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Little women: How consumer culture is forcing girls to grow up too fast

Little women: How consumer culture is forcing girls to grow up too fast

Monday, April 2, 2012

Meg McSherry Breslin



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Mattel and Abercrombie sell sexiness even to 6-year-olds. Enter those who are fighting back to let girls be girls.

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At a recent wedding Becky Groth was amazed to see the revealing dress on the beautiful 17-year-old daughter of a close friend. The dress was so skimpy and inappropriate, Groth says, that the girl drew a lot of unwanted attention from young men. Groth asked the teenager to talk about it privately after the wedding.

Groth's message was simple. She tried not to sound prudish or judgmental, but she also wanted to be clear. "She's not an overly sexual girl at all," says Groth. "So I told her, 'You don't know what you're advertising. If that's not what you're advertising, then don't wear it!'"

The conversation was received well, as the young woman and her mom went shopping afterward for some new, more conservative clothes.

Groth's experience underscores a mounting issue confronting children and their parents—the sexualization of girls and young women. The issue has captured growing attention from child psychologists, scholars, and women's activists, all of whom are raising red flags.

In many cases scholars argue that parents feel there's little they can do because the permissive culture is so pervasive.

Concerned that sexualization was becoming a serious and overwhelming concern, the American Psychological Association (APA) in 2007 released *The Sexualization of Girls*, a report that called on parents, educators, and community leaders to rally against the problem.

The APA tried to spell out the long-term negative effects of sexualization on the development of young girls. The report said sexualization happens when a person is led to believe that their value "comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics." Girls, stated the report, were increasingly being "sexually objectified," or made into a thing for others' sexual use, through advertising and media.

"Virtually every media form studied provides ample evidence of the sexualization of women," the report stated. "In study after study, findings have indicated that women more often than men are portrayed in a sexual manner. . . . These are the models for young girls to study and emulate."

Fast times

The report cited examples of how sexualization trickles down to young girls in various ways, from Bratz dolls dressed in miniskirts, fishnet stockings, and feather boas to thong underwear sized for 7- to 10-year-olds and increasing rates of plastic surgery for young girls. Another study by the Pew Research Center found some 15 percent of cell phone owners 12 to 17 years old have received nude or nearly nude photos over their phones.

The APA study underscored research linking sexualization with the three most common mental health problems diagnosed in girls and women—eating disorders, low self-

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esteem, and depression or depressed mood.

"Perceiving girls as sexual objects is dangerous for them, and it's a terrible message for the culture about childhood," says Dr. Lyn Mikel Brown, a professor of education and human development at Colby College in Maine and a leading voice on girls' social and psychological development. "One of my real concerns is the way in which we've really narrowed the definition of what it means to grow up for girls to a highly sexualized one, with an emphasis on consuming products and fashion and shopping. If girls are watching media, those are the messages that girls get. Their appearance and being looked at is so huge."

Signs of the sexualization of girls emerge very early. Brown says she has had trouble finding conservative clothes for her 16-year-old daughter from the time she was a young girl. Many retailers have introduced younger versions of stores originally designed for teens and tweens, such as Abercrombie Kids. In March 2011, for example, Abercrombie offered a push-up bikini top for young girls.

"There's the same styles of clothes from basically age 4 and up," says Brown. "The boundary between childhood and adolescence has really been eroded because it's profitable."

Amore extreme example is the recent popularity of the TLC network show *Toddlers and Tiaras*, which chronicles young girls competing in pageants. The program has featured a 4-year-old in fake breasts and an enhanced rear to look like Dolly Parton, and a 3-year-old dressed as Julia Roberts' prostitute character from the movie *Pretty Woman*.

Have parents given up?

While the media is a clear contributor to the problem, many Catholic scholars point to permissive parenting as another factor.

Groth and her husband, Eric, who live in St. Charles, Illinois with their eight children, try to hold on to their children's innocence by monitoring the movies and TV their younger children watch. But in recent years their challenge has gotten bigger, as it seems even some of their closest friends have stopped trying to set many boundaries for their children.

"We see fantastic families out there who've allowed their daughters to make clothing choices that shock me," says Groth, whose children range in age from 2 to 17. "Part of it is this generation of parents, more than our parents, want to be friends with our kids."

With her own 12-year-old daughter, Groth has frequent discussions similar to the one she had with her friend's 17-year-old daughter after the recent wedding. Yet Groth says she's grateful that her daughter Rachel hasn't really pushed for many of the things her peers want. She doesn't seem to care that she's missing television shows like *Glee* or doesn't have a Facebook page because her parents won't allow it. Instead, she seems to respect her parents' rules and the sense of discipline and structure in their home. She doesn't have a problem with her mom's ban on bikinis.

Yet some teachers and scholars say the Groth family's experience is the exception rather than the rule. As a Catholic high school teacher and youth retreat leader, John Donahue-Grossman has worked closely with teens for more than two decades. Not much that they say or do surprises him. Still, the skimpy dresses students now wear on dress-up days are impossible for Donahue-Grossman to dismiss as "kids being kids."

Donahue-Grossman says the problem got so out of hand at a suburban Chicago high school where he worked that the administration finally opted to skip "free dress" days for Mass: "We just felt, 'Wow, you can't even dress up for Mass without this being like a prom.'"

For Donahue-Grossman, who also gives talks about healthy sexuality to many Chicago area middle schools and high schools each year, the provocative dress issue goes far beyond the age-old push-and-pull among parents and teens over styles of dress. He argues that it represents a bigger problem with the way children are raised in today's culture.

Donahue-Grossman cites examples of eighth-graders with no curfews or rules, sexually involved grade-school youths, and youths feeling it's perfectly normal to "sex" each other with nude photos or sexual messages.

"I talk with kids every day, and all I can say is there's significant pressure to grow up very quickly, and the clothing is just one part of it," Donahue-Grossman says. "There's just a loss of boundaries." He worries that too many parents have given up on their role as spiritual guides for their children.

Meg McSherry Breslin is a freelance writer based in the Chicago suburbs. She covered children and family issues as a former staff writer for the Chicago Tribune. This article appeared in the May 2012 issue of U.S. Catholic (Vol. 77, No. 5, pages 12-16).

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Monday, April 2, 2012

Meg McSherry Breslin

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Vanessa Gonzalez Kraft, a 27-year-old mother who runs after-school programs at a Catholic high school in Texas, wrote about the issue in her blog for the online spiritual magazine *Busted Halo*.

While girls and teens have always tried to push the limits on appropriate clothing, Gonzalez Kraft worries that the sexualization of young girls and women has gotten so out of control—and is so culturally accepted—that it's becoming increasingly important now for girls to hear a counter-message.

"When I taught at a Catholic high school, I was in charge of monitoring the girls' dress code," Gonzalez Kraft wrote in her blog post. "As I would walk down the hallways, girls immediately started checking the buttons on their shirts to make sure they weren't unbuttoned too low or tugging at their skirts trying to make them longer. This was good for them. There was a voice in their head telling them to cover up among all those voices telling them to bare it all. It is all too common for a teenage girl to believe that her power lies in how sexy she is. Being 'hot' and making boys 'want them' is the goal, not being kind or smart or funny."

Don't forget the boys

While the APA report focused on girls, scholars are also concerned about the effects of sexualization in the media on boys' attitudes toward girls and women. "Pimp" costumes for boys have recently popped up at Halloween, as well as a T-shirt that parent Laura Fanucci saw infant boys wearing at her Catholic church: "Lock up your girls."

"So often, people see this as an issue that's only about girls," says Fanucci, the mother of two young boys. "But it really influences boys as well. All of these messages begin to tell them what it means to be a boy or a girl in our culture."

"There's evidence that [sexualization] is negative for boys and men," says Deborah Tolman, a member of the APA's task force on the sexualization of girls and a professor of social welfare and psychology at Hunter College School of Social Work and the City University of New York. "It contributes to the development of unrealistic expectations of what girls and women are like, what their bodies are like . . . and not presenting girls as full, complete people has implications for relationships between men and women. It really makes it hard to have strong, authentic relationships."

Lyn Mkel Brown has also studied the effect of advertising and media on boys' attitudes about themselves, co-authoring the book *Packaging Boyhood* (St. Martin's), which looks at how the media encourages boys to be slackers and act cool instead of being themselves.

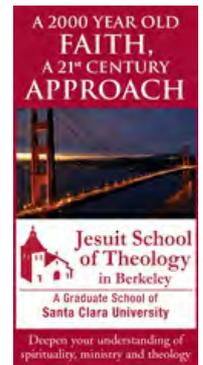
William Doherty, a family therapist and professor in the department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota and the author of *Take Back Your Kids* (Sorin Books), acknowledges that the media plays a big role, but he also agrees that parents contribute to the problem.

"You have some parents who are going to push every trend and who are going to have young children grow up too fast," Doherty says. "It's competitive parenting; the older your child seems, the better you are as a parent."

Catholic counterculture

Donahue-Grossman, the youth retreat leader, and other Catholic parents say Catholic schools should take the lead in educating parents about these issues. As Donahue-Grossman sees it, the Catholic faith calls upon parents to recognize the signs of a growing problem.

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"I think our Catholic faith has always tried to serve as a countercultural stand . . . that voice in the wilderness," Donahue-Grossman says. "And maybe one of the most important things we teach our children is dignity . . . We need to teach young men and women how to respect themselves and show them that in respecting themselves, other people will come to respect you for being who you are, not what you dress like."

Donahue-Grossman argues that more parishes need to educate parents about sexualization at the fifth- and sixth-grade levels. "Some parents are tuned in," he says, "but a lot of parents are just not aware of what's going on out there."

Kathy Chuckas, a suburban Chicago mother of four kids ages 9 to 17, is among the parents who clearly recognize the problem. Chuckas runs a summer sports camp for youth and also coaches girls' sports teams. When she sees revealing outfits, Chuckas challenges the girls wearing them. While her daughter dresses conservatively, Chuckas wouldn't hesitate to challenge her on an outfit either.

"I don't think she understands the ramifications of what could happen if she went out dressed like that," Chuckas says. "It's my obligation to make sure she's safe." Chuckas says that the cultural push toward sexualized dress and attitudes is so strong that it's sometimes tough to take a stand against it.

It's sometimes even hard to recognize. She cited the example of super-short shorts that high school girls wear for volleyball and other sports, supposedly because the shorts allow athletes to move more freely. "But then the guys wear long shorts at basketball games and that's no problem for them," she says.

Still, many parents and young girls are working to fight the trend, starting with an attempt to raise awareness. Grassroots efforts among parents and advocates are picking up steam.

In Minnesota William Doherty has worked with a group of parents who are planning an informational parent seminar to bring parents together to fight the problem. Doherty says the Minnesota parents are working on a "corporate code of conduct" that would attempt to hold corporations accountable for their messages to children. Parents could distribute petitions against corporations who violate the code.

Linda Zwicky, a St. Paul, Minnesota mother of two, is a leader of the parent group working with Doherty. She got involved after hitting a frustration point with the sexy clothes and beauty products marketed to her 7-year-old daughter. One way she's fought the trend is by simply deciding not to bring her daughter along shopping anymore.

"I just bring home things now, and I generally don't give her a choice," Zwicky says. "We are still their parents, and we are still guiding them about what's appropriate and what's inappropriate."

Teen girls beg to differ

Some teens are also puzzled by what they see as permissive parents. Alexandra Najda, 17, a high school junior at Chicago's St. Scholastica Academy, wrote a paper for a class on the influence of Disney princesses on the sexualization of young girls. The idea came to her after a visit to Disney World at age 12.

"I was walking around and I saw all these little girls in Princess Jasmine outfits, and their entire midriff was exposed," Najda says. "I just thought, 'This looks really weird, and a little bit creepy.'"

Najda wrote about how those early messages can clearly influence girls into their teens. "The lessons taught in Disney films are that you should be passive and a man will save you; hold your tongue if you want love; and pretty always beats ugly," Najda wrote in her paper. "We need strong, independent women who stand up for what they believe in, work hard, and challenge people; and currently the Disney Corporation is not helping the cause."

Najda is frustrated by how many teenage girls seem consumed by their appearance. "I just think the majority of girls are thinking, 'Well, this is the culture and it's accepted,'" she says. "I also think they know this is what guys want, so they just dress to impress."

One of the most encouraging responses to the APA report and other signs of sexualization in the media has been a growing movement to engage young girls themselves in fighting against the trend, advocates say.

Project Girl, for example, was launched in Madison, Wisconsin in 2006 to educate girls about how the media can manipulate them into thinking they have to buy certain products or look a certain way just to be happy.

Kelly Parks Snider, a co-founder of the group and an artist, leads workshops around the country, many at Catholic schools and community groups, to help educate girls about sexualization. In Madison she regularly meets with a group of girls, helping them design art projects, such as collages displaying examples of sexualization in advertisements and the media. "I'm trying to combine art with activism," she says.

Parks Snider says she finds the issue to be clearly linked to the healthy spiritual

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development of young girls. A Catholic, she hopes her project helps girls realize their value as real people, not as sex objects.

"I really think this is a spiritual issue, too," she says. "All of these media-generated values, they act like a magnet that takes us away from God. When we work with kids, we're constantly talking about how valuable they are. We do that because if you're a girl who lives in this media world, you're constantly being told you're an object to be looked at, and that really minimizes their value."

Brigit Stattelmann, a 13-year-old involved in Project Girl, says the effort has made her look much more critically at the barrage of media images of young girls. "I've just learned to be myself and not trust commercials," she says. "This just shows us you can be beautiful for who you are."

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