

■ NEWS

What a 9-year-old girl thinks

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Jordan raises her hand instantly and waggles her fingers, anxious to answer the question:

If you had a magic wand to change one thing, what would it be?

"I would change the colour of the sky to pink because it's brighter and the colour of the sun and the colour of the sky would blend to make a more vibrant colour," she says breathlessly, her Bishop Strachan schoolmates nodding approvingly at such a daring, dreamy notion. Who wouldn't want to live under a canopy the hue of candy floss with a glistening apricot *soleil* warmly lighting each day?

It is a girlish sky and at ages 9 and 10, a girl's utopian world is much like them. It brims with imagination and delight, its possibilities boundless. Rivers of love, family and friendship flow freely. It's not all candy-coloured delight. Family worries, bullying and domestic chores cloud their vision.

This is the pinnacle of girlhood. These girls are staring into adolescence, with intimations of adulthood already on the horizon.

It's a crucial stage. Which is why the *Star* talked with 65 kids over the past two weeks, to find out what's on the minds of Grade 4 girls.

One veteran sports coach calls this age the "Oh, yes!" stage: girls are wide open to learning and chasing their potential. Yet this is also the moment when forces are beginning to bind them along traditional gender lines.

Even as girls envision futures as limitless as a vivid pink sky, they are being groomed for household duties and child care and mined by big business as influential consumers who will help sell dolls, vacations and electronics to their parents.

The 65 girls eagerly talk about life, boys, God and family.

Some tales are about their neighbourhood – side-stepping drying bloodstains on the way to school. Some tales are about individual problems – being bullied at school for being smart or good at sports.

However, the important stories are universal. They love their families, recognize their mother's heavy workload and are forging strong friendships with other girls, as playmates and soulmates.

They are complicated creatures, these girls, learning to navigate from childhood to teenager in sophisticated ways that adults don't recognize, says **Shauna Pomerantz, an assistant professor of child and youth studies at Brock University.**

"For some reason, girls seem to always come up as this unified, universal category (and) the biggest misconception is that we can make assumptions about what we know about girls," said Pomerantz, who wrote *Girls, Style and School Identity: Dressing the Part* in 2008 after spending a year at an urban, multicultural high school in Vancouver's east side.

"The truth is, I don't think adults really know anything about what girls are doing. I think we're clueless."

IDENTITY

"You should be unique and don't be the way people want you to be. Be yourself. It's kind of easy."

– Christine

If only it were that easy for all girls.

At the Toronto Kiwanis Boys and Girls Club on Spruce St., four Chinese-born girls group themselves together for a discussion. Their clothes are simple – jeans and T-shirts – their hair straight and glossy. The other girls in the room – one white, the others visible minorities – form their own discussion cluster. They sport a hipper look; their clothes have sparkles, detail, a sassiness. Their thick, shining hair is twisted into braids or swept up in elaborate, layered styles.

Girls with so much in common – age, neighbourhood, school – but already defining who belongs where even in a very small room.

Pomerantz says though parents may not believe it, girls this age are navigating a daily obstacle course where school, friends, consumerism and pop culture are shaping their identity and challenging what they are being taught at home.

"Adults are forever telling kids, 'It doesn't matter what you do with your hair, it doesn't matter what shoes you wear' but it does," said Pomerantz, a 39-year-old mother of a toddler daughter.

"I choose my clothes based on how I'll be perceived, whether I'm going to teach a class or going to a bar. Girls are no different."

Rachel, one of the 9-year-old girls, says she *looooooves* shopping.

"You get to see new clothes that you never knew existed. Let's say I had last month's clothes and didn't like it any more so then I would go shopping and I would feel the newness of clothes."

Pomerantz tells the story of a First Nations student who figured out how to dress in different ways to fit in with different cliques.

The 15-year-old would wear "a kind of hip-hop, Missy Elliott, rapper-style" outfit when attending First Nations' classes in the school because her peers dressed that way. Other days, it was tight jeans and tiny T-shirts to fit in with the Asian girls who, Pomerantz said "were considered the pinnacle of cool, the middle-class Asian girls who wore all the brand names."

"To me, it was genius but it also seems incredibly hard and oppressive, totally sad, but she'd figured out a way to survive."

It's not a way of surviving that appeals to Alexandra at her after school care at the House of Chesig in Scarborough, which is part of the Native and Child Services of Toronto.

"I don't think we should change the way we dress," says Alexandra, wearing a grey T-shirt and leggings. "We're perfect the way we are."

Other 9-year-olds feel the need to mimic their peers.

"I know I shouldn't follow how (other) kids look and I should be myself," said Jeyani, who plays tennis every Sunday on the Rexall Centre's indoor field house near Jane and Finch. "But sometimes it's kind of hard because you feel the pressure."

FUTURE

"I would make the world better. I'd want war to end. I wouldn't want any earthquakes."

–Baillie

They are idealistic and hopeful and passionately protective of the planet. They want clean water, they want to eradicate homelessness and, as Emily says, "get rid of negative attitudes."

Some are puzzled about the causes of war and anxious about life in a technological future.

"Most war is about really dumb things like land – can't they share the land?" asks Nicole. "They should learn to respect the difference in cultures and race."

"I think it will be kind of scary," says Jasmine.

"I think the world won't have as many animals and will be more crowded, with more shops," says Anya.

Despite their apprehensions, 15 of 17 girls at Bishop Strachan are hopeful about the future. Two others say, "maybe."

Most look forward to careers. The only limitations are in sports – girls can't play football – or jobs that they see as male dominated: police officers, taxi drivers and construction.

"There are different jobs for boys – like doctors are usually for boys and that's why they make nurses, for girls. There's always different stuff for boys and girls."

From Regent Park to Forest Hill to Jane and Finch, the girls want to be brain surgeons, actresses, designers, teachers and pianists.

"I want to be an Olympic swimmer and the best mom ever," says Xiao.

Some want glamour – the girls at the native centre in Scarborough all said they want to be "superstars" – but add on their hopes to "help others."

"I want to be an actor in the movies," says Ocean. "And maybe a lawyer, because I think I'm good at helping people get their rights and stuff. And I think I might be a veterinarian. I really like animals."

FEARS

"I worry about what people think about me."

– Sydney

"I do worry about tests, whether I'm going to do good or fail. Or at cross-country, sometimes I worry about, 'Am I going to come in 10th (or) am I going to come, like, 102?'"

– Ocean

Girls are frightened by apocalyptic movies like 2012 and news reports showing Haiti ruined by the recent earthquake. But they are becoming savvy enough to look beneath the hype.

"I was searching on the Internet about 2012. I don't believe it," says Alexa.

Adds Taylor: "People were saying there would be flying cars in 2000. And that didn't happen, so that tells me the (2012 scares) are not true."

They are happiest with their families – playing board games, or tag or the simple comfort of saying goodnight to their parents. So when it came to worries, they centre on losing what they value most – living with those who love and care for them.

"I worry about my parents – if anything would happen to them. I worry whenever they go on a plane," says Taylor, a Bishop Strachan student.

Fears about death are not surprising at this age, says Pomerantz. "It's a feature of childhood being so open and susceptible to fear and panic," she says. A 2006 study in the *Journal of School Health* shows that girls tend to report more worries than boys – and their worries are different. Boys worry about their future, girls about being liked. "I'm worried about losing my friends," says Elizabeth, who had been with the same group of girls from kindergarten until this year when she changed schools. "But now I can't play with any of them and here at school, I don't have other friends."

"You have me," replies Joan, sitting next to her at the table.

Joan has her own fears. "My grades. I'm not that smart. I have trouble in math; I only got one A in math last

year in data management. My mother wants me to go to high school, and college and have a better life."

Even without raising the topic explicitly, fears about bullying emerge.

Bullying research has mostly focused on children in Grade 6 and older, but the problem among younger children has been recognized, says Marisa Silver, manager of national programs for the Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada.

"It can have long lasting negative effects."

It's believed boys recover from physical bullying – the push on the playground – more easily than the social/emotional bullying more common among girls.

Christine, a confident girl who earlier said, "I've never been pushed around in my life," later reveals this:

"Coming back to school on Monday worries me, because I might be bullied by boys at my school. They say mean things and spread rumours about me that aren't true."

When asked whom she admired, Jade immediately cites her single mother, but her answer leads to bullying.

"I only have one hero. My mom! Every time I'm hurt or someone bullies me, she'll be right there. She won't tell (the bully's) mom. She'll fix it in a really nice way and not make them cry."

Some anxieties are more personal.

"I worry about things when I get older," says one, who lowers her voice, as she covers her face. "Like getting my period."

Others are not quite there yet. "What's a period?" asks a girl sitting across from her.

EQUALITY

"My mom is the only one working and she only gets \$10 an hour and she has to buy food and pick me up from school and has to do chores and laundry and cook food for us. I think that's hard."

– Elizabeth

The full-page magazine ad for the Bishop Strachan School features a large photograph of world leaders – all male, with grinning U.S. president Barack Obama in the middle. Underneath the caption reads:

"Send your daughter to BSS. The world needs her."

Further down the page, the all-girls school motto is in red: "Girls can do anything."

Ocean believes that.

"We have the same opportunities as boys and we can be whoever we want, it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. It's not about what you look like or anything, it's about how you feel and who you want to be."

This childlike assuredness has not been tested by gender inequities that appear to be coming for many of these girls.

Already they are changing diapers, doing the laundry, washing dishes, caring for siblings. Yet these responsibilities make girls proud that they are trusted to help run the household.

"I like to take care of my little brother," Alyssa says of her 5-year-old sibling. "I read books to him and teach him French."

Sydney likes doting on her younger sister, but the 9-year-old sometimes feels like a mini-mom. "It's like having a kid before you actually have one."

Though daughters don't define motherhood as a job or career, they clearly recognize their mothers pull long shifts on the home front. "I don't want to work so much," says Joan, who nonetheless wants children.

"Girls do the housecleaning and taking care of babies," says Rainey. "If the woman goes out, babies don't get care and dads don't know how to cook and they'll be starving."

It's not just a child's view of the world.

Men's jobs and careers continue to be more highly valued than theirs – the wage gap between Canadian men and women is 71 per cent. Even the Vancouver Winter Games next month has an event – ski jumping – in which women aren't allowed to compete, a fact noted by some girls.

Another reality is the advertising and marketing world considers girls of this age as vacuous, malleable consumers, while boys are viewed as buyers of practical items like hockey sticks, says Natalie Coulter, an assistant professor of communications studies at Wilfrid Laurier University.

The tween market, which began emerging as a target audience for sales pitches in the 1980s, is now a crucial demographic seen as influencing what parents will purchase, from mayonnaise to minivans.

In 1999 tweens were estimated to be worth \$260 billion in spending power by international marketing experts, Coulter notes. That figure ballooned to \$630 billion by 2007 thanks to tween-targeted products like trendy shoes, or even adult-oriented products like electronics.

Coulter, who specializes in tween studies, has mixed emotions about having this once anonymous group of girls recognized by the business world.

"On one hand, it's celebratory because (young) girls are largely ignored and when referring to girls, people usually mean teenagers.

"On the other, it's terrifying because the way girls get defined within this context is as consumers . . . yet men and boys magically end up with hockey equipment and things from hardware stores."

What can't be ignored, however, is that girls like to shop.

"What makes me happy is when I'm with my friends at the mall," said Alexa.

Nicole likes to buy gifts for her family because "it always makes me feel happier that they are happy."

For Shira, a trip to the store doubles as family time.

"At my dad's I have my older brother. He buys me lots of stuff and takes me shopping."

Nine-year-olds remember the way their family stands to sing Happy Birthday. They quiver happily when their parents say they are proud of them.

"I like waking up and seeing my mommy smile," says Nowell, wearing a sparkly pink headband and pink shirt. "I like calling my daddy at work and hearing him tell me he loves me."

They say silly things about boys and then laugh. They love to sing "Party in the U.S.A." by Miley Cyrus. They sense they are on the cusp of change and some of it is mysterious. With that in mind, Nicole thoughtfully says girls her age should embrace their childhood.

"You should have fun while you can, play lots of games, but still work hard," she says. "Have fun!"

Adds Bailie: "It's great. You're not too old, not too young, you can do in-the-middle-things. It's a perfect age."

Perfect for candy floss skies and irrepressible pink dreams. Or not.

Nikoia, a girl with a lovely singing voice and clad in a black vest with hearts, is anxious to talk about colour. She has written down her thoughts to make sure she makes her point clearly.

"I think pink is overrated," she says. "Why do girls always have to wear pink? My favourite colour is baby blue."

[HOME](#) > [NEWS](#) > [ARTICLE](#)

