

Remember when you were little, and you and your friends played “House”? One of you would be The Mommy and one The Daddy, and you’d dress up your baby dolls and push them around in strollers?



When you got a bit older, maybe you were into Barbies. You’d grab your Barbie and your Ken and put them in the Barbie convertible for a spin, or by the Barbie pool for a barbecue, or maybe you’d just stand them up, face to face, and make them kiss. There was never any doubt in your mind – in anybody’s mind – that one day, Barbie and Ken would get married and have little Barbie babies. And they’d all live happily ever after. In the Barbie Townhouse.

Well, a bunch of young girls at Gloucester High School in Massachusetts – girls barely beyond Barbie age – have decided to forgo Ken and the convertible, and go straight for the baby. These teenagers, all ages 16 and under, have re-imagined “House,” and the game no longer includes The Daddy.

They made a “pregnancy pact” (it’s almost like being blood sisters!), went out and found some sperm donors (high school boys, grown men, and some homeless guy...), and got themselves knocked up, pledging to raise their children together.

Not surprisingly, everybody’s looking for someone (or some *thing*) to blame for what we all pretty much agree is a fiasco.

Also not surprisingly, most folks have migrated to their usual corners on the issue. Conservatives are blaming the pregnancy pact on our licentious, any-thing-goes culture and the general breakdown of the family, post-sexual revolution. (Reportedly, many of the girls are from broken homes.) Liberals, as expected, are bemoaning the school’s “weak” sex ed program (apparently, it ends in 9th grade... which makes one wonder when it *starts*?) and the insufficient availability of birth control. (As of now, students must have parental consent to obtain condoms from the school nurse; this may change, though, as two high-minded school officials have resigned their jobs over this “extreme” policy.)

You may think you know where I come down on this one, but don’t be so sure. I’m not. While discussing it with a left-leaning friend the other day, I was determined to keep my knee-jerking in check. As the mother of a six-year-old girl, I’ve got only a few good years before I have to start worrying about this stuff, and I can’t afford to let political principle or even religious conviction cloud my objectivity. Gotta be practical. So I tried to put myself in the mindset of *me* ten years from now, when the culture’s ten years rottener (I shudder to think!) and there’s a real live teenage girl living in my house.

“Clearly, the problem is sex education and access to birth control,” said my left-of-center companion. “They didn’t have enough of either.”

“But these kids *had* sex education,” I replied. They’re in the Massachusetts public school system, for crying out loud! And as for birth control... these girls wanted to get pregnant. The pill only works if you take it.”

This argument that if only the girls had seen more bag-the-banana demonstrations, that if only Nurse Nancy were more lenient with the condom dispenser, then this would never have

happened... well, it just doesn't hold water. These teens knew perfectly well how *not* to get pregnant. They chose the opposite path. The Pregnancy Pact Seventeen (PPS) literally 'planned parenthood.' (Rest assured, this is not what the organization by the same name had in mind at its formation.)

As our discussion continued, I brought up the A word, knowing it would agitate my companion:

"Maybe the problem was that nobody was offering abstinence as a viable – in fact, superior – option. Maybe instead of discussing the pros and cons of latex vs. polyurethane, some grown-up should have said, 'Listen, I was young once, and I get it. You're teenagers and you have urges. But contrary to what passes for wisdom these days, you are perfectly capable of controlling those urges. You are young, unmarried people, still dependent on your parents, who aren't yet ready to handle the consequences of sexual activity – and they are myriad – so you simply should not engage in it. You have the rest of your life to enjoy sex. Now is not the time.'"

"Do you honestly believe you could stand up and say something like that to a 15-year-old today?" asked my companion.

"Yes, I do," I said. "Someone said it to me when I was a teenager, and guess what? I didn't have sex. None of my friends did. Or if they did, they sure didn't go around talking about it. Nobody wanted a bad reputation."

"Do you really believe that 'bad reputation' stuff would work in today's culture?" my companion laughed. "We live in a whole different world now."

Ain't *that* the truth. For better or worse – and you can probably guess how I feel about it – we now live in a world without shame. Nothing drives that truth home quite like this statement by Christopher Farmer, school superintendent in Gloucester, Mass. Musing on why the PPS did what they did, he said:

"They will have a baby as part of their life to give them status. Motherhood gives them status."

Wow. Unwed teenage motherhood – from stigma to status symbol in a few short decades. There in the fine state of Massachusetts, where Nathaniel Hawthorne set his great American masterwork, *Hester Prynne* and her scarlet letter are well and truly forgotten. And so it is throughout the country.

Am I seriously suggesting we mount a national Bring Back Shame campaign? If I thought it would work, I'd probably be leading the charge. But I'm a realist. Social trends may cycle in and out, but I think shame – the sexual kind, anyhow – has probably gone the way of the poodle skirt... a quaint emblem of a more innocent past that makes us feel nostalgic, maybe even a little wistful, but that no one actually fancies wearing, ever again. So what to do? Maybe, instead of fretting so much about how best to stop teens from *accidentally* becoming pregnant (because lots of folks are on that already), we need to be asking ourselves *why the PPS did it on purpose*.

Why did 17 girls who were plenty sex-educated round up 17 random boys-to-men and make babies?

Some have speculated that the girls, many of whom are children of divorce, were simply looking for unconditional love... a permanent attachment in a world of ever-more-temporary connections. Others have blamed it on our popular culture, so heavy-laden, lately, with teenage-mom role models like Jamie Lynn Spears and "Juno." This would seem to shore up the "status symbol" argument – aka the Baby-as-Hip-Fashion-Accessory theory.

There may certainly be truth in these speculations, though probably not the whole truth. Let's

not forget: there are 17 girls involved in this story. We may be looking at 17 different answers to the same question. Still, if I had to guess, I'd wager the common thread has something to do with the "hookup culture" we've heard so much about lately. I have no teenager yet, so I've not observed this firsthand, but according to the media, teenage courtship rituals have changed drastically since I was a kid. In fact, "courtship" doesn't really enter the equation at all.

Apparently, instead of dating – which once led to "going steady" – kids today go out at night in large groups, often "hooking up" in pairs, later, for casual sexual encounters. Or they attend parties, where the girls take turns servicing the boys in the, um, *oral tradition*.

What a deal for the boys! No more nervous phone call to that special girl. No careful making of plans or saving up of allowance. No showing up on the doorstep with flowers. No meeting the Big Scary Dad. No porch light snapping on in the middle of the goodnight kiss. No hearing the word "No."

Again, sounds pretty good for the boys. But what's in it for the girls? Oh, wait... they're "empowered." They get to act just like guys. But do they really want to?

We have a culture, now, where too many fathers leave and too few boys show up on the doorstep with flowers. It's a culture where girls have plenty of technical information about STDs and IUDs and bodily fluids and abortion, plenty of experience with detached physical "intimacy," but no real sense of the profound, mystical connection between sex and love that was once, but is no longer, an integral part of our collective value system.

And yet, they are still young girls. At heart, they are tender and romantic and full of longing. Is it any wonder that a group of these girls decided to skip the dubious "love and marriage" thing altogether and reach for the still-meaningful, transcendent experience of motherhood... to seek a love everlasting in a world of quick hookups and easy breakups and hollow commitments? The only wonder is that it isn't happening more often.

The truth is that girls – both little *and* big – still want to play House. It's in our DNA. You can turn Ken into a cad... you can get rid of The Daddy altogether. Debunk every myth. Defile every fairy tale. But when all's said and done, girls still want happily ever after.

Ironically, the girls at Gloucester High have just risked their futures to get it.