

SEXUALIZING CHILDHOOD



Research links sexualization with some of the most pressing and common mental health problems for girls including eating disorders, low self-esteem, depression and poor sexual health.¹ Sexualization and the objectification of women in the media is also associated with body dissatisfaction and appearance anxiety.²

Children are bombarded with sexualized content and messages

- Sexualized messages are prevalent across a variety of mainstream media that target children including TV, the internet, games, movies, music and magazines.³
- In 2005, 70% of the episodes of the top twenty shows among teen viewers contained some sexual content, including 8% with sexual intercourse.⁴
- On average, music videos contain 93 sexual situations per hour, including eleven “hard core” scenes depicting behaviors such as intercourse and oral sex.⁵



Adolescent sexual activity and beliefs about sex are linked to sexualized media content

- More than half of teens report getting some or most of their information about sex from television.⁶
- Teens who watch more sexual content on television are more likely to initiate intercourse and progress to more advanced non-coital sexual activities during the subsequent year.⁷
- Teens who listen to explicit music are likely to have sexual intercourse sooner than those who do not.⁸
- Girls who watched more than 14 hours of rap music videos per week were more likely to have multiple sex partners and to be diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease.⁹
- Boys exposed to violent sex on television, including rape, are less likely to be sympathetic to female victims of sexual violence.¹⁰



Sexualized media and toys are marketed to younger children and “tweens”

- Cosmetic companies like Bonne Bell lure preschoolers — whom marketers now refer to as “pre-tweens” — to makeup with lip gloss spiked with M&Ms, Dr. Pepper, and other flavors.¹¹
- Marketers use aspirational advertising — exploiting young childrens’ natural tendency to idealize older kids and adults — to market child-sized sexualized clothing. Tight belly-baring shirts, tiny halter tops, “low rider pants” are regularly marketed to pre-teens. The Sax Fifth Avenue chain, Club Libby Lu, offers day spa treatment and makeovers for girls as young as two.¹²



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- Celebrities from films rated R or PG-13, or whose CDs carry Parental Advisory warnings, appear on television programming aimed at young children.¹³ For example, Justin Timberlake, host of the 2007 Kids Choice Awards on Nickelodeon, starred in the R rated movie *Alpha Dog*. His CD, *FutureSex/LoveSounds*, carries a Parental Advisory for explicit lyrics.
- R-rated movies and Mature-rated video games — many of which feature explicit sexualized content — are regularly advertised on television when children are likely to be watching.¹⁴ In 2002, the top selling video game for teens and preteens was *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, in which players could kill a prostitute after having sex with her.¹⁵
- The best-selling Bratz dolls, a hipper, sexier version of Barbie, are now a media empire, selling over 4 million DVDs and reaching number 1 on the Billboard Children's Chart.
- To compete with the Bratz, Hasbro planned to release a series of dolls modeled after the Pussy Cat Dolls, a burlesque troupe turned singing group whose lyrics include "Don't cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me; Don't cha wish your girlfriend was a freak like me?" Two days after the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood launched a letter writing campaign, Hasbro stopped production on the dolls.



For more information visit www.commercialfreechildhood.org.

Other Resources

- **Dads and Daughters** provides tools to strengthen father-daughter relationships and to transform the pervasive cultural messages. (www.dadsanddaughters.org)
- **Hardy Girls, Healthy Women** supports efforts to change the culture from one that values girls and women on how they look to one that recognizes girls and women for who they are and what they contribute to the world. (www.hardygirlshealthywomen.org)

¹American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2007). *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html, p. 3.

² Ibid., p. 23.

³ Pardun et al. (2005). Sexual Content in Six Media. *Mass Communication and Society*, 2005, 8(2), p. 75-91.

⁴ Kaiser Family Foundation (2005). *Sex on TV 4*. Menlo Park, CA: Kunkel, D., Eyal, K., Finnerty, K., Biely, E. & Donnerstein, E. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/Sex-on-TV-4-Full-Report.pdf>.

⁵ Lichter, S. R. et al. (2000). *Sexual imagery in popular culture*. Washington, DC: Center for Media and Popular Policy.

⁶ Sutton, M.J. et al. (2002). Shaking the tree of knowledge for forbidden fruit: Where adolescents learn about sexuality and contraception. *Sexual Teens, Sexual Media: Investigating the media's influence on adolescent sexuality*, eds. J. Brown et al, New York: Erlbaum, p. 25-55.

⁷ Collins, R. L. et al. (2004). Watching sex on television predicts adolescent initiation of sexual behavior. *Pediatrics*, 114(3), p. 280-289.

⁸ Martino, S. C. et al. (2006). Exposure to Degrading Versus Nondegrading Music Lyrics and Sexual Behavior among Youth. *Pediatrics*, 118, p. 430-441.

⁹ Wingwood, G.M. et al. (2003). A prospective study of exposure to rap music videos and African American female adolescents' health. *American Journal of Public Health*, 93(3), p. 437-439.

¹⁰ American Psychological Association Commission on Violence and Youth. (1993). *Violence and youth: Psychology's response, Volume 1*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

¹¹ O'Donnell, J. (2007, April 11). Marketers keep pace with 'tweens': Fashion-minded girls prove rich, but fast-moving target. *USA Today*, p. B1.

¹² Copeland, L. (2006, March 24). Glamour Babes. *Washington Post*. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/24/AR2006032402188.html>.

¹³ Linn, S. (2004). *Consuming Kids: The hostile takeover of childhood*. New York: New Press, p. 143-144.

¹⁴ Parents Television Council. (2003). *Kids in the Crosshairs*. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from <http://www.parentstv.org/PTC/publications/reports/videogamestudy/welcome.asp>.

¹⁵ Snider, M. (2002, December 27). Video Games: Grand Theft Auto: Vice City. *USA Today*, p. D8.