

Sexualization of Young Children Linked to Eating Disorder Development

As early exposure to themes of sex becomes the norm, children of younger ages are expressing discontent with their physical appearance. Results from a recent survey suggest that children rank body image among the highest of their concerns, above both self-confidence and social life. Recent research also suggests that nearly 50% of females between ages 11 and 16 would consider cosmetic surgery to improve their appearance.

These findings have striking implications about the factors comprising young children's self-image and esteem. Eating disorders are now presenting in children as, with dieting becoming more common among those under the age of 10.

Such ardent focus on physical appearance also comes in response to overly sexualized messages from the media. Stars considered favorites among youth (i.e. Miley Cyrus and Vanessa Hudgens) have received much press for exploiting their bodies on stage or through images leaked on the Internet.

The media also speaks to the import of sexuality and attractiveness among youth through TV shows such as "Toddlers and Tiaras." In one episode, 6-year-old beauty pageant star, Eden Wood, can be seen on stage gyrating her pelvis like a professional stripper during the "talent" portion

of the pageant. The message that it is important to be sexy is clear, even if you still have your baby teeth!

Actress Gina Davis, is engaging law makers like Sen. Kay Hagan, D–N.C., and Rep. Tammy Baldwin, D–Wisc., to support a bill called the [“Healthy Media for Youth Act.”](#) Ms. Davis believes that the more hours of television a girl watches the fewer options she believes she has in her life. “Of the female characters that were there, the vast majority ... was either highly stereotyped or were serving mainly as eye candy. So the concern was clear, what message does this send to young children about the value of girls?” Ms. Davis said.

Girls, more often than boys, receive the message at an early age that in order to be valued, they must look attractive. Attractiveness in our culture requires one to be thin and to appear sexy. This form of validation is externally driven, which leads young girls to believe that their value lies in the judgments of “others.” Their internal sense of self is not developed adequately, which in many cases, leads to the eating disorder behaviors.

As a psychotherapist specializing in the treatment of eating disorders, I am often asked what motivates me to treat this often misunderstood and life threatening disorder. My goal is to help teenagers and young women navigate their way through our culture, which, I believe, diminishes the value of women and all of our gifts. We are bombarded with images of unrealistic beauty. Often we are taught to value the

feelings and needs of others before our own, restricting our voices and distilling our spirits into a pretty package. I envision a world where women feel joyful about living their lives knowing their beauty and power lies within them.

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