

Teenage girls learn the 'porn pout' from a very young age so why are we surprised when they behave in a sexual way?



By **ALISON KEATING**

CHILD PSYCHOLOGIST

HEARING about the 'Slane Girl' video that went viral was not surprising to me; in fact, I'm surprised this isn't happening even more. The all too usual sensationalism had the airwaves in a tizzy. But perhaps we should view this as a microcosm of major societal issues that we need to address with regard to sexual and behavioural norms.

More importantly, we must fully consider the impact on this girl's mental health of such an irrevocable recording and put forward policy guidelines to prevent a broadcast of this nature from occurring in the future.

I feel for teenagers. Theirs is a difficult world. Never before have we had a more connected-disconnected generation.

Some seem a bit lost; they may be engaging physically in sexual acts but not connecting emotionally. Sex is complicated since it affects us at a physical, psychological and emotional level. Many adults struggle with the complexities of sex and relationships, so it's no surprise that adolescents do, too. They make mistakes and bad decisions just like adults.

Teenagers are subjected to more sexualised images and messages than ever before, which has led to a coarsening of sexual values, beliefs and behaviour – all of which also has a complex impact on their psychological and emotional well-being. A 2006 Australian study called Corporate Paedophilia gives a helpful view on the confluence of factors.

The study's title is a metaphor to describe the aggressive targeting of children in sexualised ways through advertising and marketing that is both an abuse of children and of public morality. Think of Playboy-branded T-shirts for pre-teens and padded bras for six-year-olds.

In the past, advertisers used older teens or young adults to portray sexualised messages to sell their product. But now they are targeting children and young teens directly.

Our young people's brains are overloaded with sexualised images from TV, videos, magazines, billboards, online and via their own social networking portals of peer comparison.

As their brains become desensitised to the sexualised images, advertisers up the ante – using more explicit content to recapture the teens' attention.

Since adolescents inhabit this increasingly sexualised world, it shouldn't come as so much of a surprise that they'd start to exhibit sexual behaviour.

Just because today's teenagers sound and look sophisticated and mature doesn't mean they have the psychological maturity to deal with daily life. They may be biologically mature and able to have sex, but they will not be psychologically mature until they are in their 20s – late 20s for boys.

There has been a coarsening in young girls' sexual beliefs and behaviours. It seems as if some girls think they need to be sexually explicit in their dress and behaviour in order to be valued.

The norm seems to be more sexualised, favouring a pouty, sultry, or grumpy sultry look.

I've noticed teenagers are trying to project an older, unsmiling image – as if it's childish to laugh and be joyful; and sexy equals stern, serious, grumpy and uninterested. Explicitly sexual language is increasingly

used, too. Popular songs feature more sexual lyrics and to hear young children sing them back does not sit well.

Back in the Eighties, Madonna was one of the few doing it – today, tell me one female popstar who's not in a leotard or her underwear. You don't see male stars singing in their boxers but for women it's so commonplace it has become boring.

YOUNG people seeing this are very impressionable. Even when Madonna had the cone boobs, she was at least still wearing trousers. Then there is the fact that people are seeing pornography at a much younger age, which may have the effect of 'normalising' an unrealistic view of sex and creating new pressures on both women and men.

To be the lad, young men might feel they need to behave as they see on screen and treat women like sex objects. The point of sex – real intimacy – can be missed entirely. This divide between sexual acts and the heart has led to an increase in isolation. I see this disconnect more and more because of the 'pornification' of younger and younger children.

When I heard about the Slane incident, I just thought about the girl – and of how this could become even more common.

I feel frustrated, because teenagers don't have the emotional self-regulation to avoid things like this in terms of pressing 'send' on the internet.

Impulse control doesn't fully mature at a structural neurological level for boys until they're around 27. So the danger of being in the moment is that herd mentality can take over. If that person had been on their own, they might have reflected on the long-term consequences of sharing something on the web.

Social media without social responsibility is dangerous. People fail to see the consequences of what they publish – and there are far-reaching consequences. An irresponsibly uploaded video will be forgotten by the press and public in a week or two, but it won't be forgotten by this girl. Many people make mistakes, but it doesn't need to become social (or traditional) media fodder.

There needs to be a change in policy. As regards ask.fm and similar websites, trying to give some psychological understanding to parents who have been affected in the worst way is heartbreaking. Our job as adults is to put safety measures in – where are the boundaries?

There should be some level of oversight to inhibit posting of sexually graphic images or videos. A rethink is required now. When you've the heady mix of a concert, a youth demographic and inhibitions perhaps lowered by drink or drugs – then you add impulsiveness and wi-fi, it's a recipe for disaster.

We're also not teaching skills in school such as valuing yourself as an individual. Teenagers are struggling to form identities and parents, too, are struggling

to have control. Parents must step back in and say, 'No. Just because everyone else is doing something, that doesn't make it okay.' They need to be the parent, not the friend – tell them they can't stay out that late, or wear that skirt.

Teenagers do have to take responsibility for themselves, but we can't take the Slane Girl case as an unfortunate event – at a bigger level, we need to think what actually led to this.

PEEER pressure is huge. Moral norms have changed – that doesn't mean everyone agrees with it but it can be very hard for a young person to step out of line and not go along with it.

Childhood is about innocence, and innocence is a lack of carnal knowledge. This is being taken away from children and adolescents thanks to sexualised advertising, accessibility to porn, and societal and peer expectations. All I see is mental health issues getting worse and presenting earlier.

Value must be placed back on the person within their own body; sex has to be put back on a higher level and treated as a big deal. Teenagers have to respect themselves and their bodies; to understand what intimacy is. This has to be taught.

Sex education should be much more than biology. We need to teach about the complexity of physically and emotionally connecting to another human. This has to occur at home, in school, at policy level, and where advertising and marketing regulatory bodies can impose sanctions on those who cross the line. The time for change is here, now.

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INCORPORATING IRELAND ON SUNDAY

Barrett has no right to luxury at our expense

AS CEANN Comhairle, Seán Barrett has a greater responsibility than most to show leadership when it comes to claiming expenses for official business.

Instead, we learn that questions were raised by Oireachtas officials in relation to four nights' hotel accommodation on a stopover in Dubai en route to a junket in China, and he subsequently agreed to pay for one of the nights himself.

Mr Barrett argued that a one-night stopover did not give him enough time to recuperate from the flights and transfers involved in the journey. This will raise a smile on the faces of the many ordinary Irish citizens who continue straight to Australia after a brief stopover in Dubai on 22-hour flights.

They somehow manage to get there in economy class, too, unlike Mr Barrett, whose business-class seat will have converted into a fully flat bed.

If he was flying through the emirate, there are few who would criticise him for wanting to visit. But it is only right that Mr Barrett should have to dip into his own pocket if he wants to stop there.

The news comes after the Irish Mail on Sunday also revealed that TDs are granted an 80% premium on the agreed civil service expenses rates for foreign travel. Depending on the city visited, this means they can claim up to €290 a day without receipts – that's the sort of money hundreds of thousands of families would consider enough for food for a whole week.

At a time of unprecedented belt-tightening, these practices must be curtailed and the news of a review is welcome. No newspaper has fought harder to expose ludicrous Oireachtas expenses and we will continue to do so until the system changes.

Tragedy of recession

IN YEARS of plenty, Ireland was a magnet for Poles and many other eastern European nationalities who came here to make money they could only dream of earning at home.

In the wake of the economic collapse, many left but many more stayed. Now they, too, are experiencing the real misery of austerity, victims of the economic downturn just as much as any Irish man or woman.

The news that a Polish man in his 30s, still unidentified, was crushed to death while sleeping rough in a skip is a heart-breaking end to that dream.

Meanwhile, Menolly Homes, one of the biggest developers of the bubble years, has told residents who are worried that a child will die in an unfinished apartment block used a playground, that it is not the company's fault 'that the youth of today have become so disenfranchised'.

In fact, it is precisely the fault of developers, speculators and their political cronies that children are disenfranchised – and also the reason why Polish men are sleeping rough in skips, with tragic consequences.

Bliss for the neutrals

TODAY'S All-Ireland football semi-final is a chance for neutrals everywhere to sit back and enjoy the sport in all its skilful and athletic glory, and we wish both teams well.

It also serves as a useful calm before the storm.

Next Sunday, Dublin take on Kerry in the second semi-final.

When these two counties meet, no one ever is neutral!