

So sexy so soon: Dealing with the impact of today's sexualized childhood on young children

Childhood has changed dramatically since many of today's teachers and parents were growing up. Media and marketers are bringing images, ideas and products into children's lives that have changed childhood. **Dr Diane Levin** helps readers develop new strategies for understanding what is going on and helping children through the minefields.



Four-year old Emma arrives at school and starts crying when she realizes her lunch is packed in a generic plastic bag, not the usual Disney Princess lunchbox she so loves. Emma says she won't be able to sit at the Princess lunch table. It's only for girls with Princess lunchboxes.

After 5-year-old Jenna has a "High School Musical" birthday party—all the girls begin doing sexy "High School Musical" dancing in the dramatic play area and at outdoor time. A few parents of the girls who went to the party voice concern about the girls new interest in sexy dancing and make up—they they put on at the party. The teacher decides to write an article for the parents in the school's newsletter suggesting guidelines for age-appropriate birthday parties that are not linked to themes in television and movies.

What's going on?

These are just a couple of the examples I have heard from teachers about how young children are bringing today's sexualized childhood to school. They illustrate how:

- some children's sense of wellbeing and relationships with others are not based on whom they are and what they can do, but to having the "right" objects, including objects stereotypically identified with one gender;
- instead of engaging in creative and imaginative play, pre-schoolers imitate behaviour of older children or media characters, such as going on dates and dancing provocatively; and,
- traditional childhood celebrations, like birthday parties, are being replaced by commercialized, pre-packaged events that are often linked to TV show and movies that feature highly sexualized behavior.

Today even pre-schoolers are exposed to images of sexualized behavior in popular culture. On television, in videos, and at the mall, preschoolers

see celebrities and cartoon characters wearing short skirts and belly-button exposing shirts. And they see wedge-heeled shoes and make-up kits designed for preschoolers. Although they cannot fully understand what they see and hear, from a very young age children try to figure it out. As they do sexualized images and content influence how they think about being male and female and their bodies. This content affects what they want to be, do, and wear. It can confuse their ideas about the nature of relationships and promote precocious sexuality (Chrisman & Couchenour, 2002; Levin & Kilbourne, 2009).

Adults should not be too surprised when children bring the sexualized content they see and hear in the world around them into the classroom—for instance, girls focusing on being princesses or doing sexy dances like they see on TV or in movies, or wearing skimpy or tight clothes that inhibit their physical activity and that make them popular with some of the boys. But too often when these issues come up at school or at home, adults are unsure about how to respond.

What Can We Do?

Here are some strategies that early childhood programs and families have found effective in helping children counteract the harm being caused by today's sexualized childhood.

Protect children as much as possible from exposure to sexualized media and products.

Often this means working to:

- make good decisions about the media and toys in their children's lives (as when the teacher sent home a newsletter about age-appropriate birthday parties at the beginning of the year).
- create rules and routines about the media in children's lives—how much screen time children can have and when they can have it, as well as age-appropriate TV shows, movies, web sites, and video games children can use and watch.
- set guidelines for what, when, and how preschoolers take part in shopping. When children know what they can and cannot buy and what will happen when they go into stores then they are less likely to nag their parents or have tantrums.
- Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment (TRUCE) prepares media, toy and play guides to help teachers and families implement these suggestions and others in this article (www.truceteachers.org).

Help children make sense of what they see and work to counteract the lessons they are learning from today's sexualized childhood.

- Children need a safe place to process what they see and hear in a sexualized environment. Preschool teachers can create an environment in which children can make sense of their world. If you observe situations like the scenes described above, let the children know you're interested in what they are doing. Try to find out what they think and feel.

For instance, if children pretend to go on dates, try asking questions like: "What do you know about dates?" "How do you decide whom your date will be?" "What do you do when you're on a date?" "What happens if you don't have a date?" "How old do you have to be to go on a date?" From such conversations, children learn that they can talk to you without being embarrassed, ridiculed, or punished.

Adults can provide information that clears up misconceptions and make comments that influence children's thinking like, "It's nice having a boy (or girl) who's a friend when you're young. But it's only when you get to be older that boys and girls really go on dates."

- You can also develop new strategies to deal with issues that arise with the children—for instance, after Emma's distress over not having her princess lunchbox, the teacher changed the procedure children used for choosing their lunch tables. The following year she asked parents to buy lunchboxes that were not linked to popular media themes. Several families thanked the teacher for easing tensions at home over choosing a media-themed lunchbox. It led to more discussions at school and home, and between school and home, about other issues related to the products being marketed to girls

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(and boys) through the media. Remember, it will be easier to develop responses if you are familiar with what children are seeing on the screen and the current fads capturing their attention.

Help all children develop a broad range of interests, skills, and behaviors that get beyond gender stereotypes.

- Choose toys and play materials carefully. Try to avoid toys that are highly gender divided, linked to television programs and movies, and can only be used in one way so they control what and how children play.
- Provide and read aloud books in which male and female characters have a wide range of experiences and emotions—girls be strong and confident and boys can be thoughtful and sensitive.
In one class where girls were obsessed with being princesses, the teacher created a curriculum project with the theme "Princesses and Princes." They read books about competent and strong princesses and princes from many cultures, turned the dramatic

play area into a castle, made crowns and swords out of cardboard and foil, and had a royal banquet where families contributed culturally favorite food dishes from their home cultures. A project like this also helps children become more creative players, using toys and props in more open-ended rather than scripted ways.

- Encourage activities at school and home that help boys and girls play together as peers.
- Don't rely on screens when children have free time to fill. Help them learn appealing, non-media activities they can do for rainy day recesses or play dates, when they are at restaurants or traveling with the family.

Work in large and small ways at all levels to create a society that supports children's healthy social, emotional, and sexual development.

- The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (www.commercialfreechildhood.org) can help schools and families take action. For instance, by getting its members to send hundreds of protest letters, CCFC got Scholastic to stop marketing Bratz doll products in its school book fair catalogue. ■

Dr Diane Levin is Professor of Education at Wheelock College in Boston.

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References and Resources

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