

# The Sexualization of Your Children:

## What To Do

by Lucy Rimalower

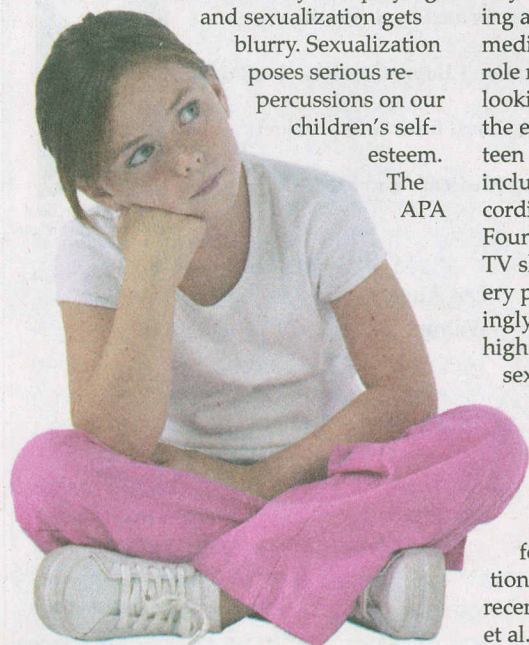
When I was six years old, I came down to dinner dressed in my nightgown with bright red lipstick, blue eye shadow and about a gallon of perfume. My family laughed at a little girl trying on her mother's makeup, enjoying the ritual of playing grown-up. Don't we all have a similar story from our childhood? But how has innocent child's play grown cancerously into the sexualization of our children? Trying on mom's makeup has been made over into a sexualized culture for children, girls in particular, marked by implicit and explicit sexuality in the media, toys, clothes and costumes.

### The Effect on Girls AND Boys

In 2007, the American Psychological Association created a task force to examine the sexualization of girls. The APA defined sexualization as the process by which a person's value is reduced to his or her sexual appeal and the person is only seen as a sexual object, rather than a thinking, feeling being. In short, "sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person." Picture an eight-year-old girl wearing pants that say "Juicy" across her bottom or a three-year-old boy wearing a shirt that says "Big Stud." But here's where the line between healthy role-playing

and sexualization gets blurry. Sexualization poses serious repercussions on our children's self-esteem.

The  
APA



found that sexualization can lead to poor self-esteem, body image problems, eating disorders, symptoms of depression and general health problems. While this study and others like it tend to focus on girls, the impact on boys is also critical. Consider that boys are less likely to be sympathetic to girls and women who are victims of sexual violence after they've seen violent sex on television, including rape (American Psychological Association, 1993). Further, the toys, clothes and media that influence girls to believe they are sexual objects may also pressure boys to believe their worth is defined by conquering and objectifying girls.

### Sexualized Media, Sexualized Kids

Our mass media culture has proffered too many "grown-up" images for children to digest and explore in their play. Role-playing adult experiences has long been part of the childhood play vernacular, with parents and others providing role models. As such, there are many positive products on the market that allow children to imagine their futures, to try on different roles, and strengthen their self-esteem as they consider all that is possible. Think of your child picking up your cell phone to make-believe a conversation, or your child trying on your clothes, walking around in too-big shoes. However, the media has made sexuality and sexualized role models too easily accessible to children looking to try on adult roles. In 2005, 70% of the episodes of the top twenty shows among teen viewers contained some sexual content, including 8% with sexual intercourse, according to a 2005 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation. Consider the current ads for the TV show, *Gossip Girl*, boasting that it's "Every parent's nightmare" and "Mind-blowingly inappropriate," featuring the show's high school-aged characters kissing or being sexual. Young viewers find their new role models in such shows.

With such sexualized content on TV, children, adolescents and teens turn to the internet, an even larger and less monitored medium, for information and often misinformation about sexuality, according to several recent studies (Steele, 1999; Subrahmanyam et al., 2006; Suzuki & Calzo, 2004). A simple

Google search of the word sex comes up with 872,000,000 hits. I assure you these are not all parent-approved websites. But beyond overt sexuality, the internet lets them explore an array of explicit and implicit sexualized messages. Consider the internet as a resource for celebrity worship. While the concept of teen idols long predates current favorites like Miley Cyrus and Jamie Lynn Spears, the internet provides a forum to gather information. As they explore their favorite stars online, adolescents and other young consumers discover new fashion trends and, more dangerously, messages about the virtues of being sexualized. At the very least, the basic media math suggests that sex scandals garner lots of attention. (For the scope of this article, I will not address online sexualized communication, but be aware that self-sexualizing behavior is often an integral part of online identity and must be appropriately addressed with your children.)

### Toys for "Hot Tots"

With the internet and other media making sexualized images so pervasive, the companies that make toys have to keep up. Toys have long been a way for children to role-play adult behavior. We all grew up with toy lawnmowers, kitchen sets, doctor kits and other toys that let us make believe we were older. But children want their toys to match the sexy media trends. According to Susan Menkes, a qualitative research consultant working with toy companies and others marketing to children, "Sexualization in toys is pushing the envelope and getting racier. Girls are drawn to the edgier dolls." Menkes went on to discuss the transition for girls, around age seven or eight, shifting from the doll-play aspect to exploring more aspirational figures in play. "They want something that doesn't make them look younger. They're always trying to be older than they are. [And] companies are trying to market things -toys, clothes, apparel- to get girls to buy them."

The most notorious offenders on the market might be the Bratz dolls. A description on one toy website describes a Bratz doll that "comes with a rockin' black dress and a pant set in faux leather that reveal her show-stopping style." Unfortunately her outfit reveals more than just style, with a micro-mini skirt and thigh-high faux leather boots. A black corseted top with faux metal grommets is almost suggestive of an S&M fashion. This doll is recommended for children ages 6-9. Bratz and other similar toys such as the Pussycat Dolls have gotten a lot of negative attention, including mention as culprits of sexualization in the 2007 APA report. Still, these dolls continue to hold a strong place in the market. According to a 2007 press release from MGA, manufacturer of Bratz, the edgy dolls beat out Barbie as the number one fashion-

themed doll in the United States. Why do such dolls continue to sell? According to Menkes, parents report giving in to their children after enough convincing, despite taking an initial stand that they don't want their children playing with such sexualized toys.

Take heart, parents can still be effective on a macro level, even if they ultimately succumb to their children's wish lists. Hasbro cancelled its 2007 launching of a Pussycat Dolls toy line after two nonprofit organizations seeking to improve media content for children, Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC) and Dads and Daughters (DADs), garnered enough letter-writing support from parents to ban the Burlesque-themed dolls. The message that parents will not let their children be sexualized by toys is getting through. Even Barbie changed her measurements in 1997 to provide a more realistic body type. Meantime, brands like American Girl and Our Generation offer girls more appropriate role models to boost self-esteem without sexualization.

While boys do not seem to be targeted for sexualization as pervasively as girls, there are still dangerous sexualizing messages for boys. Menkes stated that for boys "wanting to be a hero starts very young but their aspirational play is less about sexuality and more about being the macho, tough guy." While initially, such attitudes might manifest in healthy competition in sports or games, sexualized media content might introduce pressure to be sexual and misogyny into that drive to succeed. The video game, Grand Theft Auto III, allows players to have sex with and then kill prostitutes. The message in such games is clear- do harm to women, win points. It has an ESRB rating of M- mature, for 17 and older. While ratings may offer a guideline for parents to determine whether or not the product is appropriate for their children, you are the first-line of defense. Consider whether the product promotes healthy self-esteem or endorses negative values that might not be part of your family's ideals.

### Halloween Horror: Costumes

Throughout the year, our children are seduced by brands such as Juicy that offer sexualizing apparel for young trend-seekers. However, perhaps more than any other time of the year, Halloween highlights the sexualization crisis. Adult women's costumes notoriously proffer opportunities for sexualization, from French Maid to "Sexy Bee" costumes. There are also adult costumes that sexualize images associated with little girls and childhood, such as "sexy school girl," "sexy Alice in Wonderland," "sexy Snow White" and other childhood icons. What may be surprising and even more disturbing is the move to sexualize children's

costumes that are actually made for children. Consider the "Teen Rock Star" costume for girls ages 6-12, complete with halter top and vinyl skirt, the "Muscle Shirt" costume for boys, available in size 4, or the girls' "Velvet Vamp" with choker. Trick-or-treating in such costumes confirms for children that this is a role for them to explore, sexualized and open to being objectified by children and adults alike.

### Parents - You Can Intervene!

Having read this article, you may be walking to your child's room to lock her away, as you throw out the computer and prepare to dress her in brown sweat pants for the rest of her life. However, there are steps you may want to try first. You can help your child make healthy choices in her costumes and toys, without the sexualized messages she may be getting from the media.

### Steps to Take

**1** You are your child's #1 role model!

Are you demonstrating your own value through your sexuality? Consider how your clothes, games and media might be impacting your child.

**2** Honor your child's achievements and skills: do not focus on his or her appearance.

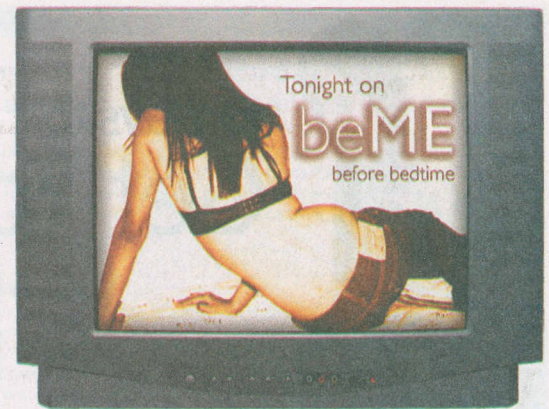
**3** Demonstrate that your respect for people is not sexually based. For example, comment on a spouse's intelligence or integrity. Point out a trait in a presidential candidate that's admirable.

**4** Talk to your child about costumes, clothes, toys and the media. What message might clothing or toys be sending about boys and girls, men and women? Help your child to be a critical consumer.

**5** It's ok to say no! Set boundaries and limits for boys and girls on video games, computer activities, clothes, makeup or even cologne. Help them identify a personal style for communication and dress that's grounded in your family's values. There's a difference between sexy and sassy and that difference is safety.

**6** Keep up with the trends and tastes of your child, his or her friends and peer group. If you're informed about what products are coming down the pipeline, you can be prepared to talk to your child about what is or is not appropriate.

**7** Your adolescent or preteen may make a case for his or her maturity. (Ex: "I should be allowed to wear lipstick to school" or "All my friends use this website"). Help your child to understand that you trust him or her but that the world is not a safe place.



The outside world may interpret sexualized appearance and behavior as an invitation.

**8** As they get older, help your child understand the difference between healthy sexuality and sexualization. Sexuality is a positive, consenting, experience of intimacy. Sexualization is turning people into objects.

### Resources

Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, working to limit the impact of commercial culture on children: [www.commercialfreechildhood.org](http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org)

Susan Menkes, Research Consultant: [www.kidsinsights.com](http://www.kidsinsights.com)

The Motherhood Project, working to change our culture and its values: [www.motherhoodproject.org](http://www.motherhoodproject.org)

The nonprofit Dads and Daughters has been shut down but author Joe Kelley remains a resource on the net for fathers and stepfathers <http://dadsanddaughters.blogspot.com/>

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