

## Nice Girls

By Mary Warner

I'm a nice girl. I don't smoke or drink. I don't wear makeup. I don't flaunt my body. I don't talk about sex or swear in mixed company. Some have thought of me as asexual, uptight, a prude, or, worst of all, frigid. Why, I simply can't be any fun at all. This nice girl, like nice girls the world over, is not only fun, sometimes, she's not as nice as she seems.

So, what's going on behind this nice girl façade? Before we get to that, perhaps we need to look at how nice girls are made, and it's not all sugar 'n' spice. Let's look in the boys' pockets with their puppy dog tails. The alpha male has been head of the pack and he knows how to keep his bitch submissive. I'm referring to our male-dominated culture, which is still incredibly pervasive in America even after the Women's Liberation movement. Lest this is starting to sound like a male-bashing treatise, let me assure you, it is not. There are plenty of men, my husband being one of them, who don't subscribe to the chest-thumping, man of the kingdom, "Thou shalt submit to me, woman!" dogma. Men are held just as captive by rigid sexual stereotypes as are women, but that's another essay. Conversely, women allow gender stereotyping to keep their personalities submerged. We just want to fit in and please don't call us bitches!

In this world sex is a weapon used to keep girls at bay. When I was growing up, the fear of sex was drilled into girls by both society and parents. The commands included, "Don't have sex, you might get pregnant," and "Don't have sex, you might catch a disease." We were warned to watch out for men because they might rape us. If these frightening scenarios weren't enough to turn a girl away from sex, there was always reputation to consider. I was told to cross my legs at the knees or ankles, instead of crossing them like a guy, with legs splayed open. That was advertising and girls never wanted to advertise.

Other reputation breakers were discouraged for the encouragement they might provide boys in the sexual realm. These included wearing excessive makeup or suggestive clothing, smoking, drinking, swearing, or talking about sex or other bodily functions. If a girl was loose in one of these areas, well, she knew where that could lead.

Nice girls took these fears to heart. By our early twenties, we could easily empathize with Gwen Stefani in the No Doubt song, "I'm Just a Girl." Nice girls knew that parents and society were just looking out for our best interests and trying to keep us safe. Girls got the message of vulnerability and it was easier to scare girls into safe behavior rather than teach them how to protect themselves. Meanwhile, boys received the message that they could be sexually promiscuous, along with indulging in some of the behaviors that were girl reputation breakers. Boys were allowed these activities in order to gain experience, but with girls in niceness mode, where was that experience going to come from? The naughty girls, of course.

Like uptight, prude, and frigid, the labels nice and naughty are hurled with the force of a spear right at girls' hearts. The terms are meant to speak to some personality defect,

rather than any specific physical defect. All are intended to keep us from enjoying our physicality and sexuality. If a girl is naughty, she's allowed to enjoy sex, but she must feel guilty about it and bear the naughty label, or worse. She may also end up with a lot of unwanted attention from those boys trying to get experience. Girls who are uptight, prudish, frigid, or nice can't possibly like sex. They're considered difficult to approach and must be the proverbial "Ice Queens" with auras of ice shards warding off potential passion. In contrast, it is assumed that all men enjoy sex, thus this aspect of their lives is not used to make personality judgments against them. Instead, men with sexual problems are encouraged to visit their doctors because they are obviously suffering a physical disorder, rather than being emotionally flawed.

All girls, nice and naughty, are more complicated and mysterious than society would have us be. Like the yin/yang symbol, our niceness and naughtiness meld into each other. While the push to be a nice girl is strong, the hormonal stew that bubbles inside nice girls is magnetic and the two urges duel each other during the teen years. In nice girls, naughtiness, while making a valiant effort, eventually loses – at least for a while.

As a teenager, my naughtiness made rare appearances, once in the form of playing Rape-scenario Barbie with my sister and a neighbor girl. (Wouldn't Mattel be pleased?) As nice girls we were attempting to figure out how to deal with this scary act. Plenty of nice girls were also reading V. C. Andrew's "incest is best" novel, "Flowers in the Attic" during my teen years. In the music world, I loved the dark, sexy songs of Depeche Mode. The romantic videos of Duran Duran were a thrill, especially the soft-porn extended versions, which never made air-play on MTV. Even though I haven't watched the video tape in ages, I keep it because it reminds me of my adolescence. (Come to think of it, how did I come to own this video tape? It had a warning label.) I use these examples to illustrate that nice teen girls do think about sex. I don't believe I was aberrant in this respect.

Was I interested in boys? Certainly, but I thought they had to make the first move. My nice girl image prevented boys from making that move. Of course, boys never knew what prurient thoughts were swimming through my head. Unlike today, this was a time when girls weren't able to talk openly about any bodily function. There was no giggling about farting or taking credit for it the way boys did. We whispered about our periods amongst ourselves and frequently employed euphemisms to discuss this "monthly visitor".

My nice-girl-ness was cemented by the fact that I wasn't allowed to date until age sixteen. I also never went to under-age drinking parties where inhibitions were lowered by the free flow of alcohol. To this day, I do not drink, other than a few sips of my husband's thick-necked Gunther beers. My nice girl attitude is only partially to blame for this. Frankly, alcohol just doesn't sit well in my stomach, so why bother? I don't have a problem with adults responsibly imbibing. Heck, live it up! It's fun to watch people get silly, and frankly, more honest. As for smoking? I think it's disgusting. I rather enjoy using my lungs and, after nagging my dad to quit, I could hardly be a hypocrite and start myself.

On the swearing front, my naughtiness snuck out in the form of a college paper I wrote called “Vulgarity Unbound”. As the title suggests, I used every swear word I could find and got an ‘A’ for my effort.

By the time I had moved on to college, my dad was sure I was destined for “Old Maidhood”. I had no such plans, even though I had never dated. Another display of naughtiness prevented the fulfillment of my dad’s prophesy of my becoming a spinster. I asked my brother to see if his best friend would ask me out. It was rather daring to break the unwritten rule of dating a brother’s best friend, but it worked. As the best friend, now my husband, says, I chased him ‘til he caught me.

I was fortunate that my husband was willing to look past my nice girl frock and glimpse the passion within. He saw my refusal to drink and smoke as a sign of strength. Because he hung out at our house often, he knew I had a sense of humor, a definite sign of fun. On the sexual front, I was timid, but he was patient and sensitive and encouraged my sensuality. Without directly saying so, he gave me permission to enjoy my body without guilt. Looking back, I realize that I was totally naïve about sex. Out of nice girl habit, I stayed uninformed. I was not daring enough to check out a library book or purchase a book that was overtly sexual. Thankfully, my husband was informed enough for the both of us. He, who is not much of a reader, knows terms that make grown men blush.

Speaking of blushing reminds me of an incident that shows just how hard it is to shake the nice girl image. My husband and I were visiting with a group of friends, all men, two of whom we had attended high school with. One of the men was telling riotous dirty jokes and one of our high school friends looked at me, blushed furiously, and apologized for the jokes. While it was sweet of him to be so concerned, he needn’t have been. In the fifteen or so years since high school, he obviously assumed I was still a nice girl. I’ve grown beyond that, primarily through the life-altering experiences of marriage and childbirth.

As I have already mentioned my husband’s effect on my nice girl persona, let me touch on the change childbirth wrought. When complete strangers looked at my bottom and poked around “down there” during my deliveries, modesty walked down the hall for a coffee break and never returned. If modesty even thought of coming back, it changed its mind during the seventeen months I spent nursing my third child. Boob, anyone?

Yes, the nice girl image can be altered, good news for both girls and those rakish fellows from the group Offspring, who wish for a naughty girl in the song, “I Want You Bad”. Like all good things, naughtiness in nice girls just takes some time to make an appearance. If nice girls know they won’t be rejected for their naughtiness, they will allow it to surface while keeping the truly nice traits of compassion and kindness. So, men, do not discount nice girls. If this nice girl thinks things like this, just imagine what is going through the minds of other nice girls.

P.S. While I was in the middle of writing this essay, I was looking for a book on Buddhism at my local library when I came across a book called *The Secret Lives of Girls: What Good Girls Really Do – Sex Play, Aggression, and Their Guilt* by Sharon Lamb (© 2001). Peeking inside, I found a chapter called “Naked Barbies” and immediately slammed the book shut. Intrigued by the topic, but not wanting to have it influence me, I decided not to read the book until after I finished this essay. Well, now that I’m done I’ve cracked open the book and started reading. It is an in-depth dissertation on what I’ve discussed in this essay and I highly recommend it for those of you who want to know more about “Nice Girls”.