

The Sexualization of Childhood

Introduction: “Growing Older Younger/Growing Younger Older”

Sharna Olfman

A few decades ago, in the United States, childhood was understood to be a unique and vulnerable stage of development; a time for play and protection from adult preoccupations and responsibilities. In recent decades however, we appear to have jettisoned these norms, and the lines that separate the lifestyles of even very young children from adults are blurring. In today's world, children dress like miniature adults, and creative outdoor play is being replaced by media entertainment that is saturated with sex, violence and gender stereotyping. Internet pornography is easily and routinely accessed by preteen boys, and pornographic depictions of women and girls have been glamorized, mainstreamed and marketed to children through dolls, clothing lines, video games, comic books, music, magazines, television and movies.

A sexualized society places *all* children at risk for internalizing impoverished models of gender, and human relationships. Girls are vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse in a culture that depicts females as objects for male pleasure. According to the landmark 2007 report by the American Psychological Association (APA) task force on the sexualization of girls, girls who are sexualized are more prone to eating disorders, depression, low self-esteem, impaired concentration, risky sexual behaviors, and unsatisfying sexual relations when they are older. Boys are also victims; they risk losing a piece of their humanity when they are flooded with images – through video games, film, TV and online pornography – of sexually brutalized women whose sole function is to pleasure men. But the children who are most harmed by a sexualized culture, are those who are already at risk because they are growing up with poverty or abuse. When the culture desensitizes us to the idea that having sex with children is a violent, immoral act, then child sexual abuse through prostitution and pornography rises, and children who are already living marginalized lives are most likely to be targeted.

Another way in which girls are being sexualized, is that they are entering puberty at increasingly younger ages, partly as a result of exposures to endocrine disrupting toxins which are flooding our environment because of lax environmental protection laws. It is no longer rare for girls as young as eight and nine years of age to have begun breast development, and their physical precociousness makes them even more vulnerable to the intense societal pressures to “grow older younger”.

Psychosexual Development Begins at Birth

Throughout this volume, the phrase “sexualization of childhood” will refer to *derailed* psychosexual and gender development as a consequence of cultural values, beliefs, norms and practices that

- teach girls that their primary worth is in their ability to be sexual objects for male pleasure,

- teach boys that sex and violence are conjoined and that girls and women should be valued primarily for their ability to give them sexual pleasure,
- isolate sexuality from personhood, and the capacity for emotionally intimate and committed relationships,
- treat children as if they are sexually mature because of the outward trappings of wardrobe, make-up or precocious puberty,
- allow corporations to use materials or methods of production that release endocrine disrupting chemicals which contribute to early puberty.

While “sexualization” is by definition an unhealthy process, children nonetheless begin the journey towards sexual maturity at the very start of life. Healthy psychosexual development needs to be acknowledged, supported, and clearly demarcated from sexualization. When we deny children access to meaningful education about their burgeoning sexual development, then we give them no choice but to glean what they can through a highly sexualized media.

Psychosexual development begins from the moment that the newborn experiences the sensual pleasure and feeling of “rightness” when she is held in her parents’ arms. During infancy, through the repeated experience of her parents’ timely and tender responsiveness to her myriad needs, she will acquire the capacity to love and be loved, a process which the famed British psychiatrist John Bowlby termed “attachment”. Attachment between infant and caregiver teaches children about the power and pleasure of committed, and loving relationships. When a child travels through toddlerhood, early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence, enveloped by a supportive family, community and culture she will develop autonomy, creativity, industry, and a sense of identity, and she will mature intellectually, socially, emotionally and morally. She will then have the capacity to enter into an intimate relationship with another person who is drawn to her intellect, personality, values, interests, and passions, and sexual intimacy becomes part of the tapestry that they weave together.

When I observe a young child who is being treated abusively by a parent – who only seems to know how to communicate by barking commands, finding fault, and asserting control by threatening violence – I see fear in the child’s eyes, that is almost too painful to bare witness to, and at the same time, a yearning, a holding out of hope for a gesture of tenderness and a sign of love from her abuser. If this child does not find escape from her abusive parent, or an alternative source of affirmation, she may very well grow up – her heart hardened against love – to be similarly abusive to her own children. Likewise, when I witness a little girl who is sexualized – dressed in a belly shirt, with a provocative phrase written across the backside of her shorts, lips glossed, hair streaked, her playful, curious nature is palpable, just beneath the surface. But when girls and boys are not rescued from these sole destroying scripts, they may become 15 years hence, a young woman with damaged self-esteem and an eating disorder, or a young man who cannot experience sexual pleasure with a woman whose body is not surgically altered to reflect the pornographic images that he has been compulsively downloading since he was 10 years old.

The APA report on the Sexualization of Girls noted a glaring absence of research on the impact of our sexualized culture on children. *The Sexualization of Childhood* brings together the expertise of leading authorities on gender and sexual development, and on the subjects of sexual abuse, pornography and child prostitution to investigate the impact on children's health and welfare of growing up in a sexualized culture, and the ways in which parents, mental health professionals, educators and policy makers can intervene effectively.

This book addresses:

- How boys' and girls' gender and sexual development is impacted by our sexualized culture
- The exploitation of black adolescent girls through rap music and hip hop culture
- The dramatic rise in the production and consumption of child pornography
- Sexual exploitation of children through internet crimes and prostitution
- The falling age of puberty in girls as a result of toxic chemical exposures
- How parents, academics, professionals, and policy makers can make a difference