

Teenage Girls Need Nurse-Midwives, Too

by Lisa Gussack

Some years ago, I attended a group where women from 20 to 70 years old shared what it was like for them to enter puberty and, in particular, to begin menstruating. The tales were riveting, with their memories of fear, bafflement, and sometimes ludicrous misinformation.

The onset of menstruation, just as the beginnings of pregnancy and menopause, are times of hormonal upheaval, and the stories I heard that afternoon confirmed that those young girls who were expecting the dramatic changes to come had a much easier transition than those who were not. One story stood out. It was that of a fearless, nine-year-old girl who insisted on going off to summer camp fully prepared, as though she were already menstruating, so sure was she that it was about to happen.

That young girl had been prepared by an expert, a nurse-midwife, and it showed in her peace of mind, her serenity and her high self-esteem. While midwives are well known for their exceptional care of the childbearing family, far fewer people realize that this care is available to girls from puberty through their reproductive years and into and beyond menopause. A quick look at the etymology of the word midwife shows it to mean "with woman." Today's midwives enjoy a much broader scope, which includes all the health issues that modern women and teens face. Midwives are with every woman in a personal, caring, non-judgmental way.

Nurse-midwives can play a critical role in the transitional stages of a woman's development, especially the uncharted terrains of puberty, pregnancy, and menopause, times when everything is in flux. Being prepared and anticipating these changes eases the process dramatically, and decreases fear and anxiety. Knowledge ultimately empowers women to trust their bodies and to engage in preventive and health sustaining practices.

Midwifery care is culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate, and respects the growing independence, privacy, and learning needs of the maturing girl. A good example of this kind of mentoring and guidance is an exercise we do with our pre-college patients. We guide them in gathering their personal medical history and family history through discussions with parents and grandparents. The knowledge obtained in this exercise starts them on the road to assuming an active role in taking care of their health.

Very often a young girl may feel more at ease talking to someone outside her family, and nurse-midwives are comfortable initiating conversations that other people in a teen's life tend to avoid. This is evident in the questions we ask, the language we use, the time we spend listening, and in our thoroughness in conducting the physical exams. A midwife can act as a transitional figure, providing support for and offering knowledge to a girl when she is ready to hear it. Though we maintain complete confidentiality, we help girls think about how to maintain and even improve communication with their parents.

Media Misinformation Is Unhealthy

In our current culture, many girls form images of their bodies and their sexuality through the media. They compare themselves to singers, socialites and starlets who define beauty and popularity for them; they are encouraged not to identify their own needs and self-image, but rather to conform to what the media deems acceptable and preferable. Information that girls rely on, from the Internet or friends, is not always vetted or accurate. Midwives believe it is okay to want to know about your body, and as our young clients grow, we add age-appropriate tools to their tool box. In addition to their reproductive health,

we discuss nutrition, relationships, stress management, exercise and body image.

Such authentic information on sexuality and reproduction should not be compared to a driver's license, but rather to a toolbox and road map. Many of the conditions and situations troubling the adolescents who come to our office could have been prevented through the kind of education that empowers the individual to make better choices.

The holistic and integrative approach to health care practiced by midwives makes them ideally suited to the promotion of healthy behaviors through all phases of a woman's life. Certified midwives in New York State are independent licensed practitioners. They perform annual physical exams for school and camp. They prescribe medication, order lab and diagnostic tests, give immunizations and make referrals to other physicians and healers. They work collaboratively with many specialists, both conventional and complementary, and have ob/gyn physician consultants available at all times. Midwives may be in-network or out-of-network providers, depending on the insurance plan. They may be in private practice, be employed by a physician, or work in a clinic or hospital.

With all that modern medicine has learned about the causes and treatment of chronic disease, we know that prevention is the best cure. Beginning midwifery care from the early teenage years onward is one way to ensure that the next generation of women will be healthier, more responsible and, better able to pass along good information to their children.

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