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The Essential Daughter: Changing Expectations for Girls at Home, 1797 to the Present

Mary Collins

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By age nine, Mary Ellen could start a fire and make breakfast for her family on the Great Plains as they traveled West. By age 11, Connie's family had her hanging the laundry and doing the dishes for a dozen people. By age 13, Beverly had no responsibilities at home and no confidence in herself. The portraits of 14 girls aged 6 to 14, when their ideas of duty and self remained in flux, are used as a starting point for discussion on how to bring daughters and their brothers back into the flow of American home life. The author explores how Americans might make girls feel essential on the home front without denying them the right of self-definition.

Few American parents expect their children to play an important role on the home front. The average daughter does fewer than ten hours of housework a week; sons do only two. What are the consequences of this dramatic cultural shift? Collins posits that nothing we can give our children in the public sphere can offset the loss. Collins concludes that Americans must rebuild a domestic culture that moves beyond the damaging sex-based division of labor so common in the past.

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