CHALLENGE
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MEDIA

End the Sexualization of Girls and Young Women in Mainstream Media

Introduction

Children are exposed to a barrage of sexual and violent images through mainstream and other media. As children gain more access to media through technology such as phones and computers, the time per day that children are exposed to images is increasing. The average high school student spends as much as 8-10 hours a day with some type of media, according to recent findings from the Geena Davis Institute. Studies estimate that counting all ads, logos, labels and announcements a child is exposed to 16,000 images in one day. (Youth Media Reporter 2009). Often, media such as TV, commercials, movies, music lyrics, and even Halloween costumes, sexually exploits girls and young women; and it perpetuates unhealthy and unrealistic stereotypical portrayals of both young men and women.

This handout and activity will analyze the impact of media on the rights of girls and young women from an international human rights framework, specifically the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The ideals of human rights aim to protect people from abuses and from the loss of worth and dignity. Girls have the right to safe, self-directed, and healthy lives; free of coercion and sexual exploitation. Article #34 of the CRC calls on governments to ensure that every child is protected from sexual exploitation and abuse. For more information please visit: www.un.org/en/documents/udhr.

From the Mind of...

...a school administrator:

"As an adult I am continually awed by the juxtaposition of two seemingly disparate occurrences: the growth in numbers of the 'educated woman' with greater than ever success and opportunity in the work force and beyond, and the mind-boggling, blatant sexualization of the women and even the youngest of girls that vaunts, in increasingly vulgar terms and images, the woman's anatomy and her 'role' as seductress. I am told that 'what makes this more acceptable today is that the more educated, liberal and liberated woman is the one who chooses this portrayal; it isn't thrust upon her anymore against her will.'"

...a high school male:

"General media influences high school students by creating a false sense of perfection that everyone is trying to achieve. In males the ideal is competitive, aggressive, sex obsessed and emotionless. In females, it's beauty, weight, fashion and acting purposely unintelligent. All of these contribute to self esteem issues, use of drugs and are cause for anxiety and depression."

...a high school female:

"I definitely think there are expectations for how women must look and act in order to have worth. They must be good-looking, pretty, cute, sexy and/or thin. It is made clear by the media that some traits are more desirable than others in women. ... Stereotypical women are often 'hot' - desirable body, pretty face, etc. and sometimes not very smart."

The Advocates
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Girls and the Media Websites

About-Face
http://www.about-face.org/

About-Face's mission is to equip women and girls with tools to understand and resist harmful media messages that affect self-esteem and body image. Their ultimate goal, the About-Face vision, is to imbue girls and women with the power to free themselves from the burden of body-image problems so they will be capable of fulfilling their varied and wondrous potentials.

Girls Inc. is a national nonprofit youth organization dedicated to inspiring all girls to be strong, smart, and bold. With roots dating to 1864, Girls, Inc. has provided vital educational programs to millions of American girls, particularly those in high-risk, underserved areas.

Girls Inc.
http://www.girlsinc.org/index.html

girls inc. — Celebrating Girls' Voices Since 1864

Girls, Women + Media Project
www.mediaandwomen.us

The Girls, Women + Media Project is a 21st century, non-profit initiative and network working to increase awareness of how pop culture and media represent, affect, employ, and serve girls and women---and to advocate for improvement in those areas. The Project also seeks to educate and empower all consumers and citizens about consumer rights and responsibilities regarding the media, and to promote universal media literacy.

The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media works with entertainment creators and companies, educates the next generation of content-creators, and informs the public about the need to increase the number of girls and women in media aimed at kids and to reduce stereotyping of both males and females.

The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media
www.seejane.org

Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

Reel Grrls
http://www.reelgrrls.org/

Reel Grrls empowers young women from diverse communities to realize their power, talent and influence through media production. Their mission is to cultivate voice and leadership in girls at a vulnerable age in their development.

TVbyGIRLS is a nonprofit organization that works with girls ages 10 to 18 to build leadership, compassionate and collaborative working skills, critical thinking and engagement in social justice and the issues of their communities. The overarching mission of TVbyGIRLS is to create stories and messages that show creative, compassionate, involved and thinking girls and women. They create work and venues for girls to see their potentials beyond the limitations they are exposed to in the mainstream media.

TVbyGIRLS
http://www.tvbygirls.tv

"The issue is that the way marketers and media present sexuality is in a very narrw way. Being a sexual person isn't about being a pole dancer. This is a sort of sex education girls are getting, and it's a misleading one."

~Sharon Lamb, co-author of Packaging Girlhood

Media Literacy Sites for Parents, Educators, and Caretakers:

Center for Media Literacy:
http://www.medialit.org/

Media Awareness Network:
http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/index.cfm/

Media Literacy:
http://www.medialiteracy.com/

Media Literacy Clearinghouse:
http://www.frankwbaker.com/default1.htm/

National Institute on Media and the Family:
http://www.mediafamily.org/

Youth Media Reporter:
http://youthmediareporter.org/

"The sexualization of girls may not only reflect sexist attitudes, a societal tolerance of sexual violence, and the exploitation of girls and women but may also contribute to these phenomena."

~APA Report, 2008

Books and Reports

The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls & What We Can Do About It (2008)
By: M. Gigi Durham, Ph.D.

This book provides research and an important perspective for parents who are interested in learning about the effect of media sexualization of girls on their daughters. Separated into chapters on the myths perpetuated by the mainstream media (the "perfect" body myth and the "if you've got it, flaunt it" myth are two examples) this book covers many of the influences that young girls face today. The overarching message to parents is: talk to your children (boys, too, should be aware that the media's messages are often just for corporate profit). At the end of every chapter, Durham provides some helpful tips for media-consciousness. She also stresses the fact that while the media promotes harmful sexualized images, we need to encourage the development of healthy sexuality and healthy relationships for our children.
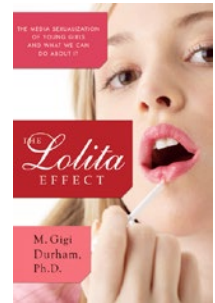
Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes (2007)
By: Sharon Lamb, Ed.D., and Lyn Mikel Brown, Ed.D.

Packaging Girlhood takes an in-depth look at the way marketing and advertising are used to target girls as consumers and the way this harms girls' development. This is inextricably linked to the sexualization of girls today because of the way advertising uses the images of sexualized girls to sell products and capture young women's interest. This book in particular dissects what girls wear, see, hear, and do in order to give parents and others involved in the care of young women an idea of what girls are exposed to. Lamb and Brown present these topics in a factual, straight-forward manner and provide parents, teachers, and care-takers with examples of conversations to have with girls of all ages on topics such as advertising, gender roles, and sex.
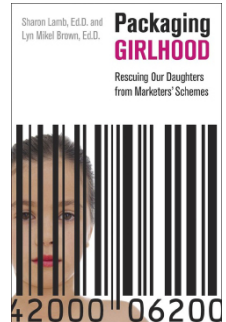
Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007)
http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf

This report is the culmination of an effort by the American Psychological Association (APA) Task Force to "examine and summarize the best psychological theory, research, and clinical experience addressing the sexualization of girls via media and other cultural messages, including the prevalence of these messages and their impact on girls, and include attention to the role and impact of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status." It is organized to take readers through the evidence for the sexualization of girls, consequences for the sexualization of girls, and positive alternatives and approaches to counteracting the influence of sexualization. This is a good place to start to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue.
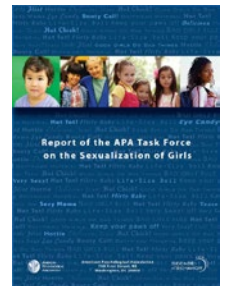
So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and what Parents can do to Protect their Kids (2008)
By: Diane E. Levin Ph.D. and Jean Kilbourne, Ed.D.

A great read for parents and educators alike, *So Sexy So Soon* addresses the issues that teachers and parents are encountering regarding early sexualization in the United States. Combined with chapters that provide advice on how to age-appropriately talk with kids about what they see in the media, Levin and Kilbourne demonstrate how the media specifically targets all children in order to attract consumers at earlier ages. Citing examples such as pornography directors being used for music video production and the fact that "A corporation's job is not to promote the well-being of children, but rather to maximize profit for its shareholders", this book provides an important perspective for kids and their parents to learn about marketing and its goals.

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As parents and educators, you are powerful influences. You can teach children to value themselves for who they are, rather than how they look. You can teach boys to value girls as friends, sisters, and girlfriends, rather than as sexual objects and you can advocate for change with manufacturers and media producers.

Tune in and Talk. Discuss media with your daughters and sons. Ask questions: Why is there so much pressure on girls to look a certain way? What do you like most about the kids you want to spend time with? Do these qualities matter more than how they look? Are girls and boys represented equally in the media? Actively listen to their answers.

Speak Up. If you don't like a TV show, commercial, CD, video, pair of jeans, or doll, say why. A conversation with your child will be more effective than simply saying, "No, you can't buy it or watch it."

Take a Stand. Support campaigns, companies, and products that promote positive images. Complain to manufacturers, advertisers, television and movie producers, and retail stores when products sexualize girls.

Model. Marketing and the media also influence adults. When you are conscious about what you buy and watch, you teach your sons and daughters to be so as well.

Educate. You may feel uncomfortable discussing sexuality with your kids, but it's important. Talk about when you think sex is OK as part of a healthy, intimate, mature relationship. Effective sex education programs discuss media, peer, and cultural influences on sexual behaviors and decisions, how to make safe choices, and what makes healthy relationships. Find out what your school teaches.

Be Real. Help your kids focus on what's really important: what they think, feel, and value. Help them build strengths that will allow them to achieve their goals and develop into healthy adults. Remind your children that everyone is unique and that it is wrong to judge people by their appearance.

Understand. Young people often feel pressure to watch popular TV shows, listen to music their friends like, and conform to certain styles of dress. Help your child make wise choices among the trendy alternatives. Remind them often that who they are and what they can accomplish are far more important than how they look.

Encourage. Athletics and other extracurricular activities emphasize talents, skills, and abilities over physical appearance. Encourage your daughter to follow her interests and get involved in a sport or other activity.

Advocate. Take a stand and create a local advocacy campaign through your PTA, neighborhood, faith community, city and state. If you don't advocate for the rights of your children, profit-making corporations will continue to manipulate and exploit them.

Stand Up to Parent Peer Pressure. As parents and educators it's up to us to be the decision makers when it comes to our children. Don't cave in to pressure to bring your child to the popular movie if it disagrees with your own common sense.

Adapted from http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report.aspx?item=3

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ACTIVITY: EXAMINE THE MEDIA

This is a fun group activity that can be done with youth and adults of any age. It empowers the learners to become media critics and will build their skill to identify inappropriate media content.

Goal: To identify gender stereotypes in the media and examine their effects

Objectives:

* To analyze the portrayal of women and girls in the media
* To explore the relationship between these images and discrimination

Essential Question: How do gender stereotypes in the media impact society?

Materials:

* Markers and one large sheet of paper
* Various forms of media (books, magazines, newspapers) *computers to adapt for online and social media

ACTIVITY 1: MEDIA ANALYSIS

1. **Cut and Paste.** Explain to participants that their mission will be to research the portrayal of women and girls in the media. Use old magazines and newspapers and have participants cut out images of the women they see. Paste these cut-outs onto one large sheet of paper and have them use markers to write words associated with the images.

2. **Analyze**. Hang the paper up on a wall and look at all of the images as a whole. As a large group, discuss the following questions for the material they are working with:
* Who do you think these ads are aimed at? A male or female audience? Why?
* What activities are the women in the images engaged in? How does this impact the image of women?
* How are men portrayed and how does this further affect gender stereotypes?
* What are the conventions of female beauty that the ads embody?
* How might these ads be different if they came from a different culture?

ACTIVITY 2: DEBRIEF

1. **Read.** Have everyone read the article "Media and Girls" from the Media Awareness Network found on the reverse side of this sheet.

2. **Discuss.** In small groups, discuss the following questions: How do the images collected in the first activity affect women's lives? How do they affect their ideas about how they look; their desire for consumer products; the sexual expectations placed on them; or any experiences they may have had with violence? Have the small groups brainstorm on what people can do to combat the negative images of women in the media and how they can persuade decision makers to present images that respect women's human rights? Each small group may want to record their responses to share with the larger group in the next step.

ACTIVITY 3: TAKE ACTION

1. **Share.** As a large group, have each small group share their ideas. On a whiteboard or flipchart make a list of all the groups' ideas.

2. **Prepare to Act.** In the large group, choose one or two ideas and develop plans to put them into action.

3. **Commit.** After developing a plan of action, ask each person to name one thing they will do after the workshop.

Adapted from: Local Action, Global Change: A Handbook on Women's Rights, Chapter 8, Exercise 6.

Media and Girls

"They have ads of how you should dress and what you should look like and this and that, and then they say, 'but respect people for what they choose to be like.' Okay, so which do we do first?"
Kelsey, 16, quoted in Girl Talk

The statistics are startling. The average North American girl will watch 5,000 hours of television, including 80,000 ads, before she starts kindergarten. In the United States, Saturday morning cartoons alone come with 33 commercials per hour. Commercials aimed at kids spend 55 percent of their time showing boys building, fixing toys, or fighting. They show girls, on the other hand, spending 77 percent of their time laughing, talking, or observing others. And while boys in commercials are shown out of the house 85 percent of the time, more than half of the commercials featuring girls place them in the home.

You've Come A Long Way, Baby?

The mass media, especially children's television, provide more positive role models for girls than ever before. Kids shows such as Timothy Goes to School, Canadian Geographic for Kids, and The Magic School Bus feature strong female characters who interact with their male counterparts on an equal footing.

There are strong role models for teens as well. A Children Now study of the media favoured by teenage girls discovered that a similar proportion of male and female characters on TV and in the movies rely on themselves to achieve their goals and solve their own problems. (The one discrepancy was in the movies, where 49 percent of male characters solve their own problems, compared to only 35 percent of their female counterparts.) Television shows like Buffy, the Vampire Slayer and computer games such as Tomb Raider and Perfect Dark, star girls who are physically assertive and in control. And of course, Lisa has been acknowledged as the brains of the Simpson family since the start.

Despite the progress that has been made there is a long way to go, both in the quantity of media representations of woman and in their quality.

In terms of quantity, the media is still a long way from reflecting reality: women represent 49 percent of humanity while female characters make up only 32 percent of the main characters on TV, as shown by a broad survey done in 2008 by Doctor Maya Götz of the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television. This study measured the representation of male and female characters in nearly twenty thousand children's programs in 24 different countries. The media industry justifies this disparity by arguing that it is easier for girls than boys to identify with characters of the opposite sex. Götz argues that this argument reverses cause and effect, saying that [...] the lack of female characters on TV is what leads to the higher popularity of male characters.

So far as quality is concerned, the media still conform to a stereotyped image of women. Götz's study identifies a number of sexual stereotypes found around the world: in general, girls and women are motivated by love and romance, appear less independent than boys, and are stereotyped according to their hair colour – blonds fall into two categories, the "girl next door" or the "blonde bitch," while redheads are always tomboys. [T]hey are nearly always conventionally attractive, thinner than average women in real life, and heavily sexualized.

Magazines are the only medium where girls are over-represented. However, almost 70 percent of the editorial content in teen mags focuses on beauty and fashion, and only 12 percent talks about school or careers.

Media, Self-Esteem, and Girls' Identities

Research indicates that these mixed messages make it difficult for girls to negotiate the transition to adulthood. In its 1998 study Focus on Youth, the Canadian Council on Social Development reports that while the number of boys who say they "have confidence in themselves" remains relatively stable through adolescence, the numbers for girls drop steadily from 72 percent in Grade Six students to only 55 percent in Grade Ten.

Carol Gilligan was the first to highlight this unsettling trend in her landmark 1988 study. Gilligan suggests it happens because of the widening gap between girls' self-images and society's messages about what girls should be like.

Children Now points out that girls are surrounded by images of female beauty that are unrealistic and unattainable. And yet two out of three girls who participated in their national media survey said they "wanted to look like a character on TV." One out of three said they had "changed something about their appearance to resemble that character."

In 2002, researchers at Flinders University in South Australia studied 400 teenagers regarding how they relate to advertising. They found that girls who watched TV commercials featuring underweight models lost self-confidence and became more dissatisfied with their own bodies. Girls who spent the most time and effort on their appearance suffered the greatest loss in confidence.

Eroticization of Young Girls

Under-represented, women are [also] misrepresented: the hypersexualization of very young girls, most notably in fashion and advertising, is a disturbing trend given that these stereotypes make up most of the representations of themselves which girls and women see in the media. The pressures on girls are exacerbated by the media's increasing tendency to portray very young girls in sexual ways. Over the past decade, the fashion industry has begun to use younger and younger models, and now commonly presents 12- and 13-year-old girls as if they were women. Camera angles (where the model is often looking up, presumably at a taller man), averted eyes, wounded facial expressions, and vulnerable poses mimic the visual images common in pornographic media.

Anthropologist David Murray warns that, "Our culture is to a large extent experimenting with eroticizing the child." For Murray, the media frenzy around teeny-bopper pop star Britney Spears and murdered 6-year-old JonBenet Ramsey are examples of how this eroticization is being turned into a highly saleable commodity.

The most cursory examination of media confirms that young girls are being bombarded with images of sexuality, often dominated by stereotypical portrayals of women and girls as powerless, passive victims.

As these girls become teenagers, many choose to tune out, but others maintain a hungry appetite for these messages. As Shawn Doherty and Nadine Joseph note, those who continue to consume media images are strongly influenced "by stereotypical images of uniformly beautiful, obsessively thin and scantily dressed objects of male desire. And studies show that girls who are frequent viewers have the most negative opinion of their gender."