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My Daughter Is 16. The World Is Crazy. I'm Looking For Ideas.

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I read about the 17 teenagers at Massachusetts high school who became pregnant last school year - pact or coincidence, take your pick. I look at my beautiful 16-year old daughter. And I wonder about the state of young women in America.

I have to ask myself a very difficult question. For all the hard-won independence and latitude that defines the lives of young women today, has there been a price to pay?

And does even raising that question cast me back to the days when young females were neatly divided between good girls and bad girls, with those straying over that arbitrary line finding it virtually impossible to come back. I'm talking about the days when young girls did not get pregnant; they "got in trouble." And they usually vanished until the trouble passed.

Such questions pose a special personal dilemma since my two children are more than 15 years apart. A lot has happened in that span; everything from easy electronic passage to our society's cesspits to celebrity disintegration as a spectator sport.

Also, my first child was male; with much of the heavy lifting in imparting manly virtues falling to my husband: play hard, don't back down, do your job and so on.

Ok - maybe I just answered my own question. Maybe that is exactly how you raise a daughter.

There is an old saying: "Happiness is the ability to look reality in the eye, and deny it." If it makes you happy, go ahead and intellectualize the idea that gender makes no difference today in how you raise kids - if the catcher is blocking the plate and you are stretching for home, run her down! But the reality is: girls are different from boys. Go ahead and laugh, but I still believe that.

I would be very happy to adjust the check-list rituals through which mothers have imparted wisdom in the ways of the world to daughters. But there is much about the new world of young women that mystifies me. My world was the Mouseketeer girls. Hers is the Spears girls.

I get the good parts - the end of female boundaries, limitations and assumptions in everything from sports to career choice. I understand that you don't float through a glass ceiling.

But toll for that empowerment is counted out in some unsettling facts.

One in five teen girls is infected with at least one sexually transmitted disease - the "at least" part is still rattling around in my head looking for a rational resting place.

And then there is the rise of teen-girl violence. The media explosion of YouTube pummelings is simply a graphic flashpoint for some puzzling trends.

Studies show historical gender gap in violence is shrinking. The most recent Justice Department Uniform Crime Report, shows the number of girls who were arrested on all charges increased by 6.4 percent, compared with a decline among boys of 16.4 percent.

Arrests of girls nationwide on assault charges rose 41 percent, as opposed to a 4.3 percent rise among boys.

A report from the Harvard School of Public Health holds that this new female violence is a new default in solving problems and a means to win social acceptance.

Some say it's the shift in role models - where women in action movies no longer wait for the hero, they kick the bad guy in the throat. Some say it's the family - from weak bonding to diminished supervision to domestic violence. Others say that - like foul language, binge drinking and grabbing your crotch - it's cool to do what the boys do.

How do we prepare daughters for this new world?

How do we make them tough, without making them hard? How do we make them show empathy without making them targets? How do we make them courageous without making them stupid?

I am an older mother of a younger daughter in a confusing time for both of us. And I'm open to suggestions.