

So Sexy So Soon

by

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Introduction

Changing Times, Changing Needs, Changing Responses

A four-year-old girl, in the dramatic play area of her preschool, begins swaying her hips and singing, “Baby, I’m your slave. I’ll let you whip me if I misbehave.” When her teacher goes over to talk to her about it, she volunteers that she learned the song from her eight-year-old sister. After doing a bit of research, the teacher discovers that the words are from a highly popular Justin Timberlake song.

Halloween costumes for young girls are so suggestive and risqué these days that Newsweek runs a story titled “Eye Candy: Little Girls’ Halloween Costumes Are Looking More Like They Were Designed by Victoria’s Secret Every Year. Are We Prudes or Is This Practically Kiddie Porn?”

A six-year-old casually asks at dinner, “What’s a blow job?” Before his parents can respond, his ten-year-old sister knowingly screeches, “Oh my God, I can’t believe he asked that!”

An eight-year-old boy comes home and reports to his father that he didn’t know what to do when his friend showed him pornography on the Internet during a playdate at the friend’s house.

Five students are suspended from their elementary school for sexual harassment stemming from an incident on a school bus that involved lewd language and touching. Some of the students said they were playing “the rape game.”

A furor erupts at a bar mitzvah when two girls are caught performing oral sex on the thirteen-year-old bar mitzvah boy in a ladies’ room stall.

Children as young as four learning to gyrate to songs in ways that might have stunned grown-ups a few decades ago. Elementary school children looking at pornography on the Internet and using words such as “rape” and “blow job.” Young teens engaging in oral sex. Parents, grandparents, and teachers around the country and beyond tell us stories like these all the time—about how issues related to sex and sexuality come up in unexpected and even shocking ways with children, often at very young ages.

What’s going on? Where does such behavior come from? What does it mean to and for children—and for the adults who care for them? Is it different from children’s sexual behavior in the past, and if so, how? What are the implications for children’s short- and long-term sexual development and behavior? And how should parents respond? This book will help you answer these pressing and vital questions and more.

WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?

Children growing up today are bombarded from a very early age with graphic messages about sex and sexiness in the media and popular culture. For instance, younger children have Bratz dolls, which surpassed the sales of Barbie dolls in 2006, and *Star Wars* action figures, which experience an explosion of sales of highly realistic violent toys every time a movie is released. As children get a little older there is the *Manhunt II* video game, an extremely violent game that created a firestorm of protest upon its release for not carrying an A (Adult) rating that would have kept it from the hands of children and youth, and Victoria’s Secret thong panties for tweens (eight- to twelve-year-olds) and teens.

Many industries make an obscene amount of money using sex and violence to market their products to children. Whatever their race, ethnic group, economic status, or gender, and whether they can afford to buy a lot or very few of these products, children are deeply affected. We have heard scores of stories, such as the ones above, about children who are learning to look and act in ways that disturb and even shock many adults. But these children are acting in ways that make perfect sense given the sexualized environment that surrounds them.

We are deeply worried. Children are paying an enormous price for the sexualization of their childhood. Girls and boys constantly encounter sexual messages and images that they cannot understand and that can confuse and even frighten them. Gender roles modeled for children have become increasingly polarized and rigid. A narrow definition of femininity and sexuality encourages girls to focus heavily on appearance and sex appeal. They learn at a very young age that their value is determined by how beautiful, thin, “hot,” and sexy they are. And boys, who get a very narrow definition of masculinity that promotes insensitivity and macho behavior, are taught to judge girls based on how close they come to an artificial, impossible, and shallow ideal.

Both boys and girls are routinely exposed to images of sexual behavior devoid of emotions, attachment, or consequences. They learn that sex is the defining activity in relationships, to the exclusion of love and friendship. They learn that sex is often linked to violence. And they learn to associate physical appearance and buying the right products not only with being sexy but also with being successful as a person. Such lessons will shape their gender identity, sexual attitudes, and values, and their capacity for relationships,

for love and connection, that they take into adulthood. While they struggle to make sense of all this, children are robbed of valuable time for age-appropriate developmental tasks, and they may begin to engage in precocious sexual behavior.

Children encounter these issues at much younger ages than in the past, long before they have the ability to understand or deal with them. One particularly heart-wrenching story recounted by the mother of a fourth-grade boy illustrates the kind of pain and suffering such messages can cause children (and their parents):

My son has gotten three love letters from one little girl. He showed them to me and I could cry for this girl. She says, “I know I am not the prettiest girl or the thinnest girl but I love you and I just want you to love me.” The rest of this letter is very grown up, about things they could do if they were boyfriend and girlfriend—which I don’t feel I can share. But suffice it to say that they’re ideas a nine-year-old never would have come up with even a few years ago. I’ve been in touch with the girl’s mother, who is having a really hard time. I thought this must be an isolated event, a problem with this particular girl, but my son tells me that there are “couples” in the fourth grade. What is going on!?! These letters are very recent and I am just beginning to unravel the issue with the school and other parents and children, who are just children for goodness’ sakes!

The fourth-grade girl who wrote this letter is struggling with her inability to meet the *standard*. She has learned to talk about herself as if she were an object, judged solely by her looks. She has learned to be grown up beyond her years and to yearn for a romantic relationship with a boy. He, as many boys his age do, has to figure out how to deal with the sexy and provocative behavior of many of the girls in his life. The boy in the story above was fortunate to have a trusting relationship with his mother, so he could talk with her about his confusion. But in such a sexualized environment, how can we expect boys to learn how to have affectionate and caring relationships? Both girls and boys, but especially girls, are pushed into precocious sexuality in appearance and behavior long before they understand the deeper meaning of relationships or of the sexual behavior they’re imitating.

WHAT THE PROBLEM IS NOT

We are not alarmed that today’s children are learning about sex and sexuality. We are all sexual beings from birth, and this is to be celebrated. Children have always been curious about sex and sexuality from an early age, and it is good for parents and schools to give them honest and age-appropriate information. But what children are learning today isn’t normal or good for them. We are alarmed by the particular lessons that children are learning. The sexualization of childhood is having a profoundly disturbing impact on children’s understanding of gender, sexuality, and relationships.

WHAT'S NORMAL?

We want to be clear that sexualization is not the same as sexuality or sex. According to the *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* published by the American Psychological Association in 2007, sexualization has to do with treating other people (and sometimes oneself) as “objects of sexual desire . . . as things rather than as people with legitimate sexual feelings of their own.” When people are sexualized, their value comes primarily from their sex appeal, which is equated with physical attractiveness. This is especially damaging and “problematic to children and adolescents who are developing their sense of themselves as sexual beings.”

It is totally normal for children to go through a gradual process of coming to understand sex and sexuality, caring relationships, and intimacy, a process we pay close attention to in Chapter 3. When children are young, long before they can fully understand the meaning of sex and sexual relationships, the foundation is being laid for the kind of sexual relationships they will have when they grow up. It is built from their experiences, of course, both positive and negative. It encompasses the full range of these experiences, not just those that are directly about sex and sexuality. In fact, the first experiences that lay the foundation for positive ideas and values and emotions about sex aren't related to sex at all.

Ideally, children have direct personal experience being in and witnessing caring and affectionate relationships with family and friends. Ideally, they are nurtured by supportive and trusted adults, who are able and willing to answer questions and clear up confusion about issues such as the physical differences between males and females and the basics of making babies. These days, children also need to be able to talk with trusted adults about the relationships and sexual images that they see in the media and in the popular culture. *So Sexy So Soon* will give you lots of help in understanding how children process what they see, and ideas about how to have these conversations.

When children have many such opportunities, they progress much more successfully than they otherwise would. They are better able to cope with the inevitable stresses and strains of life. Over time, all this early learning helps them eventually become ready and able to establish a meaningful and intimate emotional and sexual relationship with a partner.

WHAT ISN'T NORMAL?

Sadly, today, instead of having the positive experiences they need for healthy development, many children are having experiences that undermine it. Today's cultural environment bombards children with inappropriate and harmful messages. As children struggle to understand what they see and hear, they learn lessons that can frighten and confuse them.

These lessons can seriously harm their ability to grow up to have healthy attitudes about themselves and their bodies and to have caring relationships in which sex is an important part. In the most extreme cases, the media's incessant sexualization of childhood can contribute to pathological sexual behavior, including sexual abuse, pedophilia, and prostitution. A 2003 *Newsweek* story on the rapid rise in teen prostitution in the United States reported that girls as young as nine are becoming involved. The majority

of these girls are runaways or “throwaways,” exploited by men who take advantage of their vulnerability and desperation.

Child sexual abuse occurs at an alarming rate. According to the most reliable studies, as many as one in three girls and one in seven boys will be sexually abused at some point during their childhood. Almost 90 percent of the time, the abuser is someone known, and often loved and trusted, by the child. Many abusers convince themselves that the child is “asking for it” and enjoys it. The sexualization of childhood encourages these dangerous attitudes and makes it seem normal to look upon children as sex objects. While child sexual abuse is beyond the scope of this book, the sexualized climate we describe most likely contributes to it.

When sex in the media is talked about, it is often criticized from a puritanical perspective—there’s too much of it, it’s too blatant, it will encourage kids to be promiscuous. But sex in commercial culture has far more to do with trivializing and objectifying sex than with promoting it, more to do with consuming than with connecting. The problem is not that sex as portrayed in the media is sinful, but that it is synthetic and cynical. The exploitation of our children’s sexuality is in many ways designed to promote consumerism, not just in childhood but throughout their lives.

Until recently, the sexualization of childhood and its impact on children has primarily been the focus of the Christian right. This group generally uses moralistic arguments to condemn the current social climate and to insist that abstinence-only sex education will solve the problem. The issue has been largely ignored by the wider society because many adults have become desensitized or feel ill prepared to deal with it. Even the best-intentioned and best-prepared parents often feel helpless to protect their children from the onslaught.

In the past couple of years, this denial and avoidance have begun to change. For example, the *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* mentioned earlier led to significant attention to the issue by the media when it was released in February 2007. This is heartening, but we still have a very long way to go. The focus of public concern so far is primarily on adolescence, not on early childhood. But early childhood is when the foundation is laid, and that is where we need to start our efforts to understand and respond. Almost all of the attention that has been given to this issue focuses on girls. Girls suffer more overtly and perhaps more deeply, but boys suffer too. And boys raised in a sexualized culture often become men who are unsatisfying and sometimes even dangerous partners for women. No discussion of how to protect children from sexualized childhood would be complete without discussing how to meet the needs of boys. And finally, we want to acknowledge that while there is not necessarily a great disparity in rich and poor children’s exposure to the sexualized environment, the huge economic disparities in today’s society can have a profound impact on how they participate in it.

A SHARED JOURNEY

The seeds for writing this book began at the Feminist Expo 2000 in Baltimore, Maryland. That was the first time the two of us worked together professionally. We gave a presentation on the challenges and dangers of raising children in today’s gender-biased world. At our session, Diane mapped out the extreme

gender divisions, stereotypes, and increasing violence and sexualization that saturate marketing and media directed at children. She argued that these stereotypes and media messages limit opportunities for children to develop as whole people and undermine the very foundation necessary for children to actualize their full potential and to value and respect themselves and others. Jean then illustrated how these images and marketing messages aimed at younger children gradually evolve into the images and messages prevalent in the tween and teen popular culture. She showed how the harmful lessons learned by the younger children often lead to serious problems in later years, such as increasing objectification of women (by both women and men), eating disorders and depression, and even sexual violence. By the time Jean was done, there was a lot of distress in the room.

When we spoke in Baltimore, we both had already spent decades studying, teaching, and speaking publicly to students, parents, and professionals in many fields about how media and commercial culture affect children's and adolescents' development. Diane's work had always focused on preschool and elementary children. In the mid-1970s she taught a course on sexism in education, which focused on how sexism in society limits the potential of both girls and boys and what schools can do about it. Jean began examining the image of women in advertising in the late 1960s. Around the same time that Diane taught her course, Jean made the first version of her highly acclaimed film *Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women* and launched her career as a lecturer on this and related topics.

We had worked for years to promote the optimal development of both girls and boys. But Jean had not known very much about the foundation being laid in childhood and the extreme measures used by marketers to exploit children. Diane had not focused on what happened to children as they entered adolescence and then adulthood. We were educated and fascinated by each other's work and saw the power that came from putting the pieces together.

A few years later, as our concern about what we saw happening to children and teenagers all around us deepened, we decided to do some work together. We began talking with parents (and teachers) about how the experiences they were having with children related to sexualized childhood. When word got out that we were collecting these stories, many parents with stories to share contacted us. These parents were struggling to raise their children in a toxic cultural environment. They were upset. They were outraged. They wanted reassurance, and above all they wanted help.

As our story collection grew and we met more and more parents desperate for information, we knew that we had to write this book. However, after talking to parents and working on the book together for over a year, we realized that the focus should be on early childhood. Increasingly, this is when the problems of the new sexualized childhood begin. And there are far fewer resources available to help the parents of younger children deal with this than there are for the parents of older children. At this point, Diane became the lead author, with primary responsibility for the material dealing with young children, and Jean took primary responsibility for the material dealing with tweens and adolescents.

HELP IS ON THE WAY!

We wrote *So Sexy So Soon* because children desperately need your help and we want to help you give it to them. Most parents know something is terribly wrong. But it isn't easy to connect all the dots between the experiences you are having with your children and what is going on in the culture, never mind figuring out what to do about it once you make the connections. This book will connect the dots. As you read, you will develop a lens that will help you see more clearly how the graphic sexual messages that permeate the lives of your children—both girls and boys—are harming them in ways that go far beyond what they're learning about sex. Once you have that lens, we'll show you how it can help you find ways to protect your children. You will also see that you are not alone! Parents and professionals everywhere are struggling to deal with this new sexualized environment and often feel confused about how best to respond.

The primary focus of *So Sexy So Soon* is on children, girls and boys, from preschool through the tween years. This is when the foundation is laid for later sexual behavior and relationships. This is when you can make the biggest difference in reducing the negative impact of the sexualization of childhood on your children. We also show you how what you do in the early years paves the way for staying connected with your children when the stakes get higher in adolescence.

It's important to acknowledge that there are variations in how children are affected by today's sexualized childhood—based on their gender and their racial, cultural, and socioeconomic group as well as their individual disposition. And children's marketers actually use sophisticated techniques to target different demographic groups. We wish we had enough space to go into all these variations in this book, but we don't. Nonetheless, *So Sexy So Soon* is relevant for all children, because the ways in which kids internalize the messages are very much the same, and no child growing up today can fully escape today's sexualized environment.

We want to make you a promise. It's not fair that your job is made so much harder than it needs to be by the sexualized media and commercial culture. Society should support you in your efforts rather than set up roadblocks at every turn. If society supported parents in their job, we wouldn't need to write this book. Too often you, the parents, are told that the problem of sexualized childhood is your fault: If you were doing your job right and could just learn to say no, then there wouldn't be a problem. Casting blame on parents is a smoke screen that diverts attention from where the blame rightfully belongs—squarely on the shoulders of the purveyors of these media and marketing messages, those who exploit our children's developmental vulnerabilities by using sex to make huge profits.

We promise to keep the blame squarely where it belongs. Without promising that *So Sexy So Soon* will help you solve all the problems you and your children face, we will help you find many ways you can make life a whole lot better for your children (and for you) than it otherwise might be. And while we will help you banish many of the evils that the sexualized childhood creates in your children's lives, we will not ask you to banish all of them. Rather, we will show you how to work with the evils that do get in and transform them into positive lessons for your children. We will show you how to help your children expand their horizons in ways that respect who they are as individuals.

Finally, we apologize in advance for how distressing you may find the first part of this book. Today's sexualized childhood *is* very distressing, there's no way around that. We believe that understanding and

action are the best antidotes to the alarm this content will cause. Using the understanding you develop, you will learn what you can do to take action to make a difference in your children's lives, perhaps even in the lives of all children. We will show you in detail how to do this in the second part of the book. Protecting and building resilience in your children will not be easy. But it is our goal that by the time you have finished reading *So Sexy So Soon*, you will feel empowered by having the knowledge and skills you need to effectively and caringly help your children navigate the sexualized minefields of our culture. You will feel prepared to help your children grow up sexually healthy and whole— to survive and thrive, even in today's sexualized world.