

## Can Nice Girls Get Angry?

By Dr. Patricia Romney

Family Connections

March 1999

Christie, a very angry young twelve year old, used to bite herself whenever she got mad. She would put her hand sideways into her mouth, catching between her teeth the fleshy mound between the base of her thumb and her forefinger. Then she would clamp her teeth together biting down as hard as she could.

Christie was a very nice girl. She was a good student, loved by her teacher and her friends. She was the perfect confidante. Even at her young age, she was the one whom all the other girls went to with their problems, because she was unfailingly supportive and understanding. She rarely shared her own problems with others. Christie was a very nice, but very angry girl.

The hand biting was her way of keeping silent, of stifling the shouts or curses that she might voice if she did not put her hand in and bite down very hard. This self-inflicted pain helped her to keep her silence and only the reddened tooth marks on her own young flesh revealed how she felt. Few people noticed.

Christie's mother worried when she found out about this, but the little teeth marks that appeared from time to time were overshadowed by Christie's Honor Roll school performance, the host of friends she had, and the college scholarship she eventually won. The childhood expressions of anger were forgotten until she tried to kill herself when she was eighteen years old.

Girls, and the women they become, are discouraged from both the awareness and the expression of anger. Though Christie's story may be more unusual than typical, anger is an emotion that all girls are taught not to express. Two childhood nursery rhymes reveal the ubiquity and power of this message:

*"Sugar and spice and everything nice that's what little girls are made of."*

*"There once was a girl who had a little curl  
Right in the middle of her forehead.  
When she was good  
She was very, very good  
But when she was bad she was horrid!"*

The message of these rhymes is clear. Don't be angry. Be nice! The message is that niceness and anger don't go together. Being angry is seen as a contradiction to being nice.

Although there are some variations due to class and race, for the most part anger expressed in girls meets with strong cultural disapproval. It is deemed unfeminine, unladylike. If a woman expresses anger she risks being labeled a shrew, a nag, oversensitive or overemotional. Young girls hear those messages too. So the choice feels clear - keep it to yourself. Be silent!

Young girls and women in the United States today are told that they live in a time filled with opportunity. They can go to college. They can marry or not, have children or not, enter fields formerly restricted to men, travel, own property, become leaders. Yet these opportunities have an underside: pressure to succeed, fear of failure, a conviction that one should do it all and have it all. There are also many land mines in this landscape of opportunity: family breakdown, school violence, the ever-present invitations to sexual activity, the fear of sexually transmitted diseases. And abuses against women continue to fester: sexual harassment, rape, lower pay than men, unequal responsibility for children and home.

Is it healthy to expect "niceness" in the face of these pressures and abuses? Is there a place for anger and its expression in life of a girl?

The outgrowth of the cultural messages is that women often choose, as Christie did, to express the anger on the terrain of their own bodies. Eating disorders, self-mutilation, depression, under achievement, and addictions are the contemporary expressions of young women's anger.

Girls and women do indeed experience anger. They are angry about many things: sexual abuse, excessive pressure, about parental conflict and divorce, about feeling that the adults in their lives are so involved in the pursuit of their own aims that no one is there for them.

Anger is a normal and healthy emotion, and it is often an appropriate response to injustice. It is not the anger of girls that is the problem. The problems occur when anger is unrecognized and unvoiced, when anger is internalized and turned against the self.

Adults who work with teen-age girls need to find ways to help them safely and constructively express their legitimate rage. There *are* ways to help.

1. Recognize anger as an emotion that girls (and all people) feel. Name your own anger. Talk about it. Convey the message that anger can be legitimate. Feelings do not have to be justified. They are not rational and do not need to be. They are feelings.
2. Ask healing questions: "Does that make you angry?" What do you do when you're angry? What makes you feel better? How can I support you?
3. Allow and encourage appropriate venting. Create a time and space for it.
4. Modulate your own anger. Young women often report that they wish, at all costs to avoid, what they perceive as the overemotionality they see in their mothers. Often mothers, due to their feelings of powerlessness in families, are reduced to nagging, screaming and other less constructive ways of trying to be heard. Working toward equitable relationships in families can provide a good example for young girls.
5. Help girls figure out the source of their anger. Because anger is a frightening and potentially dangerous emotion, it is often displaced. The real sources of anger may be hard to identify. Mothers are the frequent targets of their daughters' displaced anger. In many cases, mother/daughter

relationships are experienced as the only relationships where girls can feel safe enough to express their anger and know that they will still be loved.

Adults can provide a constructive outlet for angry feelings by helping girls to talk through their emotional responses. By creating opportunities for girls to be heard and responded to, adults assist young girls to become more balanced and genuine. Encouraging the healthy expression of anger is not an invitation to uncontrolled rage. It is an invitation to self-discovery and empowerment - a message that one can acknowledge true feelings and take constructive action to make a difference.