



The Watchful Eye

Newsletter of the Sexualization of Youth Project

Montgomery County (MD) NOW



Evidence Even a Skeptic Might Embrace

By Mary Bailey

Is there objective, scientific proof that being sexualized by the media harms the young? One side of the argument claims it seriously affects their development, while the other remains skeptical. On our part, we have reported studies “proving” harm which we believe to be reasonable and accurate; but we also realize those studies were conducted on a small scale and await replication. Other research has passed the test of time and merits wider recognition. Below are summaries of three such reports we’ve covered at greater length in earlier issues, one each from the social sciences, statistical analysis, and neuroscience:

Sexualized girls¹

The American Psychological Association’s 2007 report, “The Sexualization of Girls,” was the initial inspiration for our Sexualization of Youth Project. It summarized a large number (approximately 430) of “the best psychological theory, research, and clinical experiences” available on the cultural sexualization of girls. Sexualization, the APA said, involves valuing girls solely on appearance, equating their physical attractiveness with sexiness, making them into things for others’ sexual use, and inappropriately imposing sexuality upon them. And the engines of sexualization, it said, are the current culture, a girl’s family, teachers and peers, and even the girl herself in a process of identification called “self-sexualization.”

As a result, the APA found, sexualizing girls in their formative years limits their future options by sidetracking their interest in schoolwork and affects their health by discouraging involvement in sports. Most tragic of all, being sexualized interferes with a major task of adolescence – girls’ ability to develop their own identities.

Social scientists rely heavily on correlation, demographics, and case studies. But even when their findings are as compelling as are those of the APA, skeptics may dismiss such research under the rubric “correlation is not causation” and consider case studies anecdotal and “soft.” What these skeptics demand is absolute proof that our culture seriously sexualizes young people and affects their behavior. But absolute proof is a standard difficult to reach when addressing a problem as complex as cultural sexualization, as scientists warning of climate change or depleting natural resources know full well.

Desensitized soldiers²

Skeptics may more readily accept statistical evidence that cultural pressure can dramatically change behavior, especially if compiled by such a non-soft institution as the U.S. Army. When the military finds that programs of desensitization can undermine a person’s sense of right and wrong, that’s worth paying attention to. In “How We Decide,” Jonah Lehrer describes a series of inquiries into young soldiers’ moral emotions under wartime conditions. Based on the research of Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall, Lehrer relates that during World War II less than 20 percent of the thousands of soldiers surveyed right after they’d been in combat had shot at the enemy. “At the most vital point of battle,” Marshall reported, “the soldier becomes a conscientious objector.”

In alarm, the Army began training its recruits in simulated killing, drilling them until they were desensitized to the act and able to shoot instantly and reflexively. So, by the time of the Korean War, 55 percent of combat soldiers were firing their weapons. Later still, in Vietnam, the figure of those who automatically fired at the enemy reached almost 90 percent. But what about today, I asked a man with a recent stint in the Army. Is this an accurate picture of military training? “That is quite fair,” he wrote back.

“In fact, my memory is that the drill to kill is intense. So intense that perhaps the intensity, rather than the passage of time, is the issue. Trainees are taught they are ‘already dead,’ thus eliminating fear of death, so they could fire their weapon effectively.”

Considering that a few weeks of training can undermine a young soldier’s moral misgivings about killing others, think what our mainstream culture’s ceaseless drumming of sexualizing messages is doing to young people. As the APA outlined, girls are being acculturated to view themselves primarily as sexual objects. However, I suspect that what our current culture is doing to boys is equally ominous, for boys are getting their sexual education straight from the “Internet” (shorthand for video games, cable movies, pornography, sexting, etc.) with little in the way of gate-keeping.

Mapped brains³

There will be skeptics who demand absolute certainty beyond even such outstanding numerical proof as General Marshall provides. They want hard, physical evidence that a steady diet of “Internet” sex meaningfully alters behavior. They want to know exactly how sexual saturation by the media or one’s peers can biologically shape a youth’s attitude and behavior. Brain-scanning offers the kind of evidence that skeptics have long demanded. In the past 15 or 20 years, neuroscientists have been busy mapping the parts of the brain and tracing their functions and development. In the process they have come upon two totally unexpected findings:

One, the human brain doesn’t stop growing in childhood as believed, but continues to develop until age 25 or so when the newest part of the brain -- the prefrontal cortex, the center of judgment and self-regulation -- finishes maturing. This means that girls and boys are being steeped in sexual imagery long before they reach the stage where they can handle it. For girls, the encounter is largely through advertising, entertainment, and fashion magazines, where women and girls are presented as glamorous sex objects. Such blandishments are hard to resist, especially for those under 30 who have never known anything else.

And two, the brain is “plastic,” meaning it continues to rewire itself based on what a person thinks and does. Take, for example, the boy who practices pitching a baseball, giving it his repeated and focused attention so that all other distractions disappear. The areas of his brain that control ball-throwing will enlarge and his pitching will become more proficient. Even if the boy only *imagines* pitching the ball, but does it often and seriously enough, his brain will be affected as though he were actually executing a pitch. Now, shifting gears, consider the situation of the adolescent boy who is giving his focused and repeated attention to the female-objectifying and frequently demeaning sex found on the “Internet.” Eventually such a practice will crowd out other, more romantic approaches to sex as his brain builds a sexual repertoire that may last a lifetime.

Not a just warning

So when we see teen and even younger girls wearing sexy clothes, hear of boys asking girls to behave like porn stars or hosting parties modeled on online porn games, and read that boys as young as eleven are getting their sexual education from the Internet, it’s time to realize that the above research may not be just a warning for the future but a description of what is already taking place. The disturbing truth is that our culture is close to accepting the modeling of objectified girls and predatory boys without fully considering the result. Let us not let our skeptical selves decide that nothing is going on here that’s worthy of our attention. As with climate change and diminishing resources, if we wait until the very last bit of evidence is confirmed, we may find that it comes too late.

¹ *apa.org*. Or, for a 7-page summary of the American Psychological Association report, go mcmdnow.org and click on “Sexualization articles.pmd”

² mcmdnow.org, scroll down to Selected Articles, then click on “Numbed to the Pain of Others”

³ mcmdnow.org, Selected Articles, “This is Our Brain in Adolescence”

“If we ask ourselves the questions, we can move toward the answers.”

-- Terry Tempest Williams