

Media, marketing creating early sexualization for children, authors find

By Melissa Wagner and Georgia Hall

In their recently released *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can do to Protect Their Kids*, Diane E. Levine, Ph.D., and Jean Kilbourne, Ed.D., explain the role that media and marketing have had in undermining children's healthy development. Levine and Kilbourne highlight the alarming new sexualized childhood promoted through the media and popular culture. Video, computer games, Internet, toys, fashion and entertainers all contribute to the negative sexualized messages that children receive.

The authors explain that "marketers have long targeted children as potential consumers, and they know that using sex and sexiness is one of the most successful ways to get children's attention in order to make them want to shop" (pg. 35). Through their lobbying efforts, advertisers and marketers have significantly reduced the regulatory power of two major government agencies designed to protect the consumer — the Federal Trade Commission and the Federal Communication Commission. Subsequently, children were and are left exposed to risqué media tactics designed to manipulate children (and their parents) to purchase their products.

Clearly, it's no coincidence that when negative marketing and advertising increased, so did issues related to violence and sex within the schools, and at increasingly younger ages (even as early as the elementary and preschool levels). As a result, middle schools are now canceling dances because of inappropriate dancing. Dress codes are necessary at many schools because of the increasingly risqué and provocative clothing children wear. It is not uncommon for teachers at the preschool level to hear children using the word "sexy" as they describe their dress or behavior.

"The sexualized childhood environment influences dramatically the social climate in the classroom. It teaches children to treat one another as objects — being judged and treated based on what they can buy and how they look" (pg.87).

The authors offer several examples of marketing efforts from the fashion industry that after-school professionals should find alarming:

- A T-shirt for 4-year-old girls with "Scratch and Sniff" printed across the chest.
- Gym shorts for 10-year-old girls have two handprints on the back — one on each cheek — zeroing in on the spot supposedly waiting to be grabbed, patted or pinched.
- T-shirts for toddler boys carry the slogans "Pimp Squad" and "Chick Magnet."
- "So Many Boys, So Little Time" is the slogan on one fitted T-shirt sold in a size made for 6-year-old girls. (pg. 42).

There is significant opportunity for adults



Many factors contribute to a new sexualized childhood, including videos, computer games and the Internet, according to the authors of *So Sexy So Soon*.

"The sexualization of childhood is having a profoundly disturbing impact on children's understanding of gender, sexuality, and relationships."

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working in child/youth settings to collectively work together with parents to counteract the negative messages and images that children/youth are experiencing. These actions will help allow grown children to be "ready and able to establish a meaningful and intimate emotional and sexual relationship with a partner" if they choose, and to "cope with the inevitable stresses and strains of life" (pg. 8).

So Sexy So Soon offers a wealth of suggestions for parents, families, teachers and youth program providers to constructively counteract the sexualization of childhood and promote positive development.

- Program staff members and parents need to work together. Establish an open dialogue between staff members and parents to express concerns about issues that may arise at the program and at home.
- Review the images, posters, music and books/magazines displayed and used in the

program. Think about the negative images or messages included and make appropriate changes. Highlight images that speak to equality, caring relationships, non-sexualized male/female leaders, and developing minds and healthy bodies.

- Encourage open-ended toys, art projects and materials (such as clay and building blocks) that encourage a child's creativity and imagination.
- Give children an opportunity to talk about the images they see and their reactions and feelings about them. Help children to have healthy, connected, give-and-take conversations as part of your relationship.
- Join in during playtime without taking over. If a child seems off track in their thinking and playing, ask leading/guiding questions to get them back on track. For instance, you may ask questions like, "Barbie always worries about how she looks. Do you know anyone who spends so much time getting dressed?" (pg. 104).
- Shield children from exposure to sexual material and imagery as much as possible.
- Encourage a broad range of skill-building and activity participation in boys and girls. Discourage children from narrowly defining activities as specific to one gender.
- Join forces with parents to express concerns directly to retailers, media, toy companies

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- reported truancy
- withdrawal from hobbies, teams, family life
- marked change in behavior ranging from hostility to violence
- evidence of eye drops used to mask bloodshot eyes or dilated pupils
- missing prescription drugs
- chronic dishonesty
- change in overall attitude/personality with no other identifiable cause
- changes in friends; new hangouts; sudden avoidance of old crowd; doesn't want to talk about new friends; friends are known drug users.

How to raise awareness

- Incorporate this information into a lesson plan to educate your children and youth in your program.
- Visit some of the following Web sites to learn more about the subject:
 - Drug Free Action Alliance: <http://www.drugfreeactionalliance.org/>
 - The American Council for Drug Education: <http://www.acde.org/educate/Default.htm>
 - The National Institute on Drug Abuse: www.nida.nih.gov
 - The Office of National Drug Control Policy: http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/drugfact/prescr_drg_abuse.html
 - Parents, The Anti-Drug: <http://www.theantidrug.com/>
 - The Partnership for a Drug-Free America: <http://www.drugfree.org>
- Share this article and raise awareness among parents and other after-school professionals.
- Get involved with the National Family Partnership (<http://www.nfp.org/>) and participate in projects such as Red Ribbon Week (a week devoted to Drug Abuse Awareness) and Lock Your Meds (a program dedicated to helping parents prevent prescription drug abuse)
- Parents, The Anti-drug (<http://www.theantidrug.com/resources/>) offers some free multilingual resources such as pamphlets, fliers and video clips.
- Get involved with Generation Rx, a collaborative student and faculty organization at Ohio State College of Pharmacy, devoted to raising awareness to this problem. Contact: Nicole Kwiek at kwiek.1@osu.edu or Ken Hale at hale.3@osu.edu.

References

American Council for Drug Education. Signs and Symptoms of Drug Use. Available from: <http://www.acde.org/educate/signs.htm>

Beatty S. Teenage Use of Over-the-Counter and Prescription Drugs. Safe and Drug-Free Schools Consortium. The Ohio State University. February 7, 2007.

Brenner GM, Stevens CW. *Pharmacology*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Saunders; c2006. 274-84 p.

Connecticut Clearinghouse. Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drug Abuse. The National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information. 2000.

and clothing manufacturers about negative hurtful images and messages.

Establishing a positive healthy environment that values equality, caring relationships and individual respect in the after-school program, even if children spend limited time there, is a worthwhile task.

The more children are able to build their resistance skills and responses to harmful images and messages experienced in media and popular culture, the better off their futures lives will be. Our lack of response to this growing crisis would be inconsistent with the core values that define our profession.

Reference

Levin, D., & Kilbourne, J. (2008). *So sexy, so soon: The sexualization of childhood in commercial culture*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

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For discussion

After sharing this article with the older children and youth in your program, consider the following questions for discussion points.

- What are some of the reasons that teenagers start abusing medications?
- What are some ways to raise awareness about prescription drug abuse?
- What are some common symptoms of medication abuse?
- Who can you contact if you know someone who is abusing medications?

Geier, Patti. The Dark Side of Prescription Drugs. Available from: <http://www.prescription-drug-abuse.org/>

National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH). 2007. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Available from <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/nsduh/2k6nsduh/2k6results.pdf> (2007)

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Treatment Episode Data Set (TEDS). 2007. Treatment Episode Data Set, 1995 to 2005. National Admissions to Substance Abuse Treatment Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Available from <http://www.dasis.samhsa.gov/teds05/tedsad2k5web.pdf>

The authors are pharmacy students at Ohio State University and are working with the university's Generation RX Initiative. The initiative is dedicated to elevating student understanding of medication safety issues, particularly the dangers of abusing prescription and over-the-counter medications. For more information, go to <http://www.pharmacy.ohio-state.edu/outreach/generation-rx>.

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