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Adult world must let girls be girls

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To be "hot, hot, hot" is not a fitting encouragement for five- and six-year-olds, writes Emma Rush.

BRAS for eight-year-olds. Lip gloss for six-year-olds. Fashion and gossip magazines for girls from age five. The sexualisation of children is changing the experience of childhood, yet there has been little public discussion of its implications.

Children, particularly girls, are under increasing pressure from advertisers and marketers to adopt a "sexy" persona from very young ages. Those who apply the pressure claim they are simply responding to little girls' interest in looking "pretty".

However, the forms "prettiness" now takes, which include "bralettes" for girls as young as three, as well as the language used to describe appearance in girls' magazines directed at readers from five up ("hot, hot, hot"), give the game away. This sexualising pressure places children at risk in a number of ways.

The emphasis on "ideal" appearances brings some of the agonies of adolescence forward many years. In one recent study, about one-third of seven-year-old Australian girls wanted to be thinner, despite the fact that they were all within a normal healthy weight range. The pressure to have a "perfect" appearance places children at greater risk of developing eating disorders at an age when nutrition is crucial - while they are still growing.

The focus on sexual couplings found in girls' magazines, pitched at readers aged five to 13, may have dangerous implications for children who are approached by predatory adults. These magazines encourage girls to have "crushes" on men older than themselves, with heavy coverage of adult female celebrities and their boyfriends, as well as articles on and posters of adult male actors and singers.

In a cultural context where sex is heavily glamourised and represented as highly desirable, is it wise to actively encourage girls of primary-school age to have romantic fantasies about older men? How do we then expect them to behave if an older man approaches apparently offering romance?

To sexualise children in the way that advertisers do - by dressing, posing, and making up child models in the same ways that sexy adults would be presented - also implicitly suggests to adults that children are interested in and ready for sex. This is profoundly irresponsible, particularly given that it is known that pedophiles use not only child pornography but also more innocent photos of children.

One less obvious risk to children as a result of an excessive focus on "sexy" appearance and behaviour is that other important aspects of their lives can suffer. The developmental period known as "middle childhood" (about six to 11 years old) is critical to children developing a sense of self and self-esteem.

Children of this age are beginning to understand their place in the world, and are forming a sense of their own competence and the kinds of activities that are important. A significant part of this learning occurs through play.

If children perceive being "sexy" as important and their play times revolve around this theme (shopping, makeovers, imitating pop stars and so on) then they will miss out on other activities that better foster physical and cognitive development, such as sports, problem-solving games and imaginative play. As a result, aspects of their physical and cognitive development are likely to suffer.

Some seek to dismiss these risks as a "moral panic", arguing that children benefit from sexualisation because their sexuality gives them a source of power in a world in which most of the power is held by adults. In fact, this very power imbalance means that any sexual engagement children might have with adults is more than likely to end in the further disempowerment of children.

Rather than being empowered, children are being exploited by the process of sexualisation. For children seeking to become empowered in an adult world, a more promising route is to focus on developing cognitive and emotional capacities that enable them to negotiate power relations more maturely and with less risk to themselves.

Such capacities also enable young people to choose to use their sexuality in a respectful way, rather than for seeking to gain an advantage over others.

It is unrealistic to expect parents to stop the sexualisation of children by "just saying no" to sexy clothing, children's make-up and so on. As any parent knows, it is not that simple. Peer friendships take on much greater importance in middle childhood and the pressure to conform is keenly felt by children. No parents want their child to be the one left out in the schoolyard.

And no parents want to be put in a position where they must monitor and regulate their children's activities. The sexualisation of children should be tackled at its source: the advertisers and marketers who are seeking to create ever-younger consumers for their products. The burden of remedying the damage caused by sexualising children should not fall on parents, teachers, pediatricians and child psychologists.

There is nothing wrong with selling products. But sexualising children to sell products has social costs that are unacceptable.

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