

The Crazy Wisdom Interviews with Sally Wisotzkey and Carole Lapidos on Raising Strong and Confident Daughters

self-aware, culture, magazines, television, internet, movies, dolls, fashion, peers, the schoolyard, pressures, issues



Sally Wisotzkey and Carole Lapidos

Photo by Rachael Waring

Magazines, television, the internet, movies, dolls, fashion, peers, the schoolyard, the home --- the pressures on boys and girls to contort themselves to meet barely understood expectations is intense, just as it was when we were their ages! What follows are in-depth interviews with Carole Lapidos and Sally Wisotzkey, two Ann Arbor women who've been thinking about these issues for a long time, in a focused way, and working with girls and their parents.

We've asked two of this region's leading authorities to talk about raising girls in the age of Twitter. Together, they started the organization, *Raising Strong and Confident Daughters*, and they are part of a network of parents, educators, social workers and therapists working to inspire our kids to become self-aware. Forty years after the beginning of the women's movement and the gay rights movement, our culture continues to take three steps forward and two steps back.

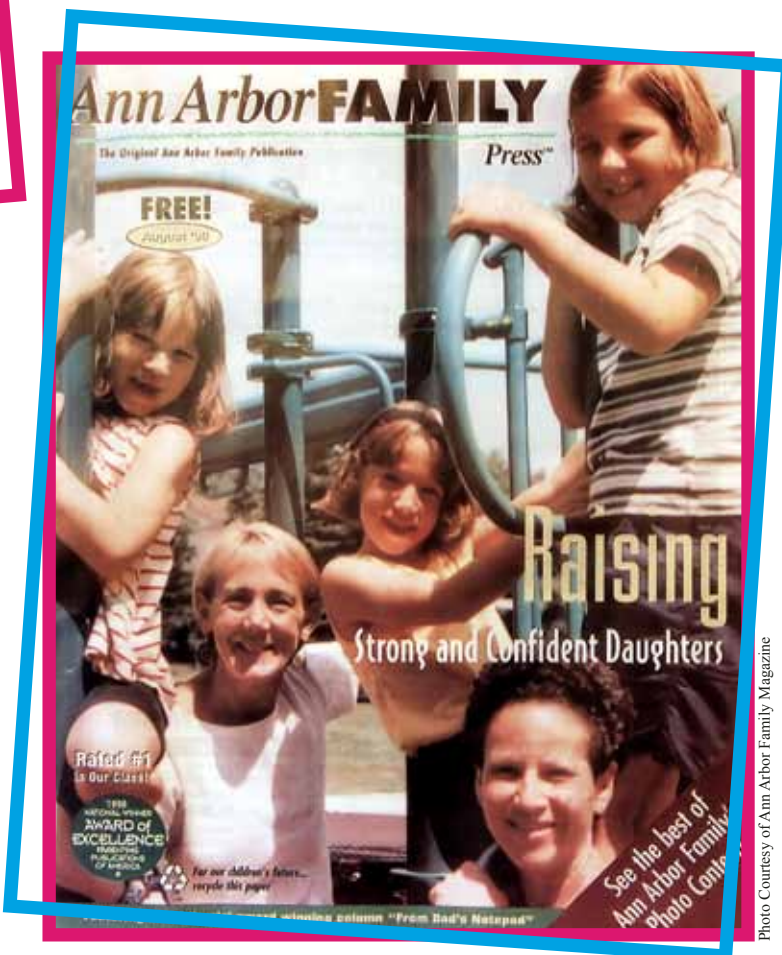


Photo Courtesy of Ann Arbor Family Magazine

Cover of the "Ann Arbor Family Press" magazine from August 1998 featuring "Raising Strong and Confident Daughters"



“I think that for many girls the early friendships they develop in elementary school are their first experience with being ‘in love.’ Girls are sharing secrets, exchanging clothes, buying each other gifts...Girls are learning about loyalty and connection. When these friendships run into trouble or maybe jealousies arise with other friends, girls can experience a broken heart. It is very important for parents to listen and validate how important her feelings are.”



Photo by Rachael Waring

Photography
by Rachael Waring
and Amy Johnston



Photo by Amy Johnston



Photo by Amy Johnston

Annah Wisotzkey



Photo by Amy Johnston

Mira Spaulding



Photo by Amy Johnston

Ilana Spaulding

“Our daughters who adored us, listened to us, sought our advice, told us about themselves and their friends, can suddenly become moody, want privacy, and stop sharing the content of their lives with us. We miss the girls they were.”



The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Carole Lapidos

Interviewed by Bill Zirinsky

*(Carole Lapidos grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota, though she's now been in Ann Arbor for 29 years. She received her undergraduate degree from the University of Minnesota, and her MSW from the University of Michigan, with a specialization in community organizing. Carole started her career in the field of Gerontology, working for 13 years at the U of M Geriatric Center as a volunteer coordinator for their older adult outreach program. In 1997, she and Sally Wisotzkey founded the organization, **Raising Strong and Confident Daughters**. Since that time, Carole has been presenting workshops on that theme, and also directing the after school program, *It's Great to be a Girl*, in collaboration with the U of M Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives, Eastern Michigan University, Girl Scouts Heart of Michigan, and three local middle schools. She is married to Jeff Spaulding, a school psychologist with Jackson Public Schools. She has two daughters: Mira is a junior at MSU, and Ilana is a senior at Pioneer High School.)*

Bill Zirinsky: Carole, you mentioned to me that Mary Pipher's book, *Raising Ophelia*, had 'opened your eyes' at the time you first read it. Let's start with that. How old were your daughters at the time, and what impact did the book have on you?

Carole Lapidos: My daughters were eight and five when I read Pipher's book. I can honestly say that reading her book changed my life. Her accounts of what was happening to girls as they moved through early adolescence and beyond both frightened and frustrated me because I felt that not a lot had changed since I was a pre-teen. My being frightened had all to do with being on the other side of the table as a mother of two daughters. So what was Pipher saying? She talked about the girls she was seeing in her private practice and how they were struggling with 'dumbing down' - in other words, hiding their intelligence because it wasn't cool for girls to be smart. Many were overly focusing on their appearance and popularity, thinking those things are what is most important about being a girl.

I felt determined to be a part of a movement that supported girls in looking beyond these very negative and narrow definitions of girlhood. In looking around Washtenaw County, I did not see a program that was directly dealing with educating parents, teachers, and coaches on how to support girls in staying resilient. It was at this time, in the fall of 1997, that I partnered with Sally Wisotzkey, a local therapist and parent of a then nine-year-old daughter who attended my daughter's school. Sally and I immediately connected and felt that by starting with talking and sharing information with parents of young girls, that we could begin addressing the salient issues that were impacting girls' self-esteem. We founded *Raising Strong and Confident Daughters*, an organization whose mission was to work with children, their parents, and professionals within the community, to develop and implement innovative, prevention-oriented programs that would support girls in resisting the cultural stereotypes that limit their potential.

Bill Zirinsky: You said to me that "it takes a lot of resilience for girls to hold on to their true selves". Will you elaborate?

"In the 13 years that I have been doing this girl development work, I have seen the trend on the part of merchandisers and corporations attracting the attention of younger and younger girls with products, clothing, and make-up that blur the lines between children and teens."

Carole Lapidos: I feel strongly that at a very young age our daughters are faced with many pressures to be somebody they are not. In the 13 years that I have been doing this girl development work, I have seen the trend on the part of merchandisers and corporations attracting the attention of younger and younger girls with products, clothing, and make-up that blur the lines between children and teens. The Girl Scouts of the United States of America, through their research studies, coined the phrase, 'developmental compression.' The years of being a child are being condensed into a smaller and smaller space. So much so, that I had a mother at one of my workshops share with me that at her daughter's seven year old birthday party, more than half the girls when jumping into their pajamas to get ready for bed were wearing thong underpants!



Photo by Rachael Waring

Carole Lapidos

"If someone had asked me ten years ago to close my eyes and envision what my daughters would be like at seventeen and twenty, I would see them as they are now. I am a bit biased but I see their greatness!"

When I talk about resilience, I am talking about creating opportunities for girls to talk about the pressures they feel to grow up too fast and to have loving supportive adults assist in expanding the parameters of the 'girl box' that defines girls based on their looks, sexiness and popularity. The way to help develop a resilient young woman is to help her look critically at the culture's messages about what it means to be a girl and a woman and support her in being true to her interests, passions and values.

Zirinsky: How toxic is the culture to girls?

Lapidos: Very!!! Girls and the adults in their lives have to work hard to find positive role models for girls. When I talk with parents, I encourage them to become girl culture experts. Pay attention to the TV shows, movies, and magazines that target girls. Practically everything out there portrays girls in the most stereotypical way. Take a stroll through the toy aisles at any department store and you will still see the pink aisle with baby dolls, dress up dolls and Barbie. The boy's aisles will have action figures, trucks, and action oriented toys.

In addition to the stereotyped way in which girls are defined, we are now facing an increasingly dangerous sexualization of girls. An example of this is the Bratz doll. These dolls are dressed in very sexualized clothing. They wear miniskirts, fishnet stockings and tight skimpy shirts. As caring adults in the lives of girls we need to help them navigate this journey.

Zirinsky: I understand one of your daughters did a survey for a course she was taking, on 'girls and body image', not too long ago. What were her findings?

Lapidos: My daughter Ilana is a senior at Pioneer High School. As a project for her psychology class, she and another classmate conducted a survey of fifty girls between the ages of sixteen to eighteen. Some of the results they found were very disturbing. Seventy percent reported they would change their appearance if they could. Sixty-eight percent have tried to lose weight or been on a diet. Ninety-five percent constantly compare themselves to other girls. Sixty percent believe wearing tight clothes will make boys like them. Seventy-six per cent of girls felt pressured to look a certain way.

BZ: In raising your own daughters, you said: "I made it my personal goal that I wouldn't say something derogatory about my body to my kids". Were you able to keep to that, and what effect do you think it had on your daughters?

Lapidos: One of the most important pieces of information I gleaned from all the books I have read on this topic, was, don't talk negatively about how you look in front of your daughter. One of the most powerful examples I read was an anecdote from a mom who was sharing that she was with her eight year old daughter in a department store dressing room trying on jeans and the mom said out loud, 'I look so fat and ugly in these jeans!' Her daughter looked up at her and said, 'but mommy, everyone always says we look just like each other.' I really tried to hold onto keeping my own sometimes negative feelings about my body to myself. Did my husband hear it, oh yeah!

BZ: Please talk about the power of male approval, and male privilege, and how that relates to dads, as stewards and as representatives of malehood? And did/does your husband "buy in" to your viewpoint?

Lapidos: I think it is very important for fathers to understand that they play a very important role in helping shape their daughters view of themselves. Girls want their father's approval. Girls want time with their dads. When daughters are little, dads can begin to lay down the tracks that forge their relationship. If there is comfort and support there, daughters will turn to their fathers throughout their lifetime.

BZ: Let's talk some more about dads and daughters. You mentioned to me that you work a lot with college women and they can remember when their dads 'stepped away', and the way that gets interpreted by teenage girls as "what's wrong with me". Can you expand on that for us?

Lapidos: I think some dads have a more difficult time figuring out how to stay in relationship with their daughters once they move into puberty and start

"Girls want their father's approval. Girls want time with their dads. When daughters are little, dads can begin to lay down the tracks that forge their relationship. If there is comfort and support there, daughters will turn to their fathers throughout their lifetime.."

to become young women. The college women I work with expressed feeling rejected by their fathers when they started developing and menstruating. The young women thought something was wrong with them and didn't understand their fathers' changed behavior. On the other side, fathers have expressed to me that they too feel unsure about how to stay engaged when a big part of their interaction was wrestling and having her sit on their lap. I encourage dads and daughters to find new ways of being together. An example is Dad and daughter night out. The key issue is connection; how you connect can be determined by both dad and daughter.

BZ: Another facet of working with dads and their relationship to their daughters is fathers yearning for the opportunity to understand their daughters' feelings, and those of other young women. Tell us how you've been able to work with that disconnect?

Lapidos: I just conducted a workshop recently and one of the dads spoke up and said, 'I don't speak girl!' A lot of girls are verbal creatures. I encourage dads to engage girls in conversation. If as a dad you don't understand what your daughter is expressing, then ask for clarification. The important thing here is your willingness and interest in being with her.

BZ: Recently you were at a workshop led by author

Courtney Macavinta, who does workshops with high school and college women. Can you tell our readers about the exercise in which one tries to envision one's daughter in ten years, and its broader meaning?

Lapidos: The exercise involves closing your eyes and seeing your daughter as she is right now. Visualizing her with friends in activities and paying attention to the feeling you get as you see her. The next step is to imagine her ten years from now. Again, noticing what she looks like, who she is with, and what she is doing. This exercise provides a window into your vision of what you want for your daughter. I think it is always valuable to have a picture of what your daughter might move toward in the future. It is important to always remember that who she becomes will be up to her.

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Photo by Amy Johnston

Carole Lapidos and her girls -- Ilana Spaulding (on the left) is 18. She is graduating from Pioneer this spring, and going to Wittenberg University in Ohio in the fall. Mira Spaulding will be turning 21 in June. She is a junior at MSU.

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The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Carole Lapidos

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BZ: You cited Nancy Snyderman's *Girls in the Mirror*, as an important book about girls coming of age. Please talk about her references to "the other people in the room" – the other women, the other stories, the other female role models.

Lapidos: When our daughters are growing up with us as their parents, there are always other people in the room. The other people aren't really physically present; they are the influences of our parents, or grandparents, or stories or beliefs that we grew up with. Being cognizant of what these influences are can be really enlightening as we struggle and celebrate who our daughters are.

BZ: At this point in time, you are primarily doing parent workshops and running a mentoring program. Is that right?

Lapidos: I offer parent workshops throughout the state of Michigan and will be for the first time this year doing workshops in Canada. The *It's Great To Be A Girl* mentoring program that I run is an innovative and effective self-esteem building program. This past fall, my colleague, Kimberly Grover, and I conducted an *It's Great To Be A Girl* training for MSU students through their

Residential College for the Arts and Humanities. MSU is exploring setting up this program in Lansing. As we work to develop the training manual, we hope to offer this mentoring model training throughout Michigan.

BZ: Please tell us about the *It's Great to be a Girl* mentoring program, and about the topics which are explored by the 11-year-old girls and their "femtors".

Lapidos: The program is a ten week afterschool program that provides the opportunity for sixth grade girls in the company of college women who we call femtors to explore and discuss the many topics that impact the daily lives of eleven year old girls. The topics include friendship, body image, teasing and harassment, advocacy, and dream building. The femtors complete a three-week training, learning

how to guide discussion and activities on these topics. The femtors have this instant 'cool factor' and the girls love being with them and sharing what is happening in their lives. This year we had a femtor work with us who had been in the program as a sixth grader. She talked about how the things we discussed when she was in sixth grade stayed with her throughout high school.

BZ: Can you tell us about the *Get it Together for Girls* organization?

Lapidos: *Get it Together for Girls* is a network of individuals and organizations who offer programs, services and support to girls and young women, approximately ages 8-22, in Washtenaw County. We share information about what is being offered for girls and what support is needed. We will be working to identify community needs that are unmet and will work together to direct resources toward meeting those needs.

Get it Together for Girls meets three times a year. Each meeting has at its centerpiece an educational component. Recently, we had a very informative program titled, *A Multicultural Perspective on Body Image and Disordered Eating*. I worked with Sharon Gold-Steinberg of *Strong Moms Strong Girls*, a program of the U of M Center for the Child and Family. (The Junior League helps to provide the funding for *Strong Moms Strong Girls*.)

"Girls have deep connections with one another and they learn a lot about themselves through their friendships with other girls."

BZ: In the book, *The Secret Lives of Teen Girls*, the author, Evelyn Resh, writes about navigating through girl friendships. She writes about girl to girl cruelty, and the volatility and drama in girl friendships. Will you speak to that?

Carole Lapidos: I think a lot of media attention is paid to the topic of girl cruelty in friendships. We know girls can struggle in their friendships and that it can create a lot of drama but we don't pay enough attention to the ways in which girls do stick up for each other and support one another through very difficult situations. Girls have deep connections with one another and they learn a lot about themselves through their friendships with other girls. It is important to let girls know that there will be conflicts in their relationships but if both girls are willing to work it out it can strengthen the bond they already have.

BZ: You reminded me that we all have "so many scars from middle school", and also that it's important to "honor those struggles". Why do we need to honor those long forgotten and painful memories?

Lapidos: I think remembering the ways in which we were 'injured' in middle school can shed some light on what our children go through. Middlers are just trying to figure out who they are and who their friends are. At this age, kids are dealing with so much insecurity it is inevitable that somewhere along the



Photo by Amy Johnston

"Whether she wears dresses or baseball jerseys, it is who she is and what she is passionate about that really matters. Being an ally to your child is the most important role you can play."



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line your child will be teased or hurt. Sometimes we as parents need to take a closer look to see if our child is the one doing the teasing.

BZ: In talking about the intense feelings that girls experience in their friendships and relationships, you noted that “they’re really heartbroken”. And that parents dismiss “the heart of their children’s feelings”. Say more, please.

Lapidos: I think that for many girls the early friendships they develop in elementary school are their first experience with being ‘in love.’ Girls are sharing secrets, exchanging clothes, buying each other gifts, etc. Girls are learning about loyalty and connection. When these friendships run into trouble or maybe jealousies arise with other friends, girls can experience a broken heart. It is very important for parents to listen and validate how important her feelings are. There will be a roller coaster of emotions happening with your daughter but be aware that you do not have to ride it with her, you can be a supportive bystander.

BZ: You were on the *Today Show*, correct? I know they don’t give anyone too many minutes to talk about anything in depth, but what was your subject matter, and what did you hope to get across?

Lapidos: I appeared on the *Today Show* in August of 2007. I was asked to talk about the topic of tomboys. The concern that parents had with having a daughter who was a tomboy was that she would be teased and she would be missing out on being a girl. What I shared was how important it is to embrace who your daughter is. Whether she wears dresses or baseball jerseys, it is who she is and what she is passionate about that really matters. Being an ally to your child is the most important role you can play.

BZ: In late January you attended a workshop on “the Lolita Effect”. Please tell us about that.

Lapidos: The workshop presented the harmful effects of the rampant proliferation of sexualized images of girls and young women in advertising, merchandising, and the media. This kind of exposure can be harmful to both girls and boys. Girls can take away that what is valuable about them is how ‘hot’ they are and this can impact the development of a healthy sexual self-image. Boys learn to see girls and women as sexual objects. Parents can play an active role in limiting some of the exposure their young teens have to this media. Dialoging with older teens about these issues can provide an opportunity to express your values on sexuality and relationship issues.

BZ: How do you think your involvement with these issues has affected your daughters?

Lapidos: I think my involvement in these issues has had a significant impact on my daughters’ lives. They both have volunteered for girls conferences and led discussions on body image and friendship and dream building. My oldest daughter has been involved for over two years with Michigan State’s sexual assault prevention program, and my younger daughter is a member of Young Women for Change, a fundraising program that supports girl programming in Washtenaw County. They see the impact that our culture has on girls’ self-esteem but I do believe they have developed a ‘struggle muscle’ as it relates to these issues that seems to fortify them in significant ways. If someone had asked me ten years ago to close my eyes and envision what my daughters would be like at seventeen and twenty, I would see them as they are now. I am a bit biased but I see their greatness!

BZ: How do you think your husband has been affected by your deep involvement in these issues, and your expertise?

Lapidos: Jeff says that by being exposed to these issues through me it has helped him understand some of the issues girls face and how they are affected by the father’s attitudes towards body image and the idea of ‘beauty’.

BZ: Thank you, Carole.

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Carole Lapidos and Sally Wisotzkey will be presenting an evening on Parenting Teens on Monday, May 17th, 7-8:30 pm, at Crazy Wisdom. They’ll answer questions and facilitate a discussion about how parents can navigate the difficult adolescent years with their teens. For more information, see the listing in the Parenting section of the Calendar, on page 80.

The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Sally Wisotzkey

Interviewed by Bill Zirinsky

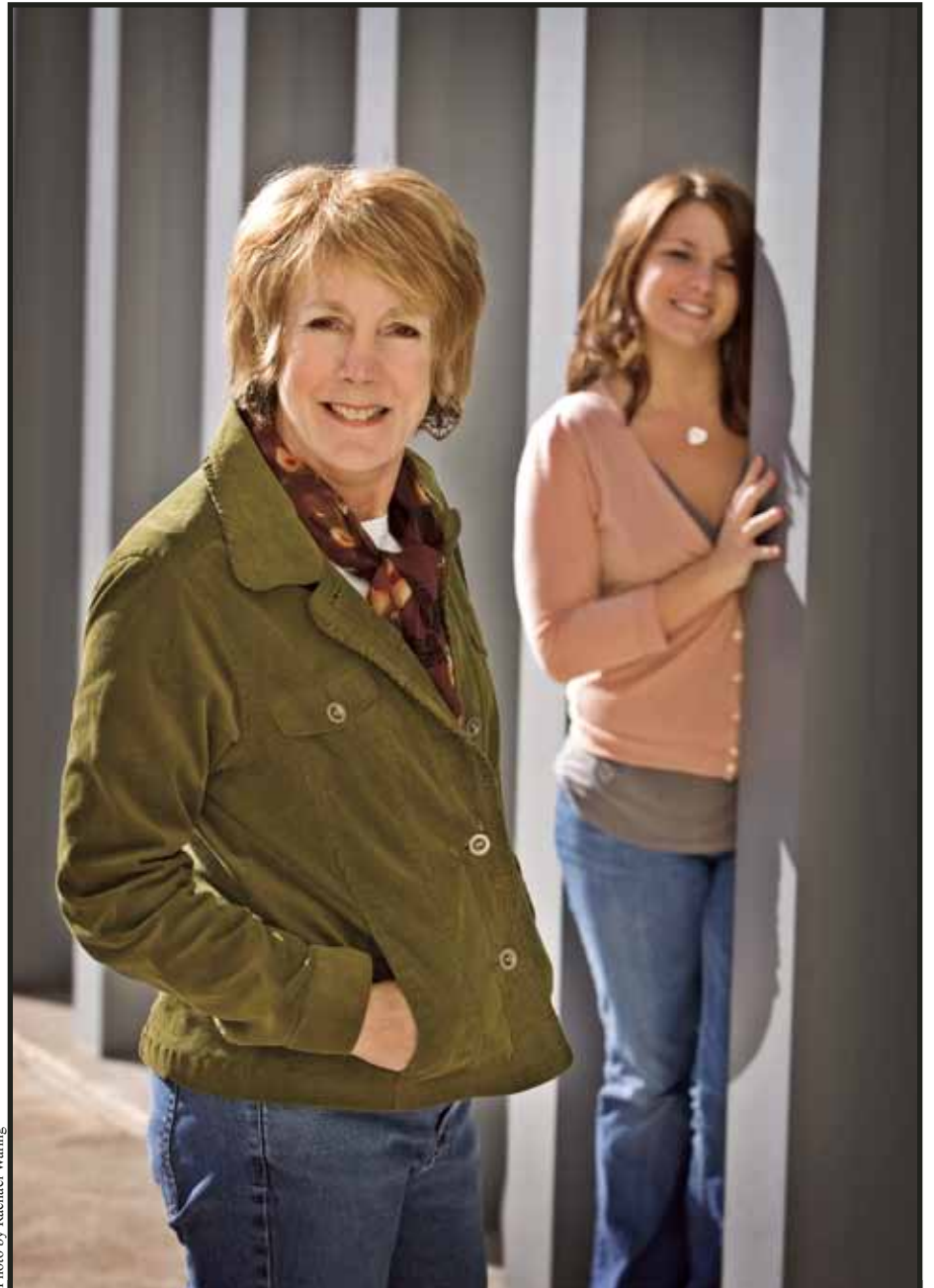


Photo by Rachael Waring

Sally Wisotzkey

“We, too, like our daughters, are still works in progress and we bring our own strengths and frustrations to our roles as mothers. Thank goodness we’re not perfect!”

*(Sally Wisotzkey has lived in Ann Arbor for a quarter century, and been a practicing psychotherapist in the area for 23 of those years. She specializes in the issues of teens, especially girls, young adults and women, parenting and families, self esteem, grief and loss. She also treats trauma and family of origin issues. Sally was trained in Person of the Therapist work with Harry Aponte, and she is an EMDR therapist. Also, she’s been working with issues of spirituality in psychotherapy for many years. In 1997, she and Carole Lapidos co-founded **Raising Strong and Confident Daughters**.)*

Sally grew up in York, Pennsylvania. She received her undergraduate degree from University of Pittsburgh in 1974, and her MSW from U-M in 1977. She has two children, Annah, 21, and Jake, 19. They are from her first marriage with Jon Wisotzkey, who died of cancer in 1992. She was remarried in 2002, to Steve Wyzgoski, and has two step sons, Cal, 25, and Sam, 21.)

Bill Zirinsky: Sally, the book, *Reviving Ophelia*, had a strong impact on you and Carole Lapidos, at a time when your daughter was in second grade at Abbott. Why?

Sally Wisotzkey: In *Reviving Ophelia*, Mary Pipher spoke to me as a mother and a woman. She made a strong case for the risk girls in our culture are at, of losing their unique and special selves in the face of a culture that objectifies girls and women. My reaction was FEAR that my daughter, who was 8 at the time, would be harmed. What parent isn’t afraid that the unhealthy aspects of a current culture, (be it objectification of girls, pressure to grow up too fast, pressure to achieve rather than learning to be, substance abuse, etc) will take their children

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The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Sally Wisotzkey

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in a harmful direction? I recall my reaction also being, “I don’t want to just sit by and watch this happen...what can I do”? We decided to form a small business which we called ‘*Raising Strong and Confident Daughters*’.

Bill Zirinsky: Please tell us about what evolved out of your joint interest in that book?

Sally Wisotzkey: The first thing Carole and I decided to do as *Raising Strong and Confident Daughters* was to educate ourselves and develop an educational/prevention program for parents.

We piloted this at Abbot Elementary School with the support of other parents and the PTO. The parents attending found it very helpful, and we began offering the workshop in the local community as well as other locations in Michigan. From these workshops evolved monthly ongoing parent support groups for mothers, which I facilitated in my private practice office. One of these groups is still meeting after 12 years of raising our daughters and sons together, and a new group has just formed!

In addition to the workshops and support groups for parents, it made sense to offer something for girls themselves. We wrote a curriculum for middle school girls called “It’s Great to be a Girl”, developed a training program for college “femtors”, and in collaboration with Wild Swan Theater, UM, and Forsythe Middle School, we received a grant from Ann Arbor Community Foundation to pilot the program. The following year, the Michigan Women’s Foundation funded moving the program to West Middle School in Ypsilanti. After collaborating with and financial support from the Huron Valley Girl Scouts, the program expanded to include East Middle School.

Today, ten years later, “It’s Great to be a Girl” holds weekly groups at both middle schools in Ypsilanti as well as in Willow Run. We have collaborations with Eastern Michigan University and University of Michigan in recruiting and training femtors. The program has strong financial support and commitment from U of M’s Office of Academic Affairs, Multi Cultural Initiative. The collaborative nature of the program has been central to its success.

The ongoing vitality of the program is a testament to Carole’s amazing perseverance, and the program’s effectiveness at providing girls the opportunity to come together and experience the validation of their self worth!

The Girl Scouts Heart of Michigan has also provided many years of support for the development and provision of day long self esteem/friendship workshops for girls in grades 3 through 8.

As you can see, we have been on an exciting and gratifying journey!

Zirinsky: Can you tell concisely tell us about the arc of your professional career? You started in private practice in 1986?

Wisotzkey: After receiving my MSW in 1977, I worked for 9 years for Plymouth Canton Community Schools. While there, I had the good fortune to work with and learn from many talented and creative individuals committed

to meeting the needs of struggling teenagers. I worked there in the capacity of both a school social worker and as part of a community collaboration in developing alternative educational opportunities for teens. As a professional, I became more aware of the specific problems teen girls have with self esteem and self image, and was a part of developing support groups for girls. My time there laid the foundation for my interest in and ability to work with teens and their families, and to create programs that are engaging and fun for them.

From there I started a private practice as a therapist specializing in working with the issues of young people and their families. My children were born in 1988 and 1991, and I began to learn about children from a new perspective, that of parent. Now I had to try to use the advice I had been giving for many years!

The opportunity to weave together my interest in working with teen girls, my previous experience with developing school based programs, and my own parenting came together when I had the good fortune of meeting Carole. Working with and learning from Carole as we founded and grew *Raising Strong and Confident Daughters* has been a true blessing for me. I couldn’t have a more delightful and loving human being as a friend and business partner! These days, I have focused back on my work as a therapist, while Carole has continued to create and evolve the programs.

Zirinsky: And so your professional background, and your being a mother with a daughter to raise, came together --- with respect to

developing a specialized expertise in mother and daughter relationships?

Wisotzkey: I think my expertise in the specific issues of girls, teens, and parenting has evolved over the years as a combination of my own life experiences and professional opportunities. Parents, both mothers and fathers, have such a profound impact on boy’s and girl’s sense of themselves and their self identity as young men and women. For example, it is every bit as challenging and important as a mother to raise our sons with a healthy sense of self, as it is for us to raise our daughters in a healthy way.

In addition, being a single parent for 10 years raised my awareness of the unique challenges single and divorced parents face, and their exceptional need for support from other parents within the community. I could not have raised my children without reaching out for and receiving support from neighbors, friends, schools, community organizations, churches, etc.

I notice as my own children get older, I have been working with more clients their age. Again I feel fortunate that my work life and personal life experiences have fit together so nicely.

BZ: When you work with teenagers, do you also generally work with their parents? And when parents come in for sessions, do the dads generally show up, too?

Wisotzkey: It is always helpful as a therapist to see teens as part of a family system and to keep parents in the loop. However, since much of the work of the teen years, and many of their difficulties, are around developing their own identity and competence at being independent, they often want their therapy to be their own. It is always fun to find that balance, and most parents understand this. I often find myself in the position of interpreting parents’ behaviors to their teens and teen behavior to parents in a way that keeps good will flowing!



Photo by Amy Johnston

Sally and Annah -- Annah, 21, is a senior at Western Michigan University. She is majoring in psychology.

“I often find myself in the position of interpreting parents behaviors to their teens and teen behavior to parents’ in a way that keeps goodwill flowing!”

It is my experience that many contemporary fathers may have grown up emotionally disconnected from their fathers, but they want to have a closer bond with their own children. They realize the value to themselves and their children of building a strong bond, and they are willing to ask for help with the communication skills necessary to have this bond. So yes, dads show up and it is rewarding work.

BZ: When you have done workshops for parenting teenagers, or workshops on raising strong and confident daughters, what percentage of the parents who come to these workshops are men? Please tell us about drawing dads in.

Wisotzkey: Well it is true that probably about 80% of parents showing up for workshops are mothers. Women just seem to be more interested in talking and sharing with each other about parenting. Carole has offered workshops specifically for dads. Also, we make a point in our workshops of providing specific ideas for fathers to help them stay connected to their daughters as they go from being little girls to young women.

BZ: More generally, tell us about what has been most meaningful to you about those workshops, over the years, on *Raising Strong and Confident Daughters*.

Wisotzkey: It is, without a doubt, being blessed and comforted by the sense of support and encouragement that is given and received when parents come together in the desire to be the best parents they can be to their sons and daughters. Many parents in past generations had the involvement of their own parents, aunts and uncles, and other relatives, in child raising. Today, with extended families being so dispersed, we need strong connections within our communities to find that needed support. Everyone who is a parent shares in the common humanity of the challenges of parenting and worries about our kids. It reminds me of a joke I heard recently: *Two women were meeting in a park for a visit with each other. They sat on the park bench and one said to the other, "so how are you doing?" and the other woman responded with a deep sigh, "oh my". Then she asked her friend back, "and so how are you doing?", and her friend also responded with a deep sigh "oh my". And then she said, "OK, that's enough about the kids!"*



Photo by Amy Johnston

"Girls are confused by the message that they can be whatever they want to be, but while they're being, they need to be sexy."

BZ: In the book, *Girl in the Mirror – Mothers and Daughters in the Years of Adolescence*, Nancy Snyderman writes, "For many of us, switching gears as mothers is as difficult as the transition out of childhood is for our daughters". Can you talk about that?

Wisotzkey: Many mothers experience a daughter's often sudden and unanticipated change in attitude towards them as a loss... And it is. Our daughters who adored us, listened to us, sought our advice, told us about themselves and their friends can suddenly become moody, want privacy, and stop sharing the content of their lives with us. We miss the girls they were. It takes some time, and a step back, to notice it is just our daughters doing what they are supposed to do...beginning to form their own identities. It can be awkward for both mothers and their daughters. Mothers learn to listen in different ways, and learn to give their daughters the space they need to grow. Daughters learn they don't have to slam the door so hard, and find their way back to a changing relationship with their mothers. It's a process, as is all of parenting.

BZ: Separate, but possibly related, Snyderman writes, "Two important landmarks in female life – menarche and perimenopause/ menopause, events that in previous generations were separated in time, will, in daughter and mother, likely overlap." She wrote that she and her co-author, Peg Streep, found that "hugely important – if rarely mentioned". To paraphrase a question raised in that book, can you talk about how the changes in daughters during adolescence affect a mother's sense of self, and conversely, how a girl's experience of

adolescence is affected by where, in life, her mother finds herself?

Wisotzkey: It would make sense that the life stage a mother is in will affect her experience of her daughter's adolescence, and vice versa, and I believe the experience would be unique to each mother and daughter. For example, a self confident woman in her 50's, with a young teen of 13, may experience her daughter's budding sexuality with a sense of excitement and celebration, bringing her own wisdom and sense of self to help her daughter as she grows. Another woman in the same stage of life, who has not done her own work, may feel threatened and intimidated by her daughter's youth, and the typical

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Soulstar Healing Hearts

Kate Rogers

- * The Feldenkrais® Method
- * The Anat Baniel Method – Mastery Level in Children
- * Conscious Channel
- * Shamanic Journeys
- * Channeled Energy Healings
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The Crazy Wisdom Interview with Sally Wisotzkey

Continued from page 35

criticism of the mom by her daughter. A woman who takes good care of herself and challenges herself to work through her own self esteem issues, will always be better equipped to parent in any life stage of her own or her daughter's.

However, we know that even the healthiest of mothers and fathers will find they alone don't affect a girl's view of herself during her adolescence. More than ever before, the sheer amount of information that comes from constant media exposure rivals a parent's influence.

BZ: Cultural change happens slowly. Much has changed, and much has stayed the same, in the area of sex roles, and also in the broader area of female adolescence, since the early 1970's, when you and I began college. In Snyderman's book, it says, "We do not generally appreciate the way in which the stresses our daughters face are markedly different from our own adolescence." What are your thoughts about this, as a workshop leader and a therapist and also as a mother?

Wisotzkey: In my opinion, the convergence of excessive media consumption and the sexualization of younger and younger girls has created a dangerous culture for our daughters. Rather than learning about healthy sexual identities from their parents and peers, girls are learning from the media that they are only valued for their "hotness", i.e. their bodies. Young people are bombarded with this message on TV, on the Internet, in magazines, song lyrics, video games, billboards, clothing stores. Girls are confused by the message that they can be whatever they want to be, but while they're being, they need to be sexy.

And in communities like ours, girls are also under pressure to be good at sports, do volunteer work, get the best grades, play an instrument, have lots of friends, get into a great college, etc. Girls experience this as a feeling of never being enough. It shows up in my office in the forms of low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and substance abuse.

Of course, boys are also victims of the sexualization of girls. They, too, feel pressure to compete for the "hot" girls, and "hook up" before they are emotionally ready. What girls and boys both really desire are friendships and relationships with each other where they can have someone to talk with, feel special and cared about, and safe just being themselves!

BZ: You said to me that many moms and dads do not explicitly educate their children about the culture. You also noted that many parents don't even think to do the cultural deconstruction when their daughters are 10. They wait to start until they're 14, and then it's too late? Can you expand on that?

Wisotzkey: Parents have many opportunities when kids are young to point out and talk about how girls are portrayed, and sexual stereotypes in the media in general. For example, many fairy tales have the beautiful princess being saved by the handsome prince... Parents can begin pointing out how silly that is to 3 and 4 year old girls. When it comes to choosing dolls, parents can have fun with girls by comparing the bodies of Barbies with real girls. As our kids age, we can have conversations on daily bases that teach kids to look critically at the media. The earlier a parent engages their children in this way, the more likely the messages will stick. I found my own children were much more open to my rantings before they were teens! There are literally hundreds of media literacy organizations on line that provide tips for parents on how to give their kids the knowledge they need to be their own media critics. Just recently I viewed the website sosexysosoon.com taken from the new book by Diane Levin and Jean Kilbourne. It had extensive ideas for parents... check it out.

BZ: We live in a highly educated town, a town full of professional women. How come our girls are still so powerfully influenced by the cultural stereotypes? How do we protect our girls from the culture, and also to engage in the culture?

Wisotzkey: We protect our girls from the culture by giving them knowledge about the culture... creating in them an awareness, an observing point of view, as opposed to being a blank slate... giving them the knowledge necessary to resist the stereotypes.

But while we are educated and tuned into these issues, we are also women who grew up in homes with mothers and fathers in traditional roles, parents who were just beginning to see the possibilities. We were also raised in times when women were objectified. We still struggle to figure out our own self

Local Resources for Raising Daughters

1. **Get It Together for Girls:** A network of individuals and organizations who offer programs, services and support to girls and young women, approximately ages 8-22, in Washtenaw County. Contact: Carole Lapidos at Carolelap@aol.com or Sharon Gold-Steinberg at sharongs@umich.edu

2. **Strong Moms Strong Girls,** a program of the University Center for the Child and the Family and the Junior League of Ann Arbor. SMSG offers training on how to empower girls and young women to decrease Relational Aggression. Web address: strongmomsstronggirls.org. Phone: (734) 764-9466

3. **Raising Strong and Confident Daughters:** An organization that works with children, their parents and professionals to develop and implement prevention-oriented solutions that will support children in resisting the cultural stereotypes that limit their potential. RSCD offers workshops for parents, girls and professionals. Carole Lapidos: (734) 668-7402; Sally Wisotzkey (734) 747-9191. www.confidentdaughters.com; Carolelap@aol.com; Salwiz@comcast.net

4. **It's Great to be a Girl** is a unique mentoring program that matches undergraduate women with middle school girls. The mentors and the girls talk about and strategize around issues that affect their self-esteem. This program is a partnership between Girl Scouts Heart of Michigan, University of Michigan Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives and Eastern Michigan University. Contact: Carole Lapidos at Carolelap@aol.com

5. **Girl Scouts Heart of Michigan** offers Mother/Daughter Puberty Programs in partnership with Raising Strong and Confident Daughters. Contact: Girl Scouts Heart of Michigan at (734) 971-8800.

6. **Girls on the Run-Southeastern Michigan.** A self-esteem program combining an innovative curriculum with running. Contact: Danielle Johnson at (517) 294-2197.

7. **Young Women for Change:** An innovative philanthropy program for high school girls across the state of Michigan. Email: contact@miwf.org or jennilane4@gmail.com


esteem and body image issues. We are trying to work out gender roles with our spouses. We want to be sexy without being sex objects. We still comment on how "cute" little girls are and pay more attention to what our girls wear than what our boys wear. We're trying to understand the meaning of our own "inner beauty" and focus less on our outer beauty. We are struggling with divorce and financial difficulties and working full time. We too are trying to figure out what good enough is. We too, like our daughters, are still works in progress and we bring our own strengths and frustrations to our roles as mothers. Thank goodness we're not perfect!

BZ: You mentioned to me that parents often ask you to help them navigate issues related to cell phone usage, texting, social networking, television, movies, and so on. Please tell us about that, and give us some anecdotes.

Wisotzkey: I read some months ago (see NYTimes.com, *Room for Debate, Wired Kids, Negligent Parents?* Jan. 28) that a recent Kaiser Foundation study found that kids in the U.S. between the ages of 8 and 18 *spend MORE THAN 7 1/2 HOURS A DAY* on average using electronic devices, often connected to more than one at a time. That is more time than kids spend in school... way more. In addition to TV time, most is spent socializing on cell phones and computers, especially for girls. Boys are playing video games.

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Step into Who You Really Are

Parents of today are challenged to find ways to support their kids' necessary use of electronics and media, while setting age appropriate limits, often very difficult to monitor. Parents often come in to my office with reports of their kids having thousands of text messages every week, at all hours of the day and night. Our community, like others everywhere, is dealing with the phenomenon of 'sexting', with kids themselves being charged with child pornography...how ironic. And then there is the issue of Internet safety for young people. Parents are trying to teach their children that electronics are there for us to use, rather than them using us.

Fortunately, parents can use that same access to information to find help in how to manage their kids' electronic usage. Web sites such as Common Sense Media, Keep Kids Healthy, and Get Net Wise are available.

BZ: Please talk about the kinds of issues you have to navigate with teenage girls, and their parents, related to clothes. And give us some anecdotes, if possible.

Wisotzkey: Well as you can imagine, this is often a battle ground between girls and their parents, and has been through the ages. In general, parents can support girls in developing their own "style", as an expression of their unique selves. For example, I have a teenage client who wears scarves well, and it is her own look. The popular style for teen girls is highly sexualized, with as much cleavage as one can get out the door with! Girls see clothing through the lens of style, fitting in and being included. Parents want this for their daughters, but their lens is also about safety and self esteem. Girls are struggling themselves to fit the "ideal" body type. Parents need to be sensitive to their daughter's need to fit in, while pointing out and speaking up about why they find some clothing objectionable. When my daughter was a teen, we battled about 'short shorts'. I recall there were times when she was a young teen that I said no. There were times I said, "not with my money but do what you want with your own money". But I find the best way to handle this issue is to compliment your daughter when you feel she is wearing clothes that look good on her, and say nothing when she chooses to wear clothes you're not too fond of.

BZ: You noted to me that "I wasn't expected to be as sexual as girls are expected to be now". And you also said that you weren't expected to have as much sexual power as girls are now expected to have. Can you elaborate on that?

Wisotzkey: In the current culture, girls who are adept and sophisticated with their outward sexual appearance and behavior are rewarded with power within their social groups. They have the power of popularity, the power to get boyfriends. This is particularly true with younger teens. Unfortunately for these young women, the culture is backing them into a corner. They often lack the building blocks of true self-confidence, which are based on one's own abilities and accomplishments, one's own sense of self, which comes from within, rather than from the attention of others. I grew up in the 60's. Because the predominant culture and media at the time was not as sexualized, girls were not expected to gain social status from outward sexual look or behavior.

BZ: You have led parent support groups for about 12 years, yes? Please tell us about them. Tell us about the kinds of support that is engendered, and about what has been most memorable about those support groups.

Wisotzkey: Yes, the longest running support group for moms has been meeting monthly on Friday mornings for 12 years. We have come together to offer each other advice and support. We have come to know each other's stories intimately, we have been able to laugh at ourselves, cry, and laugh some more. We appreciate the differences among our children and our parenting styles, we have celebrated the passages of our lives and our kids lives, and we are just there for each other, nonjudgmental, encouraging each other to accept our kids for who they are. For me, it has been an honor to facilitate these groups.

As I said earlier, a new support group just formed last year, and we are building the safety every parent needs to talk about their parenting experiences. It's exciting! It would be wonderful if all parents had the opportunity to be a part of a support group as they face the challenges of parenting.

BZ: How do you think your daughter has been affected by her mother's involvement in these issues, and your awareness of the nuances of these issues?

Wisotzkey: My daughter, who is now 21, has a great deal of self confidence and feels so very comfortable in her own skin. She used to get so annoyed with me for reminding her about how pictures of models are not real (I know Mom), giving her books upon books to read about strong girls, friendship issues, healthy bodies (I'm not going to read these Mom), telling her to "just be yourself"(I am Mom), and on and on. I don't really know if and how the messages got through, but I sure do like the person she has become!

BZ: How do you think your son has been affected by your involvement in these issues, and your awareness of the nuances of these issues?

Wisotzkey: My son just turned 19 years old. These issues are the last thing on his mind right now! However, he did spend a few minutes thinking about this question. He said he is much more aware of the issues of girls and how they are stereotyped than he would have been without my talking about it all the time. He said the most important effect my work in this area has had on him is that when he is a father, he wants to raise a girl who is strong and confident. I have no doubt he will!

BZ: How do you think your husband has been affected by your deep involvement in these issues, and your expertise?

Wisotzkey: Steve came into my life in 1999, when I was working long hours in developing and finding funding for all of the programs for girls, doing workshops and running girls' groups, seeing clients, and being a mom. He should have run the other way! Instead, he jumped in and has been supportive and encouraging all the way through, as a husband and also as a co-parent. Given that we both were raised in families with traditional male/female roles, we have had to work at finding our way into marital, parenting, and step-parenting roles that are a workable expression of what we learned then with who we want to be today.

BZ: Thank you, Sally.

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Resources ---

Books and Magazines for Girls and their Parents

We've created a special window display of "strong and confident girl titles" at Crazy Wisdom Bookstore, in conjunction with this article, and many of the titles noted below are available at the store.

Elementary School Girl Resources

New Moon magazine

American Girl Library Series: *The Feelings Book*; *The Care and Keeping of Your Emotions*; *Friends: Making Them and Keeping Them*.

Girls to the Rescue by Bruce Lansky

Middle School Girl Resources

New Moon magazine

American Girl Library: *Help, An Absolutely Indispensable Guide to Life for Girls*; *A Smart Girl's Guide to Friendship Troubles*; *A Smart Girl's Guide to Boys*.

Girl's Life: Guide to Growing Up by Bokram and Sinex

But I'm Almost 13 by Ginsberg and Jablow

Chicken Soup for the Preteen Soul: 101 Stories of Changes, Choices, and Growing Up for Kids Ages 9-13 by Canfield, Hansen & Dunlap

Teen Resources

Deal With It by Drill, McDonald and Odes

Girltalk: All the Stuff Your Sister Never Told You by Carol Weston

Body Drama: Real Girls, Real Bodies, Real Issues, Real Answers by Nancy Redd

Respect: A Girl's Guide to Getting Respect and Dealing When Your Line is Crossed by Macavinta and Plum

Teen Resources (more spiritual in nature)

Wide Awake: A Buddhist Guide for Teens by Winston

The Goddess in Every Girl: Develop Your Teen Feminine Power by Abadie

Girls Speak Out: Finding Your True Self by Johnston

Be Who You Want To Be: Dealing with Life's Ups and Downs by Casey

For Parents

Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls by Mary Pipher

Girl in the Mirror: Mothers and Daughters in the Years of Adolescence by Nancy Snyderman

From Magical Child to Magical Teen by Pearce

The Secret Lives of Teen Girls: What Your Mother Wouldn't Talk About but Your Daughter Needs to Know by Evelyn Resh

Girls Will Be Girls: Raising Confident and Courageous Daughters by Deak and Barker