

A Conversation with  
**Laura Sessions Stepp**

Author of

**UNHOOKED**

**How Young Women Pursue Sex, Avoid Love,  
and Lose at Both**

**Q: What is “hooking up”? How do you define it?**

A: Hooking up is a sexual interaction between two partners and it can be anything from kissing to intercourse. It’s deliberately undefined by this generation so that when you tell a friend you hooked up with someone, you’re really not telling them anything at all.

**Q: What’s the significance of the term being deliberately undefined?**

A: It’s convenient. It erases any guilt you may feel at what you’re doing. It’s a lot easier to say “I hooked up with someone last night,” than to say, “I gave Johnny a blow job.” It conceals what you’ve done, and you can talk yourself into thinking it really doesn’t matter. Words make a difference and this generation uses a lot of euphemisms for what they do. For example, girls will say, “I tea-bagged this guy.” That means she massaged a certain area of his private parts with her mouth. And speaking of how words are used, I also think it’s worth noting that in the book I use the term “girls”—even though these are young women up to age 22—because that’s how they talk about themselves. I found that interesting in and of itself. Those of us who grew up in the ‘60s hated the term, and wanted to be called women from the time we were 16.

**Q: Where did the idea for this book come from? How did you first get involved in looking at this cultural shift?**

A: It came out of my reporting for the *Washington Post*. Back in 1998, I learned about a situation at a Washington middle school that involved as many as a dozen girls performing oral sex on two or three boys for most of the school year. These were all 8<sup>th</sup> graders. That led me to write a story about oral sex in middle schools. It was clear to me in those transactions that the partners were not in love with each other. It seemed to be more about the physical act. So I became interested in sexual activity among younger adolescents. I followed up with, observed, and kept in touch with these kids as they got into high school and joined new groups of friends, and I started hearing phrases like “friends with benefits,” and “sex buddies” and eventually “hooking up.” I wasn’t quite sure what that meant and decided to investigate.

**Q: You’ve written a number of stories about this for the *Washington Post*. What’s new in the book?**

A: A newspaper story generally provides a snapshot of a limited time period in someone’s life. It includes perhaps the week before and the week after you’re actually writing the story. In this book I followed a group of young women in college and high school for an entire year so I could see how their relationships changed, how they started reflecting on what they were doing, or even whether they were reflecting on it. I was able to see how hooking up affected them over the course of that year: whether they become depressed, whether they enjoyed it, how many times they hooked up, and how it affected their thinking about relationships. What’s also new is that I was able to dig into how we got to this point. Newspaper journalism is really great at telling the “who,” “what,” and “when” but it rarely has the time to suggest the “why.” And I think that may be what this book does best.

**Q: How did you conduct your research? And how did you choose your subjects?**

A: The first thing I did was try to find scientific surveys to see what they could tell me about the population of adolescents that are hooking up, at what ages they’re doing so, how often, and so on. I found almost no data. “Are you hooking up?” is not a phrase that researchers use. Also, there’s little research about sex and dating on anyone under the age of 18, because the federal government makes it very hard to ask such questions. I ended up choosing to look at middle income to upper middle income families because they make up the largest segment of our population and are also the ones who set many of our cultural standards.

The next step was to send out several hundred letters to teachers, parents and researchers I knew asking for ideas about who I should talk to. I got lots of suggestions and interviewed dozens of young people. I quickly realized I needed to limit the sample. I could either go broad or deep, and I chose to go deep. It wasn’t a scientifically random sample but it reflected much of what I found out later when I cast a wider net.

And finally, in choosing the specific subjects, I looked for individuals who could illustrate something significant about the culture. I also looked for young women who were articulate and who I thought would open up to me. (I wanted to use their voices as much as possible in the book.) And I consciously chose a variety of backgrounds in terms of race or ethnicity, so the book includes two young African American women, a young woman whose parents are from Iran, several young Caucasian women, and so on. This is clearly a phenomenon that cuts across races.

**Q: Why did you choose to focus on young women as opposed to young men?**

A: This phenomenon would *not* have taken hold if it weren't for girls buying into it. Girls and women have traditionally been the gender that said "No" to sex. You can argue whether it was right or wrong that they had to do so, but that was the role they played. There was a good reason for that: They could get pregnant.

Today, effective methods of birth control are available. And young women are being raised with the idea that they not only can but should go for everything guys go for. They have taken that message to heart and essentially said, "We deserve to have as much fun with our sexuality as guys do. We should be able to pursue guys like they pursue us."

I also chose to focus on girls because they have the most to lose, physically and emotionally. So they're not only partly behind the cultural shift but also the ones who suffer most as a result of it. I have a son in this age group, so initially I wanted to write about young men as well, in order to learn more about him, but I ultimately decided that it would dilute the message. If we're going to change things it's going to have to be the women who do the changing. It's not fair, but it's the truth.

**Q: Why did you choose *Unhooked* as the book's title?**

A: The defining characteristic of the hook-up culture is the ability to unhook from a partner at any time. That is its primary allure for both guys and girls. This is a generation that's scared of commitment, that doesn't want to get tied down, and that thinks relationships are messy. They want to be able to walk out the door at any time. Being able to do so is seen by young women as a sign of power. One young woman told me that when she hooks up with a guy for the night she wants to be the first one out the door in the morning, so she can see the look on his face when she leaves.

**Q: How is "hooking up" different from the "free love" of the 1960s and early '70s?**

A: The notion that everyone slept around back then is a myth. Only a small percentage of young Americans, primarily on the West Coast and in New York, took part in the free love movement. They caught the media's attention and everyone assumed they were characteristic of the entire generation. Hooking up today encompasses a much larger section of the population.

Another difference is that "free love" meant intercourse. Hooking up does not, although it can include intercourse. Finally, with the "free love" of that earlier era, there was at least a suggestion of love. Hooking up carries no such suggestion.

**Q: Are there positive aspects to hooking up?**

A: Yes. Number one, it gives girls an opportunity to experiment with their sexuality and not feel guilty. Some of them may be having more fun with sex than past generations did.

Number two: Hooking up enables them to walk away from a guy who's not treating them well. Walking away is not always the right thing to do, but there are times when it is absolutely appropriate.

Number three: Because of hooking up's emphasis on the physical, young women talk more freely about sex and their bodies with each other and even with guys. I've heard conversations between girls and guys that just floored me.

Conceivably, these three characteristics could build sexual confidence that would carry over into longer-term relationships.

**Q: What’s so harmful about hooking up?**

A: Judging by what I observed, it can lead to depression and low self-esteem. An epidemiologist explained it this way: When a male and a female have intercourse, the female receives a jolt of oxytocin, a chemical that makes the body want to hold and caress. The man, on the other hand, gets a jolt of testosterone which *inhibits* oxytocin and makes him want to have sex and then run away and go chase bears or whatever.

In a hook-up, the young woman may get up and walk out the door. But in doing so she’s denying what’s happening to her body and her emotions. The result may be that she starts to question herself and her motives. What she thought would make her feel powerful leaves her feeling weak. Girls have said to me, “I don’t know why I keep checking my cell phone to see if he’s called me. It’s just a hook-up. Why am I doing this?” It’s because their bodies are driving them to do it. And that’s something girls need to understand.

The other thing that concerns me about hooking up is that it doesn’t encourage young women to practice some of the finer qualities of our humanness: our ability to care about someone, to sustain that caring over time, to commit to another person, to learn to trust, to communicate. These are all characteristics of a *loving* relationship.

**Q: As part of your research you hung out with these kids as they partied. What was that like for you?**

A: I confess I always had to take a nap before I went out. It just exhausted me. But it was fun. I was an anthropologist observing a culture in which I was very interested.

One interesting thing was that both guys and girls—when they learned why I was at a party or club—would come up to me individually or maybe in pairs and just want to talk. One young man said to me, “If you put a sign above your head and a basket in front of you, you could earn \$100 tonight.” Hearing their stories made me realize how confused many in this generation are about what they’re doing and how much they’d love to talk it through with someone other than a same-age friend.

**Q: What should be done to help young people make good decisions about their sexuality?**

A: The only people many young women and young men feel free to discuss sex and love with are their peers, who are doing the same thing they’re doing. There’s no one to give them an outsider’s perspective, no one who will allow them the safe space to clarify their perspective. If there’s anything I learned over the last several years, it’s that if you ask these young people the right questions, they’ll eventually get to the answers that are good for them. They intuitively know what works. But they have to be allowed to discover it and to be able to articulate it.

So my short answer to your question is this: Older adults should be spending more time at home and in the classroom creating a conversational space where no topic is off limits. Sex education in school and home should be expanded beyond “Just say no” or the mechanics of avoiding pregnancy and disease. Parents, in particular, or aunts, uncles or older family friends, should not shy away from giving their point of view, but in ways that inspire dialogue. They should not hesitate to share some of their history and some of the mistakes, as well as good choices, they made.

**Q: Schools and parents have always been poor at educating their kids about sex. What is that particularly problematic now?**

A: The difference is that in the past, there were societal standards that kept *many* young women from doing what they're doing today. Norms were enforced by churches, parents, teachers, and so on. Those norms have disappeared in all but the most conservative circles. At the same time, sexuality has spread through our culture like never before. Where are girls supposed to find the standards by which to live their lives? They're making it up as they go along. There are no guardrails anymore to protect them.

**Q: You say that asking “What’s wrong with these girls?” is not the right question. What is the right question? And what’s the answer?**

A: The right question is, “What is wrong with this picture? What are we older adults not doing that we should be doing? What are we doing that is making things worse?” For example, one reason young women give for hooking up is that they don't have time to have relationships. Their parents and other adults have encouraged them to be the best in everything they can do—meaning school, athletics, graduate school and career. Left out of the equation is having a boyfriend. Girls have taken this in and feel indebted to their parents who have invested time and money in them. They say, “I don't have time to play varsity lacrosse and maintain a good GPA, and have a relationship, too.

**Q: But what’s wrong with encouraging achievement?**

A: It's a positive message, but it's incomplete. There needs to be balance. There needs to be talk about how to fit all of this in, and whether you can fit all of it in. We push these girls so hard they're exhausted. Why do you think the drinking rate of young women now matches that of young men? It's a release, thus the phrase 'work hard play hard.' The rates of sexual activity between young men and women are equal as well. When young men and women of college age are asked, “How many of you see yourself as being married in the next ten years?” more men say they do than women. Women aren't even thinking of marriage right now. There's too much to do.

**Q: Are you saying we shouldn't encourage our girls and guys to achieve and be successful?**

A: No. I'm saying we also need to round out their lives and make sure they understand that a full life includes intimate relationships. Scientists say a key component of a healthy identity is the ability to feel love and to love in return. When children are young, it's the parents who supply that love. In adolescence, the circle grows to include intimate others. *As older adults*, we need to ask how we can we help young people achieve that whole life.

**Q: Is this a feminist or anti-feminist book?**

A: It is a book that tells young women they deserve to get the best out of a relationship and that means they shouldn't limit themselves to just the physical. Real power is not having sex with every Tom, Dick and Harry. That gets dull, boring, has no meaning and can hurt you. Real power comes from knowing when and with whom to have sex, and what good sex is. Sex within a loving, committed relationship is good sex. Hookup sex is not.

**Q: What surprised you most as you began putting this book together?**

A: What surprised me is how hooking up has come to define a generation. Going into this I thought there would be pockets of girls who hooked up, but that they would be a significant minority. What I found was girls hooking up who don't necessarily want to hook up but *feel they* have to because it's the only available way to get to know guys. You go to a bar, meet a cute guy, hook up and then you decide whether you like him. In my day, at least you thought you liked the guy before you hooked up with him.

**Q: What do you think will surprise readers most?**

A: I think readers will be surprised by the same thing. They'll challenge it. They'll think, "It's not my daughter who's doing this," or "It's the lower-income young women who're doing this" or "It's the white girls (or black girls, or Asian girls, or Hispanic girls) who're doing this" depending on their own ethnicity. Guess what? It's all of them. Even those who don't hook up are affected by the hookup culture. One of the last young women I write about in my book is a poised, smart, gorgeous girl who didn't go out with a guy her entire freshman year at Duke because she was afraid she'd be put in a situation where she'd have to hook up, and she didn't want to do that.

**Q: Every now and then there's a public firestorm about our increasingly sexualized media—movies, songs, the web, TV, etc. How much of the problem can be laid at the feet of pop culture and the media?**

A: There *is* a lot more sex out there in culture including in the media and kids, to a certain extent, want to do what they see on TV, in movies, or on the Internet. But media are just one part of a larger diet. *Research* shows that parents and peers have much more of an influence on kids than the media. With sex, as with violence, parents have to be a mediating force, working hard to stay consistent with, and emphasize, our values.

**Q: Has the increasingly aggressive sexual behavior of young women prompted a change in young men as well?**

A: As one young man said to me, "It makes it easier for us to be assholes." Hooking up is a great deal for young men. They can have sex, are not expected to commit, can walk at any time, and their partners are supposed to fine with that. If one young woman isn't interested, the next one will be.

**Q: In the book, you talk about the impact of *The Vagina Monologues* by Eve Ensler. You say the play has ushered in a movement, fully ensconced on many campuses, aimed at teaching young women how to enjoy sex. Are you blaming the *Vagina Monologues* for the *hookup* culture among girls?**

A: I write about one production of the show and actresses who enjoyed being able to discuss their sexuality in front of a large audience. The production was well-done. But the play itself is incomplete. It divorces sex from love. There's no sense of endurance, no value placed on of making a guy feel cared for and respected. It's all about "me" and "my physical pleasure." So now young women can act just as badly as young men. Is that success? Young women need to hold themselves and their partners to higher standards.

**Q: What do you want readers to get out of this book?**

A: I would like them to get beyond what they may consider the “shock value” of the book so they can think about what intimacy looks like in their own lives. What do they want out of their sex lives, love lives, and relationships? How can they get that—not just immediately but throughout their lives? What are the principles or core values they bring to their relationships, and how do those values play out? It’s like Alicia says in the preface of the book. “You may not agree with everything Laura says. I know I didn’t. But what she said made me have to decide what I believe.”

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