

Countering the Sexualization of Your Youth

- Yvonne K. Fulbright, Ph.D., M.S.Ed.

Miniskirts, fishnet stockings, feather boas. It all sounds sexy - 'til you realize it's being sported by that every-girl-wants-one Bratz doll. If you're hoping that this sexual offense is an isolated incident, it's not. From "naughty and nice" shoe ads featuring a schoolgirl clad, lollipop licking pop star to "wink wink" thongs sized for 7- to 10-year-olds, big business is out to sexualize your youth.

Add to this the fact that almost every type of media has long been doing the same, and we've got major problems. With television, movies, magazines, video games, sports media, music videos, and the Internet bombarding young people with sexual messages and imagery daily, the consequences are damaging.

According to a report by the American Psychological Association, sexualized images seen in advertising, merchandising, and the media are causing harm. Youth are suffering from a number of physical and mental effects, with their well-being, sexuality, attitudes, beliefs, and cognitive functioning all impacted for the worse.

The body of research has reported that:

- Self-objectification takes away from one's ability to concentrate, leading to impaired performance on mental activities. One study found that female college students who were asked to try on a swimsuit versus sweater before taking a math test did significantly worse on the test. (No difference was found for males.) Researchers concluded that their mental capacity was disrupted by body thoughts and comparisons to sexualized cultural ideals.
- Imagery depicting sexualization and objectification lead to shame, anxiety, and self-disgust, all undermining one's confidence in and comfort with one's body. Such leads to the three most common mental health problems in females: eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression.
- Self-objectification impacts sexual health negatively, with adolescent females less assertive, e.g., decreased condom use when sexually active, and having unrealistic or negative expectations about one's sexuality.
- Females who consume a great deal of mainstream media content are more supportive of sexual stereotypes that depict females as sex objects. Feminists may find this forgivable in considering that girls are basically being taught to model femininity that's sexual, e.g., assuming a bodily posture indicating sexual readiness. They also regard physical appearance and attractiveness at the heart of a woman's value.

Yes, these findings are disheartening. But collectively, parents, caregivers, and other important people in a youth's life can counter these negative effects. This begins with the following...

Take responsibility as a parent. It's harsh to hear, but parents contribute to a youth's sexualization in making it a goal for their youth to be physically attractive. They reinforce the need to be appealing and sexy in buying products and clothes intended for such. Some even support or encourage plastic surgery in attaining a certain standard of beauty.

So don't be afraid to say "no" when a child requests a toy, article of clothing, type of make up, or whatever "must have" that can contribute to negative sexual messages. Just be sure to explain why you will not support their request, especially as they get older.

Have rules around media exposure. Control a child's exposure to sexual imagery and pop culture content related to such. Encourage creative play that doesn't involve turning on the boob tube or media exposure.

When you do tune into the media, know the rating systems used for content violence, language, and suggestive themes. Limit screen time and watch the programming with your child. Use any inappropriate scenes as teachable moments. Here, you process what has taken place, imparting your values in countering the negative messaging.

Know what your child is up to outside of your home. Get to know what's being watched by your child's peers and in their homes. Look at the content yourself or read descriptions about it. Parents and caretakers, work together in making sure that all of your homes are positive environments for youth.

Work with your youth's school. Schools should be encouraged to provide media literacy training in fighting the effects of sexualization. Youth should be taught the skills needed in exposing themselves to media. Such efforts should be complemented with extracurricular activities that boost one's self-esteem, as well as comprehensive sex education.

Find good role models for your youth. This can even be you, especially if you work at fostering a caring relationship, one where a youth will seriously weigh your opinion to that of others. Having positive people to look up to will help in fighting narrow or negative stereotypes about the genders and allow for greater comfortability when it comes to embracing the self.

Become a sex educator. It's important to talk to your kids about sex, one's sexuality and what it means to be sexually healthy and in a healthy, intimate relationship. Equipping your child with your views on sex will help to counter any brainwashing effects of what they're seeing.

Get your hands on So Sexy So Soon. This book, by Drs. Diane Levin and Jean Kilbourne, guides parents and caregivers from the early years to the “tween” years in grappling with youth sexualization. It’s packed with ideas on how to protect your youth from negative sex messaging, including those around gender, relationships, body image, and sexual violence.

Finally, last, but certainly not least, talk to the young males in your life about how they’re being sexualized. While one study in *Sexual Abuse: Journal of Research & Treatment* found that 85% of magazine ads sexualize girls rather than boys, it’s important not to overlook how males are being victimized. The sexualization of females can have a negative impact on them as well.

Research in *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* reported that being exposed to narrow ideals around female sexual attractiveness may make it hard for some males to find a partner he finds “acceptable.” He may also find it difficult to wholly enjoy being intimate with her.

With the percentage of ads which sexualize youth increasing every year, we need to start countering the messaging – and aggressively at that. It’s up to us, and not advertising, merchandising, or the media, to create an environment in which everyone can feel sexually healthy.

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