

Girls on the edge: the four factors driving the new crisis for girls
Leonard Sax

A Book Review by Kate Broadley

Girls on the edge focuses on a popular concern for the state of girls in western society. Sax outlines four major areas which are part of the 'new crisis' by using personal anecdotes from girls whom he has both treated as a family doctor, and met through his role as the executive director of the National Association for Single Sex Public Education (NASSPE) in America.

The first four chapters, which focus on the sexual identity of girls, cyberspace, obsessions, and environmental toxins, tend to create a state of 'alert and alarm' for the reader. Statistics and research articles are cited to illustrate how girls' lives have progressively deteriorated over the past 50 years, to the point where we have hit crisis-mode. There is a tendency for Sax to romanticise the 1950s and '60s as he describes the gradual loss of community and connection for the girls of today. However, he clearly demonstrates that a growing proportion of girls: are confused about their sexual identity, stuck in unedifying 'cyber-bubbles', vulnerable to obsessions, and reaching puberty at an earlier age.

One criticism of *Girls on the edge*, is that it tends to focus on the problems more than the solutions. The text really must be read in its entirety so that readers are not bogged-down with seemingly hopeless scenarios. In contrast, Chapter 7 is uplifting. Sax explores the spirituality of girls and presents a compelling argument that girls should be free to engage with this aspect of their lives. 'If you fail to nurture your daughter's budding spirituality, it may be extinguished' (p. 183). Sax then examines the links between spirituality, sexuality and gender, offering the advice: 'we should help our daughters to understand who they are and who they want to become regardless of the pressures from the society and the popular culture to conform to a particular "ready-made" caricature of the feminine' (p. 187).

While this text is clearly marketed at the parents of girls, educators of girls at single-sex schools could benefit from reading various sections. The first four chapters do provide a good starting point for understanding some key issues facing girls. Readers who have areas of expertise will find the text does not add to their knowledge. For example, the chapter on cyberspace is not as comprehensive as the material published by Australian psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg in his book *Real-wired child* (2007). Chapters 5, 6 and 7 on mind, body and spirit may be of particular interest to educators.

Two Alliance-member schools receive special mention in *Girls on the edge*. Sax relates his experience of visiting Korowa Anglican Girls' School in Melbourne; he praises the Physics staff and school curriculum for the way they engage girls in science (pp. 132-133). Lauriston Girls' School is also commended for its Year 9 Howqua Campus learning experience (pp. 200-201).

Single-sex education is extolled more broadly by Sax in several parts of his book. He argues that girls in single-sex schools achieve better academically in Chapter 5; that girls should participate in sports in the same-gendered environment in Chapter 6; and that 'a girls' school can so easily provide an authentic community of girls and women' (p. 206), which is one of the solutions to the crisis.

Sax's conclusion is that a healthy community and the opportunity to mix with women of all ages are keys for the creation of successful girls. 'The kind of community in which your daughter engages will shape the person she becomes' (p. 204). While this statement is neither revolutionary nor original, it is a timely reminder of the direction to which we should all be steering the girls in our care. Many of Sax's conclusions seem glib: creating an all-female sewing group or drinking water exclusively from glass containers. Yet overall, he has tapped into common areas of concern. Many girls in our communities are not living healthy and fulfilling lives, therefore *Girls on the edge* adds a useful perspective to the literature related to girls' education.

Sax, L. (2010). *Girls on the edge: the four factors driving the new crisis for girls*. New York: Basic Books.