if she wants to get back into sports she has to quit.

Sam's mom, Shirley Mason*, found out about her daughter's habit early on. She offered her support, suggesting the two of them create a schedule to help Samantha cut down. She brought home brochures and videos about the health risks of smoking, and she continues to monitor her daughter's tobacco use. (She even took Sam to a doctor for a Zyban prescription, but Sam was too young to use the medication.) Despite Mason's repeated attempts to help her daughter quit, Sam tells her mom that it's her decision and she'll quit on her own time.

A non-smoker, Mason says it's hard for kids, especially girls, to be in the company of their peers without lighting up themselves. So parents have to educate their kids about the risks of smoking well before it becomes an issue. "After they've ignored their training, anything a parent can do to draw closer to the child is important," she advises. "Talk to her, be supportive and continually show the child unconditional love so her feelings of self-worth don't suffer."

Mason's concern is well founded and shared by health professionals. Research shows that girls become addicted more quickly than boys because they weigh less and the nicotine is more concentrated in their bodies. A new study by the BC Cancer Agency shows that teenage girls who smoke have a significantly increased risk of getting breast cancer before they turn 50. Adding to the ominous snapshot of the future, statistics show that 85 percent of adult smokers began smoking as teenagers and that lung cancer, a disease caused by smoking, is the number one killer of women in Canada. (In 2002 an estimated 7,700 Canadian women died of the disease.)

So how come the "bad-ass girls" don't get it?

"We talk to girls about the terrible things that will happen to their health and they don't believe it," laments Lynne Baillie, a primary prevention coordinator with the BC Cancer Agency Centre in Kelowna. "They don't believe they will become addicted, nor do they see health risks pertaining to them in the long term. They can't imagine being 25, let alone 50."

Baillie's study indicates parents and educators may be losing the battle because traditional ways of thinking about why girls smoke aren't the reality. She refutes the conventional theory that girls start smoking because of peer pressure. "No one is applying pressure. Girls are looking for ways to be independent and to find their identity," says Baillie. "Having a smoke in their hand seems sophisticated. Smoking is a good icebreaker; they bum a smoke or a lighter, or begin a conversation with, 'Oh, you smoke too.' It's a social lubricant."

Although, the 2001 Health Canada Canadian Tobacco Use Monitoring Survey (CTUMS) reported that Canadians are increasingly butting out and fewer youth are smoking overall, the numbers of teenaged girls who are taking up the habit is still alarming. Few statistics exist about smokers under age 15, but CTUMS found that 24 percent of girls 15 to 19 years old smoke — compared with 21 percent of boys. Girls start as young as 12; boys begin at 13, according to CTUMS.

Why do more girls smoke than boys? The Ontario student drug use survey conducted in 1997 suggests one reason: They think it's a way to get, or stay, thin. The study shows that girls who think they are overweight are more than 50 percent as likely to smoke as girls who don't have that perception. No wonder. For generations, women have been told smoking is a fast way to a slender, attractive body. In the 1920s, advertisements exhorted women "To keep a slender figure… reach for a Lucky [Strike cigarette] instead of a sweet." More recently, ultra-thin supermodel Kate Moss, a well-known heavy smoker, is often featured smoking in her photographs. In one major publication her photo was accompanied by a caption saying her diet regimen is cigarettes and beer.

It's illegal to advertise tobacco in Canada, but most girls read magazines published in the US, where they see plenty of seductive images. The ads typically show smoking women casually indulging themselves, relaxing and socializing — just like Lisa said. Tobacco advertising ostensibly targeted at women has a profound effect on girls. (See You've Come a Long Way, Baby — Yeah, Right!)

While girls lighting up think they will be more popular, thinner and in command, anti-smoking advocates believe these girls are victims of cruel and blatant manipulation. "Tobacco companies know teenage girls want to rebel and be independent and they explicitly use that to market smoking as the badge of a tough adventurer," says Christy Ferguson, formerly with the Ottawa-based Physicians for a Smoke-free Canada. Ferguson and her colleagues organized a group called Sluts Against Butts that hosts a lively Web site (slutsagainstbutts.com) and stages public actions against businesses that support cigarette companies, as well as tobacco companies themselves.

"No one wants to be taken advantage of," maintains Ferguson. "So we're showing girls that they're getting screwed by the tobacco companies. We're saying, 'Direct your rebellion. Take away the power the tobacco companies have over you.'"

Some educators believe teaching kids about tobacco companies' attitudes is the best defence against teen smoking. For example, Keith Lynn Alternative School in North Vancouver has launched Project Moving Target. The school's peer mentors don't tell younger kids not to smoke. They tell them to make up their own minds. But they do tell them about the tobacco industry. They show them documents in which tobacco industry representatives call teenage smokers "illogical, irrational and stupid."

The peer mentor method works better than the traditional scare tactics taught by teachers, according to Rae Schidlo, a career and personal planning teacher who's been delivering the anti-smoking message for years. "Kids think they're invincible, and smoking is such a lifelong choice, it has more impact than they can be aware of," she stresses. "So to have kids just older than them talk about how the tobacco industry thinks they're suckers is more meaningful to them than talking to them about health."

Hannah Timmins* is in grade ten at Keith Lynn. Now 15, the peer mentor has been smoking since she was 12 and is trying to quit. She believes Project Moving Target is a better way to keep younger kids from starting to smoke than the way she was taught. "When I was younger and teachers told me not to do something, it tempted me to do it even more. I knew it was bad, but I wanted to try it," she remembers. "Now that I'm a smoker, if I can keep one kid from starting up, I'll be happy."

Like Hannah, her mom, Margaret Timmins*, started smoking at 12. Timmins understands that Hannah didn't believe she would get addicted. At first she banned her daughter from smoking in the house, but Hannah stayed away from home to smoke. Now she and Hannah both smoke in the house and Timmins shares her DuMaurier Specials with her daughter because Hannah can't afford to buy her preferred brand, Export 'A' Lights.

"I would like to see her quit because I don't want her to be smoking at 49, like me," says Timmins, adding that her own mother is still smoking at age 74. Given the family history, health educators aren't surprised Hannah smokes. A 1990 study found that children of smokers were almost twice as likely to smoke as those whose parents never smoked.

"If you're a parent and you smoke and you're trying to educate your kids not to, you're not much of a role model. You've got to stop smoking," says Richard Dunphy, who delivers the anti-smoking curriculum to junior high students at St. Anne's Academy in Dunville, Newfoundland. "I've been teaching for 30 years now and I've noticed that no matter how much we preach, kids are going to try it. It's sad to say, but some of them will become hooked." A non-smoker, he has two adult children who started smoking as teens and their health is still a constant worry.

Back in Calgary, 14-year-old Sam is determined that nicotine addiction won't be her fate. "I know tobacco companies want to get us hooked on cigarettes while we're young, so we'll keep buying cigarettes when we're older. They know that smoking is killing us. And I'm supporting that? That makes me mad and I want to quit." Sam and her friends enjoy their power to evoke adult concern, inhaling deeply to flaunt their rebellion. They are contemptuous of the hypocrisy of the adults. As Lisa passes around a cigarette, she asks a complex cultural and political question: "If it's killing us, why is it still legal?" The girls nod and murmur agreement. Out of the mouths of babes.

You've Come a Long Way, Baby - Yeah, Right!

In the 1960s, tobacco advertisers became even more effective in their messages to women. The hugely successful Virginia Slims' "You've Come a Long Way, Baby" campaign, for example, capitalized on the feminist movement. Research has since correlated the advertising with a dramatic rise in smoking among teenage girls. A 1994 study reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that between 1967 and 1973, smoking initiation rates among 12-year-old girls soared 110 percent; among 13-year-old girls, they shot up by 55 percent.

A 1995 article in the Journal of Marketing, Theory and Practice reported that children are three times more susceptible to advertising than adults. Teenage girls are especially vulnerable. An American Cancer Society study found that cigarette smoking among teenage girls was identified with an anti-authority, rebellious attitude towards the adult world.

Virginia Slims cleverly encourages this through some of its advertising that pits adolescent girls 'just wanting to have fun' against older women admonishing them. One ad depicts a Victorian-looking woman complaining about young women: "Tsk. Tsk. Proper, decent women shouldn't have fun in the sun. In fact, they shouldn't have any fun at all." A young woman replies, "Well, shame on me, 'cause I really like to have fun."

Smoking equals fun. This is progress?

** Names changed by request.*

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