

Dealing with the Impact of Today's Sexualized Childhood on Young Children

Four-year-old Emma arrives at school and starts crying when she realizes her lunch is packed in a generic plastic bag, not the usual princess lunchbox she so loves. Emma tells her teacher, "I won't be able to sit at the princess lunch table. It's only for girls with princess lunchboxes."

Preschool boys and girls are walking around outside holding hands. A teacher asks what they are playing. A boy excitedly replies, "They're our girlfriends. We're on a date!" The teacher observes that the girls are wearing skimpy clothes in a style often worn by preteens and teens.

After 5-year-old Jenna has a "High School Musical" birthday party over the weekend, all the girls begin imitating sexy dance moves in the dramatic play area and at outdoor time. The teacher decides that at the start of the next year, she will write a parent newsletter suggesting age-appropriate ways to respond to children's interests at birthday parties.



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What's going on?

These are just a few examples of how preschoolers are bringing today's sexualized childhood into their programs. They illustrate how

- some children's sense of self and their relationships with others are based not on who they are and what they can do, but on having the "right" objects, including items stereotypically identified with one gender.
- instead of engaging in creative and imaginative play, preschoolers imitate the behavior of older children or media characters, such as going on dates and dancing provocatively.
- traditional childhood celebrations, like birthday parties, are being replaced by commercialized, prepackaged events that are often linked to TV shows and movies that feature highly sexualized behavior.

In addition to sharing ideas from this article with families, sign and make copies of the Message in a Backpack on page 11 to send home. It's available online (in English and Spanish) at naeyc.org/tyc.

Today even preschoolers are exposed to images of sexualized behavior in popular culture. On television, in videos, and at the mall, preschoolers see celebrities and cartoon characters wearing short skirts and belly-button-exposing shirts. And they see wedge-heeled shoes and make-up kits designed for preschoolers. Although they cannot fully understand what they see and hear, from a very young age children try to figure it out. As they do, sexualized images and content influence how they think about their bodies and being male or female. This content affects what they want to be, do, and wear. It can confuse young children's ideas about the nature of relationships and promote precocious sexuality (Chrisman & Couchenour 2002; Levin & Kilbourne 2008).

Teachers should not be surprised when children bring the sexualized content they have seen and heard into the classroom—for instance, girls focusing on doing sexy dances like they see on TV or wearing skimpy or tight clothes that inhibit their physical activity. But too often when these issues come up, adults are unsure about how to respond.

What's a teacher to do?

Here are some suggestions that early childhood programs have found effective in counteracting the harm being caused by today's sexualized childhood:

Protect children as much as possible from exposure to sexualized media and products. Often this means helping families to

- make good decisions about the media and toys in their children's lives (as when the teacher sends home a newsletter about age-appropriate birthday parties at the beginning of the year).
- create rules and routines about age-appropriate media—which TV shows, movies, Web sites, and video games children watch or use. Home life is less stressful and parents retain better control of their children's access to the media.
- set guidelines for when and how preschoolers take part in shopping (see Levin 1998). When children know what will happen and when, they are less likely to nag their parents.

Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment (TRUCE) prepares materials to help teachers and families implement these suggestions and others in the article (www.truceteachers.org).

Help children make sense of what they see and influence children's learning and behavior.

Children need a safe place to process what they see and hear in a sexualized media culture. Preschool teachers can create an environment in which children can make sense of their world. If you observe situations like the three scenes described on page 8, let the children know you're interested

SUPPORTING DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Establishing rapport with families who speak other languages will go a long way toward building a mutual plan for reducing premature sexualization among preschoolers. Families who don't speak English are often left out of these discussions, but they need to have the same information as other parents. While you may not be able to change the TV shows, movies, or games that any family favors at home, you can explain the role you plan to take in the program and the community to stem the tide of early sexualization. Focus on modeling appropriate behaviors and setting up an appropriate environment so all children will understand what behaviors are expected and accepted, even if they are not ready to understand a full explanation in English.

in what they are doing. Try to find out what they think and feel.

For instance, if children pretend to go on dates, try asking, What do you know about dates? How do you decide who your date will be? What do you do when you're on a date? What happens if you don't have a date? How old do you have to be to go on a date? From such conversations, children learn they can talk to you without being embarrassed, ridiculed, or punished. Teachers can provide information that clears up misconceptions and make comments that influence children's thinking like, "It's nice having a boy (or girl) who's a friend when you're young, but only older boys and girls go on dates."

Help all children develop a broad range of interests, skills, and behaviors that get beyond gender stereotypes. Provide and read aloud books in which male and female characters have a wide range of

experiences and emotions—girls can be strong and confident and boys can be thoughtful and sensitive. Plan activities that encourage boys and girls to play together as peers.

In one class where girls were obsessed with being princesses, the teacher created a curriculum project with the theme Princesses and Princes. They read books about competent and strong princesses and princes from many cultures, turned the dramatic play area into a castle, made crowns and swords out of cardboard and foil, and had a royal banquet where families contributed favorite food dishes from their home cultures. A project like this also helps children become more creative players, using toys and props in more open-ended rather than scripted ways.

You can also develop new classroom strategies to deal with issues that arise. For instance, after Emma's distress over not having her princess lunchbox, the teacher changed the procedure for children choosing their

lunch tables. The following year, she encouraged parents to buy lunchboxes that were not linked to popular media programs. Remember, it will be easier to develop responses if you are familiar with what children are seeing on the screen and the current fads capturing their attention.

Work in large and small ways at all levels to create a society that supports children's healthy social, emotional, and sexual development. Create a program culture in which the whole parent community works together—for example, through casual conversations, newsletters, and parent evenings. Make phone calls, talk to store managers, and write letters to explain the harm caused by highly sexualized products that are directed at young children. Advocate for public policies that better protect children from a sexualized childhood. The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (www.commercialfreechildhood.org) can help you do this.

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