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# FROM ON

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY CHAPTER OF THE NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN

## The Sexualization of Girls American Psychological Association Report

BY MARY BAILEY  
FIRST IN A SERIES

**We've been reading accounts like these** for years now: Toy stores carry dolls wearing black leather miniskirts, thigh-high boots, and feather boas aimed at 8- to 12-year-old girls. Clothing stores sell thongs, some labeled "eye candy" or "wink wink" in sizes for 7- to 10-year-old girls. Child beauty pageants encourage 5-year-old girls wearing makeup and false eyelashes to "flirt" onstage. Adult models resembling little girls wear sexy lingerie on TV fashion shows. Prime time TV repeatedly displays the sexualized image of JonBenet Ramsey, the murdered 6-year-old "beauty queen," even though she died 10 years ago.

**None of this is child pornography, right?** So, if it's not against the law, why make a fuss about it? It's not society's business. Let the family handle it in the privacy of the home.

**One organization that wants to make a fuss** is the American Psychological Association, specifically the APA's Committee on Women in Psychology. In its "Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls," released February 2007, the evidence-based organization summarizes "the best psychological theory, research, and clinical experience addressing the sexualization of girls via media and other cultural messages."

**Sexualization differs from healthy sexuality**, notes the APA. Healthy sexuality involves mutual respect between consenting partners. It fosters intimacy, bonding, and shared pleasure. By contrast, sexualization occurs when:

1. A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appearance or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics. Here, the report is concerned with the imbuing of adult sexuality upon a child.
2. A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy. A specific and virtually unattainable physical appearance is defined as being sexy for women and girls.
3. A person is sexually objectified — that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use — rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making. Sexuality is valued over other more relevant characteristics, such as girls' athletic abilities.
4. Sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person, especially a child. For example, when adult models who resemble girls pose in a sexy way, their sexual objectification blurs the distinction between adults and children and thereby sexualizes girlhood.

**Being sexualized in one's youth** is a serious matter, the report says. One of the important tasks of adolescence is to develop a sense of oneself as a sexual being. Today, our culture is encouraging teenage girls to look sexy. Yet they know very little about what it means to be sexual or to have sexual desires. And they still have to learn how to make rational and responsible decisions about sexual pleasure and intimate relationships. Thwarting this healthy process, young girls are being imbued with adult sexuality, making them seem to be appropriate sex objects and suggesting they are sexually available when they are not yet sexually mature.

**Who or what is responsible** for this state of affairs? Why does our society tolerate it? As you might guess, the report's answer is multi-layered. Society itself is one contributor by suggesting, through the media and other cultural messages, that the sexualization of girls is normal and good. So too, family and friends often treat girls as — and encourage them to be — sexual objects. And the girls themselves may treat and experience themselves as objects for sexual attention.

**Girls develop their identities as teenagers.** They model themselves on what they see older girls and young women doing. "There is no question that girls (and boys) grow up in a cultural milieu saturated with sexualizing messages," the report notes. It stands to reason that if girls learn that sexualized behavior and appearance are approved of and rewarded by both society and their peers (whose opinions matter most to them), they are likely to internalize these standards and engage in what the report terms "self-sexualization."

**Consistent exposure to sexualized themes** over time, the report stresses, can lead viewers to adopt a particular perspective about sex, or anything else for that matter. What young women believe about themselves and how they feel right now are significantly shaped by how they were treated and what they were exposed to when they were girls. In this connection, the role of the media is of particular concern. Children and teens spend more time with the media than on any other activity except school and sleeping. However, the media are not just a means of creating or strengthening cultural values, the report argues. They are also a primary delivery system for cultural values, not only to our culture at home, but for the U.S. culture being exported worldwide.

**How did the APA come to these conclusions?** Next month's issue will cover the evidence upon which the report is based. In the issue after that, we will cover the consequences of sexualization on girls, on others, and on society at large. (Single copies of the report are available from the American Psychological Association's Women's Programs, 202-336-6044 or online at [www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html](http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html).)

# How Society Sexualizes Girls

## American Psychological Association Report

BY MARY BAILEY

### Part II: Culture's Contribution

*This report by the American Psychological Association (APA) is unpleasant to read. Because it provides evidence of the sexualization of girls via mainstream cultural messages – television, music videos, cartoons and animation, magazines, sports media, video/computer*

*games, the Internet, advertising, and products – its impact is like being hit by a tsunami. Some of the evidence isn't new, but seeing it all in one place is overwhelming. Following is a sampling of the findings:*

“**Media content** responds to demand and is a reflection of culture, but it also contributes to it,” according to a report by the American Psychological Association. Girls, along with boys and everyone else, are major consumers of culture. When the various media are combined, children view 6 hours and 32 minutes a day (Nielson Media Research, 1998). Such massive exposure to content that sexualizes females has to have an effect on girls, and the APA maintains that it does.

On **television**, it reports, males disproportionately populate the world and the women in it are disproportionately sexy and lacking in intellect. Sexual harassment is a frequent story line. Of 81 programs, 84 percent contained at least one episode of sexual harassment with an average of 3.4 incidents per program (Grauerholz and King, 1997). In workplace-based situation comedies, the dominant jokes refer to women's bodies and sexuality (Montemurro, 2003).

Various studies of **music videos** indicate that 44 to 81 percent contain sexual imagery (e.g., Pardun & McKee, 1995). Sexually objectifying images of women constitute a large portion of the sexual content (e.g., Andsager & Roe, 1999). Women typically serve as decorative objects who dance and pose but do not play an instrument (e.g., Arnett, 2002). They are often displayed in ways that emphasize their bodies, body parts, facial features, and sexual readiness (R.C. Vincent, et al., 1987). In 42 MTV music videos, women were objectified in 44.4 percent of the 30-second segments (Sommers-Flanagan et al., 1993). Music videos also convey female sexuality through the changing personas of the female artists. Teen artists metamorphose into mature and “edgier” versions of their former selves, exemplified by Christina Aguilera, Faith Hill, and Britney Spears (Andsager & Roe, 2003). Such presentations focus not on an artist's talent but on her sexuality and drive home the point that being a sexual object is the way to be perceived as mature and successful in the music industry.

Degrading **musical lyrics** that teens frequently listen to were concentrated in rap and R&B music. In 2005, for instance, Ludacris sang, *That's the way you like to f\*\*\*...rough sex*

*make it hurt, in the garden all in the dirt.*” As many as 70 percent of rap and R&B songs included degrading sexual content (Martino et al., 2006).

Adolescents are the largest segment of moviegoers. Many **movies** with sexual themes have plots that appeal to teens and young adults as, for example, *Cruel Intentions* and *American Pie*. Children are also consumers, with 13 percent attending theaters on a typical day and 39 percent watching a video or DVD. (D. Roberts et al., 2005). In R-rated movies of the 1980s, female nudity exceeded male nudity by 4 to 1 (B.S. Greenberg et al.,). One notable trend in movies is the near absence of female characters in top-grossing films (Bazzini et al., 1997). Of the 101 the top-grossing G-rated movies from 1990 to 2004, 75 percent of the characters were

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male (Kelly & Smith, 2006).

Much of children's programming features **cartoons**. While sexualization of children's cartoons or teen animation has not been systematically studied, there is evidence of sexual content. Recent movies and TV programs for children are “sexier” than the *Snow Whites* of yesteryear. Disney's female characters have more cleavage, fewer clothes, and act “sexier.” *Shrek 2* has a parody of a stripper. *Ella Enchanted's* costumes don't match the characters' roles (e.g., Lamb & Brown, 2006). Most cartoons and animation portray girls as domestic, interested in boys, and concerned with their appearance (Thompson & Zerbino, 1997).

Adolescents regularly read **magazines**. Among 8- to-18-year-olds, 47 percent reported reading magazines at least 5 minutes a day, while 22 percent reported reading them for 20 or more minutes a day (D. Roberts et al., 2005). One dominant sexual message across teenage girls' and women's magazines is to present oneself as sexually desirable to gain the attention of men (M. Duffy & Gotcher, 1996). Attracting the attention of boys by looking “hot” or “sexy” is the point of many articles, ads, and photographs (McMahon, 1990). Nearly everything girls and women are encouraged to do in the line of self-improvement is geared toward gaining the attention of men, even in articles on fitness and health. (Durham, 1998). Advice in *Teen*, *Seventeen*, *Glamour*, *Mademoiselle* and *YM* told adolescent girls which attributes were most successful in attracting men (innocence) and which should be avoided (being pushy or bossy, acting like a mom, being too demanding, pushing too early for commitment). Much of the content of mainstream magazines geared to girl teens and young women emphasized the centrality of heterosexual relationships (Durham, 1998).

**Sports coverage** of women athletes is minimal despite the boom in female athletics since the passage of Title IX in 1972. Thus it is particularly troublesome that when they are

featured, the coverage is often selective (Kane, 1996) and the commentary sexually objectifying (e.g., Messner et al., 2003). Available evidence suggests a trend toward increasing sexualization of female athletes comparable to their overall increasing visibility.

Male athletes are rarely depicted solely as sexual objects when they endorse a product, but several female athletes have recently posed nude or in provocative poses in national magazines. Examples include swimmer Amanda Beard in the swimsuit edition of *Sports Illustrated* in 2005 and soccer player Brandi Chastain in *Gear Magazine* in 1999.

In a study of *Sports Illustrated* and *Sports Illustrated for Women* from 1997 through 1999, only 10 percent of the photographs of athletes in *SI* were of females, and 5 percent were “pornographic/sexually suggestive,” such as focusing on an athlete’s breasts. In *SI* photographs, 66 percent showed men actively engaged in a sport versus 34 percent of women. In *SIW*, the photos were “only slightly better,” with 56 percent depicting female athletes actively engaged in sports and 2 percent pornographic (Fink and Kensicki, 2002).

One study found much of the coverage by the sports media to be subtle, such as favoring an athlete’s face rather than her athletic performance. Less subtle, however, were commentators’ remarks, as when Brandi Chastain removed her jersey [not her sports bra] after scoring the winning goal of the World Cup. Although this specific behavior was identical to that of male soccer players in the same circumstances, in Chastain’s case, sportscaster called it a “striptease” and deemed her “the owner of the most talked-about breasts in the country.” In several media sources, the team was referred to as “booters with hooters.” The sports commentary was also vigilantly heterosexual, placing female athletes in family settings to suggest they were not lesbian, regardless of their real-life sexual orientation. Thus female strength is redefined as male pleasure. (Shugart, 2004).

Eighty-seven percent of children and 70 percent of adolescents play **video/computer games** (Palk, 2001). In a sample of 80 teen-rated games, 27 percent had sexual themes and were significantly more likely to depict female rather than male characters as partially nude or engaged in sexual behaviors. The percentage rose to 46 percent when pronounced cleavage, large breasts, or provocative clothing were included in the study. (Haninger and Thompson, 2004).

Recent studies have shown that girls lead boys in **Internet** use in the early middle-school years (Lenhart, et al., 2005). Now that blogs and sites such as MySpace encourage young people to describe themselves, some girls are presenting themselves in provocative clothing and posting their sexual availability online. No research as yet has assessed the danger inherent in such sexualized self-presentations (Kornblum, 2005). As for pornography, it is readily available on the Internet (Griffiths, 2000). A Kaiser Family Foundation

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(2001) study found that 70 percent of teens ages 15-17 years had accidentally encountered pornography on the Internet, with 23 percent saying this occurred somewhat or very often.

Sexualization of girls is particularly prominent in **advertising**. Out of 72 randomly selected TV commercials, 75 percent of beer ads and 50 percent of non-beer ads were

labeled “sexist,” featuring women in very limiting and objectifying roles (Rouner et al., 2003). Women in magazine ads were suggestively dressed, partially clad, or nude about half the time in women’s magazines such as *Redbook*. Almost four out of five women were depicted in this manner in men’s magazine ads (e.g., *Esquire*). A whopping 80.5 percent of photo ads in two popular men’s magazines, *Maxim* and *Snuff*, depicted women as sex objects (Krassas et al., 2003). Female models in fashion and fitness magazine ads were posed in submissive, sexually exploitative, and violent positions in approximately 80 percent of the sampled ads (Rudman and Verdi, 1993).

Numerous studies document that such patterns in advertising have been increasing over time. For instance, 28 percent of women were shown suggestively dressed, partially clad, or nude in ads in 1983 compared to 49 percent in 2003 (Reivhert and Carpenter, 2004). Such patterns differed depending on the women’s race, however. White women more often than black women were represented with faces hidden, thus placing emphasis on their bodies, in both women’s and men’s magazines (Baker, 2005). In *Cosmopolitan*, 42 percent of ads contained suggestive body exposure, compared to 13 percent in *Ebony*, 32 percent in *Essence*, 21 percent in *Latin Girl*, and 0 percent in *Filipinas* (Sanchez-Hucles et al., 2005).

Despite evidence that ads are more sexual than ever, an *Adweek* poll showed that 70 percent of respondents thought there was too much sexual imagery in advertising (Dolliver, 1999).

**Products** designed for children and teens are big business, accounting for over \$21 billion in 2005 (Ackman, 2006).

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# How People Sexualize Girls

## American Psychological Association Report

BY MARY BAILEY

### Part III: Personal Contributions

*In order to remain faithful to the original, this series on the American Psychological Association's report, "The Sexualization of Girls," retains the APA wording whenever possible. For readability's sake, this time we exclude citing any of the studies upon which the report is based. Note, however, that the majority of the research was published in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If you missed Parts I and II of the series, you can download them from the April and May 2007 issues of this newsletter at [www.mcmandnow.org](http://www.mcmandnow.org).*

The important people in girls' lives – parents, teachers, peers – strongly contribute to the sexualization of young females. Subtly or overtly, they contribute by supporting the cultural messages delivered through the media and consumer products. Sometimes these significant people “sexually harass, abuse, or assault girls, a most destructive form of sexualization.” In another strong contribution, girls often internalize these cultural messages and in the process sexualize themselves.

### Being Objectified by Parents...

Parents have a significant effect on girls' gender-related ideas about themselves and others. Mothers contribute negatively when they respond to cultural messages about thinness. White mothers especially engage in “fat talk” about their own bodies and those of their teenage daughters. Said one researcher, “girls seem to be surrounded by excessive concerns over physical appearance and talk of feeling fat.” Conversely, African American girls reported getting more positive feedback about their appearance and “style” from their parents. They looked up to their mothers as role models who teach them how to succeed in a hostile world. Although they dieted at about the same rate as white girls, black girls were more satisfied with their bodies and less concerned about their weight.

Adolescent girls received fewer comments on their bodies from their fathers than their mothers did, but when they did, it was in the form of criticism – “appraising looks, kidding quips, putdowns, and snide comments like ‘When did you start getting boobs?’” Such comments are often experienced as statements about their sexuality.

Encouragement for girls to look at their bodies rather than attend to other things teaches them to view their bodies as objects to be decorated and made desirable for others. As young girls mature during their teenage years, such looking becomes sexualized.

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Sexual harassment by boys is a regular part of school life. ...Girls experienced more sexually harassing comments as their bodies matured. These experiences, in turn, lead them to experience greater feelings of shame about their bodies.

Parents also contribute to the sexualization of girls by, for example, entering their 5-year-old daughters in beauty pageants in which they act in ways that are socially associated with sexiness. Although few girls actually participate, they have become a topic of interest in the media. “In this way, the participation of a few may in fact contribute to the sexualization of many.”

### By Teachers...

Teachers sometimes encourage girls to play dress-up games and act as sexualized adult women. This often involves looking in mirrors, walking in fancy high heels and “vamping.” In one study, heaviness and body “bulk” were negatively correlated

with teachers' ratings of girls' competence, but positively correlated with their ratings of boys' abilities. In another, middle-school teachers' descriptions of Latina (Puerto Rican) students focused almost exclusively on the appearance and sexuality of the girls. The girls' “hypersexuality” was seen as being incompatible with academic achievement.

### By Peers...

Sexual harassment by boys is a regular part of school life. Research on playground life showed that boys mark girls as sexual at a very early age. In one study, 63 percent of girls reported being sexually harassed “often” or “occasionally.” The most common form of harassment was being made the object of sexual jokes, comments, gestures, or looks. Next most frequent was being touched, grabbed, pinched, or brushed up against in a sexual way.

Even 10-to-12-year-old girls, most of whom had not yet finished the fifth grade, reported significant and frequent experiences in school. Although both girls and boys reported such experiences, the nature and effects were different. Girls experienced more sexually harassing comments as their bodies matured. These experiences, in turn, led them to experience greater feelings of shame about their bodies.

Girls police each other to ensure conformance with the ideals of thinness and sexiness. In addition, teenage girls may seek revenge by negatively sexualizing girls whom they perceive as a threat, for instance by labeling them “sluts.” Girls now

equate popularity with sexiness and view behaving with boys in a sexual way as a pathway to power. Popularity required girls to construct a femininity that “emphasized the male gaze.”

### And By Themselves

Many parents and marketers argue that girls want the clothes and accessories that make them “sexy” and that it is difficult to convince teenagers and younger girls to make less sexual

choices. When girls make choices about how to behave and whom to become (often styling their identities after the sexy celebrities who populate their cultural landscape), they are, in effect, sexualizing themselves. They anticipate that they will gain social advantages, such as popularity, for buying into the sexualization of girls (i.e., themselves), and they fear social rejection for not doing so.

In self-objectification, girls internalize an observer's perspective on their physical selves and learn to treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated for their appearance. Though portraying themselves as a sexual object to be looked at is sometimes viewed by girls and women as exercising control over their sexuality, presentation of themselves in this way can be viewed as a form of self-objectification.

The focus on physical attractiveness is not new – it has long been argued that physical beauty can translate into power for females. But the definition of attractiveness differs depending on the tastes of the culture. There is evidence that physical appearance was not always the prime road to girls' social success. While today's culture equates "sexiness" with attractiveness, yesterday's culture equated it with "domesticity." Diaries of young girls over the past 100 years show that girls of earlier eras wrote about self-improvement in terms of improving their studies and becoming better mannered. But in the last 20 years they have almost exclusively described changing their bodies and enhancing their physical appearance as the focus of self-improvement.

There is ample evidence that self-objectification is common among girls and women. Girls as young as 12 are found to place greater emphasis on their body's appearance than on its competence. Many studies have demonstrated that girls and women self-objectify more than do boys and men.

In addition to making sexualized choices regarding clothing, hair, and makeup, girls and teens sometimes "act out" in sexually precocious ways. Given the highly sexualized cultural milieu in which most girls are immersed, these behaviors may simply be the result of modeling. It is important to note, however, that sexualized behavior in children (e.g., compulsive sex play, persistent and sometimes public self-stimulation, inappropriate sexual overtures to others) is one of the common results of sexual child abuse.

As to abused girls, it would be inaccurate to state that they freely choose these behaviors. Rather, the mental processes necessary for healthy decision-making have likely been damaged through the experience of sexual abuse victimization, leading to precocious or age-inappropriate behavior.

Childhood sexual abuse puts girls at risk for prostitution. "Girls in prostitution by definition are sexualized – objectified and treated as sexual commodities." In the case of girls

under age 18, prostitution is legally considered sexual abuse, commercial sexual exploitation of children, or child prostitution. Most women over the age of 18 in prostitution began prostituting when they were adolescents. In one study of 50 Seattle women prostituting in escort services, on the street, in strip clubs, through phone sex, and in massage parlors, all began prostituting between ages 12 and 14. In another study,

69 percent began prostitution before age 16.

Girls are not fully independent of their history and the surrounding cultural milieu. But "it is important to remember that girls are fully capable of agency and resistance in this area," the report said. A later issue will cover how the APA suggests influences that sexualize girls being counteracted.

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The next issue will cover the American Psychological Association's evidence of the negative consequences for girls when they are sexualized or exposed to sexualized images and also when others are exposed to such images. If you wish to read the full report, single copies are available from the APA's Women's Programs at 202-336-6044 or online at [www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.htm](http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.htm).



# Consequences Of the Sexualization of Girls

## American Psychological Association Report

BY MARY BAILEY

### Part IV

**What is the harm in sexualizing girls?** This final piece in our series on the American Psychological Association's report, "The Sexualization of Girls," addresses the question. But first, a discussion of the word "may." Throughout the report, the APA uses the word when analyzing the effects of various social and personal behaviors. It will say that a certain behavior *may* have a certain effect. That is the way scientists talk, including those in the public health and social sciences. They say, cigarettes *may* cause cancer, or pornography *may* contribute to the sexualization of girls. In other words, no matter how strong the evidence of harm – and, in this case, the report considers the evidence to be strong – those who study complex systems such as society or the human body realize that absolute proof for their conclusions is probably impossible. Instead, to merit serious public concern, they will say: a significant number of smokers *may* get cancer. In similar fashion, the APA report publicizes evidence that girls are being sexualized and objectified in ways that are unprecedented and ultimately harmful to their and society's health.

Evidence suggests the sexualization of girls may....

**Affect their identity.** Teens and young girls are like actors experimenting with different facets of their newly forming identities and trying on different social "masks." This process makes them susceptible to the messages society conveys, especially when marketers link popularity to their products. Thus, sexualized messages and products may be more easily accepted during this developmental stage.

**Threaten self-esteem.** For adolescent girls, how others perceive their physical attractiveness is closely linked to how they view themselves. Therefore, it is just at the time when girls begin to construct their identities that they are likely to suffer a loss of self-esteem.

**Discourage mental and physical growth.** Perhaps the most insidious consequence of self-objectification, or assuming the persona of a sexual object, is that it fragments consciousness. Chronic attention to physical appearance leaves fewer resources available for other physical and mental activities. Thus the sexualization of girls may contribute to girls' dropping out of higher level math in high school. Or it may lead girls to limit their physical activities, which can affect their overall health and well-being and make them less able to defend themselves from physical attack and abuse.

**Cause dissatisfaction and anxiety.** A nearly constant monitoring of their appearance can lead girls to feel ashamed of their bodies when they don't meet cultural standards. Checking and adjusting their appearance, chronically tugging at tight or skimpy clothes, and not knowing how or when their bodies will be looked at: all lead to anxiety.

Seeing herself as an object also can lead a girl to feel disgust toward her body. Such dissatisfaction may spur teens to seek plastic surgery, which is costly and incurs risks. In addition, expensive cosmetics and beauty salons may serve to widen the gulf between rich and poor girls.

**Create mental health problems.** Sexualization of girls by the mainstream media is linked with three of the most common mental health problems of girls and women: eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression. Strong evidence of the media's role in shaping girls' body image can be seen in "before" and "after" analyses of cultures new to Western media. For example, the traditional Fijian culture emphasized a robust body shape for girls. Three years after TV was introduced in the country, girls' eating behavior and attitudes about their bodies had changed and rates of eating disorders had increased.

**Stunt their sexuality.** Sexualization has negative consequences on the female ability to develop healthy sexuality. A woman who has learned when young to fear negative evaluations of her body can become more focused on her partner's judgments of her and less on her own desires. It also can make it difficult for her to enact safe sex practices and to feel entitled to sexual satisfaction. For instance, she is less likely to receive (but not less likely to perform) oral sex.

**Influence boys and men.** Objectifying girls and women is integral to "masculinity" beliefs of dominance and control that jeopardize men's ability to form intimate relationships with women. When one person objectifies another, it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to treat that woman with empathy, an important factor in satisfaction and stability in intimate relationships. Exposure to narrow ideals of female attractiveness makes it difficult for some men to find an "acceptable" partner or enjoy full partnership with a female. Studies have found that exposure to pornography leads men to rate their partners as less attractive and sex with them less satisfying. They also express a greater desire for sex without emotional involvement.

**Harm women.** A cultural milieu in which females are sexualized harms adult women in all the ways that it harms girls. There are additional consequences, however, for adult women in at least one domain – the workplace. From the job applicant to the career professional, women are exposed to more physical evaluation and ageism than men.

**Affect society.** Pressing social problems that disproportionately affect girls — violence against females, sexual exploitation, forms of pornography, and prostitution of girls — can be nurtured by continuing and escalating sexualization of girls and women.

**Encourage sexism.** Studies show that frequent, regular exposure to music videos and other media high in sexualized imagery are associated with greater acceptance by both sexes of traditional masculinity ideologies that objectify women. Exposure to sexualized rap videos strengthens negative perceptions of women, especially those who are African

American. Exposure also affects how women actually behave and how men treated and respond to real women in subsequent situations.

**Limit girls' educational aspirations.** If, as research suggests, girls' preoccupation with appearance ties up intellectual and problem-solving resources, then girls will have less time and mental energy for other pursuits. Girls may be learning to prioritize certain rewards (male attention) over other rewards (academic achievement), thus limiting their future educational and occupational opportunities. If they perceive working in science, technology, engineering, and math as inconsistent with a sexy image, they may want to be a model, fashion designer, or pop star instead.

**Increase sexual harassment in school.** Despite the fact that many girls believe that a sexy appearance brings them power, quite the opposite may be true. A list of studies suggests that boys exposed to sexualized portrayals are more likely to commit sexual harassment.

**Support violence against girls and women.** Numerous studies have shown a connection between stereotypical attitudes about women's sexuality and aggressive sexual behavior. Several have shown that women and men exposed to sexually objectifying images from mainstream media were significantly more accepting of rape myths, sexual harassment, sex role stereotypes, interpersonal violence, and adversarial sexual beliefs about relationships.

**Encourage girls to accept sexual abuse.** It appears that exposure to sexual objectification in the mainstream media encourages girls to objectify women and to see them as less than human. An extreme form of sexualization is child sexual abuse. It is associated, both during the victim's childhood and later, with defensively separating one's emotions from the abuse, resulting in anxiety, depression, post traumatic stress disorder, and other health problems. Since child abuse usually occurs with threats of violence and demands for secrecy, these effects are unlikely to result solely from sexualization. A common symptom of the sexually abused girl is sexualized behavior. She may incorporate the perpetrator's perspective into her identity, eventually viewing herself as good for nothing but sex. Her constricted sense of self and the refusal of the perpetrator to respect her physical boundaries may result in a greater likelihood of being further victimized as an adult.

**Make the sexualization of girls seem normal.** There is little or no research on the effect on viewers of sexualized images of girls or even of women made up to look like girls. Almost no experimental research has been done specifically considering child pornography (which is illegal). One study found that viewers seeing adult women made to look like children perceived a sexualized child. A second found that such viewing can lead viewers to associate children with sex even when those being sexualized are child-appearing adults.

A pernicious effect of constant exposure of sexualized images of girls and child-women is that individuals and society may be "trained" to perceive and label girls as "seductive." Adults may project adult motives and adult responsibility onto girls. Studies have shown that adult men often misperceive friendliness as sexual interest. Images of precocious sexuality in girls may serve to normalize abusive practices such as child abuse, child prostitution, and sexual trafficking in children. Finally, the sexualization of girls may contribute to the trafficking and prostitution of girls by helping to create a market for sex with children through the cultivation of new desires and experiences. *(For a complete copy of the APA report, call 202-336-6044 or go to [www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.htm](http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.htm))*



### How Can We Counter The Sexualization of Girls?

Help challenge the narrow prescriptions for girls in our culture through the following approaches:

- 1) Work through the schools to develop and implement media literacy training.
- 2) Provide access to athletics and other extracurricular activities that encourage girls to focus on body competence instead of body appearance.
- 3) Urge your school board to address media, peer, and cultural influences on sexual attitudes and behavior in comprehensive sexuality education classes at the middle school level.
- 4) Organize a grassroots letter-writing campaign to confront sources of sexualized images of girls.
- 5) Encourage girls to develop their own media alternatives, such as "zines" (homemade magazines distributed in print form or on the Web).
- 6) Encourage girls to work together in groups, publicly and visibly, to protest sexualization and to develop critical perspectives on how girls and women are sexualized. *(APA report)*