The Impact of the Contemporary Age of Sexualization on Young Girls

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Agenda

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- Sociocultural Portrayals of Girls and Women
- Media Influence on Girls & Developmental Implications
- Longitudinal Outcomes
- What to do
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Objectives

- Identify contributions to the sexualization of young girls in today's society
- Understand the theories behind the impact of sexualization on young girls' mental health
- Learn to implement strategies for parents and children to combat the contemporary age of media.


- The sexualization of girls is a broad and increasing problem and is harmful to girls
- The APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls was formed in response to these expressions of public concern
- Tasked with examining the psychological theory, research, and clinical experience addressing the sexualization of girls via media and other cultural messages, including the prevalence of these messages and their impact on girls and the role and impact of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status


- The report defined sexualization as occurring when any one of the following conditions are met:
  1. a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal
  2. a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness with being sexy
  3. a person is sexually objectified
  4. sexuality is inappropriately imposed on a person


- The sexualization of girls occurs along a continuum
  - Less extreme end - Sexualized evaluation (e.g., looking at someone in a sexual way)
  - More extreme end - Sexual exploitation (e.g., trafficking or abuse)
- Several examples of the sexualization of girls to clarify the definition:
  - Imagine a 5-year-old girl walking through a mall wearing a short T-shirt that says "Flirt."
  - Consider the instructions given in magazines to preadolescent girls on how to look sexy and get a boyfriend by losing 10 pounds and straightening their hair.
  - Envision a soccer team of adolescent girls whose sex appeal is emphasized by their coach or a local journalist to attract fans.
  - Think of print advertisements that portray women as little girls, with pigtails and ruffles, in adult sexual poses.

APA, 2007
The Lolita Effect

- **Urban Dictionary:** The Lolita Effect
- **The Lolita Effect by Meenakshi Gigi Durham**
  - Offers a community advocacy, critical, and ethical view on the sexualization of girlhood in today’s highly mediated and global society.
  - Young girls are confined to play the role of slut or asexual.
  - Reviews of the book are generally positive.
  - Helpful for parents and counselors.
  - Critics feel that it is too much focused on the adults of the situation and less on the culture behind the issue.

Durham, 2008

Media Influence on Girls

- Powerful contributor to the sexualization of girls
- A substantial body of work has demonstrated that the media depict women and teenage girls in a sexualized manner.
- On any given day, girls are exposed to images of fully-clothed men and scantily clad women. Is it possible they on an unconscious level associate their societal role, their worth, and their contribution to their social network with those images?
  - “To be seen and valued, I have to be ‘sexy’.”

APA, 2007; Ward, Sendrook, Manago, & Reed, 2015

Access to Media

- Average number of devices in the American home:
  - 2 smartphones
  - 1 computer
  - 1 tablet
  - 1 streaming media device (e.g., Amazon Firestick or Google Chrome)
- 90% of US households have a median of 5 of the aforementioned devices
  - 1/5 of American homes are “hyper-connected” with 10 or more of these devices.

Child Development

- In the first 3 years of life, a child’s brain has up to twice as many synapses as it will have as an adult.
- Synaptic blooming and pruning are influenced by genetics, socialization, geographic environment, and social networking.
- Forming earliest memories, learning to process and encode information, and interpret the meaning of what they see and hear.
- School-aged children use social modeling to understand their place in the world - what does these images model for them?
  - Egocentrism

Media Influence on Girls

- Virtually every media form studied provides ample evidence of the sexualization of women:
  - Television, music videos, music lyrics, movies, magazines, sports media, video games, the Internet, and advertising.
- Findings have indicated that women more often than men:
  - Are portrayed in a sexual manner.
  - Dressed in revealing clothing with bodily postures or facial expressions that imply sexual readiness.
  - Are objectified.
  - Used as a decorative object, or as body parts rather than a whole person.

Childhood Television Shows

- Average hours that children watch television by age
  - 2 to 11 = average 32 hours a week
  - 12 to 17 = average 23 hours a week
- Boys depicted as valuing girls only for their physical attractiveness
- Older children or adults acting as younger children
- How common is sexualization in television shows popular among girls ages 6 to 11?
  - Random sample of 3 episodes from the 10 most popular children's television shows
  - Sexualization was present in every episode that was coded
  - Female characters were significantly more likely to be sexualized than male characters
  - An average of 24 instances of sexualization per episode
  - Most common forms of sexualization include:
    - Self-sexualizing behaviors (wearing revealing clothing or heavy makeup)
    - Sexual harassment
    - Unwanted sexual touching

Grauerholz & King, 1997; Krassas, Blauwkamp, & Wesselink, 2001; Smith et al., 2009; Hofschire & Greenber (2001)
16-year-old seeks extreme body alteration in hopes of meeting potential partner

Disney Princesses

- Disney’s female characters and especially Disney princesses have been hyper-sexualized
  - From their animation to their look-alike toy products
  - Tiny waists, big busts, heavy make-up
- Disney’s original princess movies are centered around romance and marriage
  - Even though all of the princesses are only in their teens

Children’s Toys

- Examples of dolls that depict “sexy”
  - Bratz dolls marketed for girls 7 to 10
    - Dressed in minis and fishnet stockings, tight jeans and skimpy tops
  - Barbie, introduced in 1959, was the first “fashion doll,” with an emphasis on her clothes and appearance.
    - Past research has found that the way fashion dolls such as Barbie are physically formed and dressed communicates messages of sexualization and objectification to girls
  - Study on girls ages 4-7

Magazines

Sherman, 2014
Portrayals of girls in American teen magazines have become increasingly sexualized over time from 1994 to 2011.

Research Study with Middle School Children (1999 and 2004)

- 55% female
- Girls who read articles about dieting more likely to engage in extreme weight-loss practices five years later
  - Such as vomiting

Social Media

- Snapchat
  - Snapchat right now is one of the most popular social media apps
  - Photoshop-like edits that certain Snapchat filters add to images
  - The impact these filters and others like it had on perpetuating mainstream idealized beauty standards through the millions of people who use and share photos via the platform
  - Snapchat's latest stats boast a hundred million active users per day and nine thousand snaps per second.

- Instagram
  - Mirror shots, pouting self-portraits of teenagers (typically female) and sexually suggestively posed girls in a mini dress
  - They're showing how much they like themselves and hoping that you'll hit "like" to reinforce the claim
  - Cyberbullying

Children's Clothing

- "Let Girls be Girls" Campaign
  - Calling on retailers to sign up to a pledge not to sell products that sexualize children
  - Primark ceased selling padded bikini tops for children as young as seven
  - Van Heeswijk
    - "These clothes are a worrying example of how girls are being groomed at younger and younger ages to fit into a sex-object culture, in which women are viewed as a sum of body parts, always sexually available, and whose value lies in how sexy they look to boys and men."

- Murnen & Colleagues Study
  - One-third girls' clothing at 15 major retailers has sexualizing characteristics
  - Psychologists indicate can encourage girls to view themselves as sexual objects at early age
  - School Uniforms

- Starr and Ferguson (2012) showed 60 American 6-9 year-old girls a pair of paper dolls

Graff, Murnen, & Krause, 2011; van der Berg et al., 2007

Starr & Ferguson, 2012; Pappas, 2011; Ward, 2004; Mumsnet, 2019
Beauty Pageants

- Age inappropriate behaviors and appearances
  - Wear makeup, fake teeth, false eyelashes, lipstick, elaborate hairstyles with hair extensions, and specially designed, sometimes provocative, outfits
  - Resemble dolls, which objectifies them at a very young age

- Confidence-building (parents) vs. Negative effects (critics)
  - Do the negatives outweigh the positives

- The child pageant industry involves thousands of contestants and $5 billion a year in revenue
  - Appearances are monetized
  - The viewership implies that many adults not only condone these activities but also the view of children as sexual objects

- Carleton Kendrick, a family therapist out of Boston says,
  - "At its core, [pageants are] teaching girls that the best thing [they] can do, and the most attention they can get is to view [themselves] as an assemblage of body parts. And that you will focus on drawing attention to those body parts sets them up for all manner of problems in their lives—self-esteem, eating disorders, relationships they enter into.”

Longitudinal Outcomes

- Evidence that the proliferation of sexualized images of girls and young women in advertising, merchandising, and media is harmful to girls’ self-image and healthy development.

Cognitive and Emotional:
  - Undermine a person’s confidence in and comfort with her own body, leading to emotional and self-image problems, such as shame and secrecy
  - Self-objectification has been shown to detract from the ability to concentrate and focus one’s attention (impaired performance on mental activities)

Mental and Physical Health:
  - Research links sexualization with three of the most common mental health problems diagnosed in girls and women—eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression or depressed mood

Sexual Development:
  - Research suggests that the sexualization of girls has negative consequences on girls’ ability to develop a healthy sexual self-image
  - Self-objectification has been linked directly with diminished sexual health among adolescent girls (e.g., decreased condom use and diminished sexual assertiveness)

General Society:
  - Increase in sexism
  - Fewer girls pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)
  - Increased rates of sexual harassment and sexual violence
  - Increased demand for child pornography

Parent Interventions

- Learning about the impact of sexualization on girls
  - Viewing media with their children
  - Have “uncomfortable” discussions
    - Talk about when you think sex is okay as part of a healthy, intimate, mature relationship
    - Ask why girls often try too hard to look and act sexy
    - Effective sex education discusses media, peer, and cultural influences on sexual behaviors and decisions, how to make safe choices, and what makes healthy relationships
  - When you think about what you buy and watch, you teach your sons and daughters to do so, too
  - Teaching girls how to talk to one another, teaching boys how to talk to girls

- Intrinscit: explore own beliefs about cultural norms and images in the media to develop educated opinions on what parents themselves value and want to teach their children.
- Get help: talk to other parents who have similar aged children to share ideas and give support.
- Be a conscious consumer: choose products with positive messaging and boycott the ones that reinforce sexualized images and messaging.
- Pick positive role models: there are so many amazing women in the media - Alicia Keys, Taylor Swift, Ellen DeGeneres, Johanna Wagstaffe, Christine Sinclair, etc. Encourage your kids to pay attention to these women.
Therapeutic choices

- Empower parents to take action in their children’s lives
- Teach them the parenting skills
- Start the conversation in family therapy
- Pay attention: Be mindful of what your clients are watching, playing with, and how they are dressing
- Pay therapy, music videos, celebrities
- Empower young girls to advocate for themselves and question the society around them
- Have open therapeutic discussion regarding the implications addressed in this presentation

APA Task Force Recommendations

- More research done that focuses on girls. Most research focuses on women.
- An example would be to examine the effects of interventions that promote positive images of girls.
- Practitioners such as psychologists and teachers are given resources to help them teach young girls how to accept more positive images of themselves and counteract the negative effects that the sexual images might have.
- Media literacy programs are developed and public health reports include sexualization in their agenda.
- Federal agencies support programs that help girls feel powerful in ways other than to look sexy
- For example: Web sites and extra-curricular activities.
- Develop media awards for positive portrayal of girls as powerful, able and non-sexualized, for example for the best toy or television image.
- Convene partnerships between government, leading experts and the media to work on the issue.
- All members of communities from school staff to business people promote extra-curricular programs that help young people develop self-esteem based on ability and character and not on appearance.

What should society do?

Questions

References