



# The Watchful Eye

Newsletter of the Sexualization of Youth Project

Montgomery County (MD) NOW



## Teen Magazines Send Girls Wrong Message

By Sheila Gibbons

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### Girls blasted with "advice"

If the screaming pink and orange cover lines on mass-circulation teen magazines don't get you, the mixed messages inside will. Has there ever before been a flood of such contradictory, confusing, high-pressure "advice" directed at teen girls that serves their interest less?

The yin and yang of being simultaneously irresistible and virginal fill page after page. Teens (and pre-teens) are being whipsawed by the mixed messages. Tips on how to look hot and sneak lip-locks with a beau at the school locker are interspersed with warnings to keep sexual matters from getting out of hand.

"Hallway make-out sessions: dos and don'ts" (YM) co-exist with heartbreaking confessionals such as "Gossip ruined my life" (Seventeen), in which a night of necking made lurid headlines the next day at school. These articles ran in August and September [2003] back-to-school issues.

Teen magazines are loaded with ads and editorials – and the two are difficult to distinguish – urging girls to acquire the latest "hot" haircut (Seventeen) and "hot" looks (Elle Girl), reinforced by commands to "flirt your way to a date" (Teen). It seems to me that turning up one's personal heat this much puts a girl on the path to commentaries such as "One night of partying ruined my reputation" (Cosmo Girl), in which a college student recalls waking up naked and wondering if she's had sex. Campus gossip said she had.

The magazines envision teen-age girls' lives as endless popularity contests ("301 ways to be the coolest girl in class" in Teen, and "432 ways to go back to school a new person" in YM, in which the assumption is that the reader invariably has defects that need to be fixed. School is the main stage for efforts to attain popularity and snag a boyfriend (you can't have one without the other, it seems) but mostly school is merely that – an environment for socializing. These magazines have little to say to girls about the value of academic achievement, civic engagement or intellectual challenges. It's fair to say that the brain is not the "hot" organ at the center of teen magazine content.

### Bodies: the new priority

It wasn't always thus. Joan Jacobs Brumberg, author of *"The Body Product: An Intimate History of American Girls,"* says: "The body has become the central personal project of American girls. This priority makes girls today vastly different from their Victorian counterparts. Although girls in the past and present display many common characteristics – such as self-consciousness, sensitivity to peers and an interest in establishing an independent identity – before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, girls simply did not organize their thinking about themselves around their bodies. Today, many young girls worry about the contours of their bodies – especially shape, size and muscle tone – because they believe the body is the ultimate expression of the self."

You need look no further than the mass-circulation teen titles (and their adult sisters) for confirmation of this. And the consequences of being a teen-age reader of magazines may not always be happy ones. "Magazines, not television, seems to have the strongest relationship to eating disorders," says Rose M. Kundanis, author of *"Children, Teens, Families and Mass Media: The Millennial Generation."*

“Researchers explain that because television encourages the consumption of high-fat foods, it minimizes the effect on eating disorders. Magazines, on the other hand, offer more instruction on dieting and therefore seem to be more significantly correlated to eating disorders,” she says. The impact has reached ever-younger girls: Teen magazine this fall [2003] reported, without comment, that 35 percent of girls 6 to 12 years old have been on at least one diet, and that 50-to-70 percent of normal-weight girls consider themselves overweight.

### **Beauty before health**

Information on maintaining healthy skin, hair, and nails abounds amid a scarcity of information about other health issues in teen magazines. Sexual health in particular receives short shrift. A 2002 study by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. of teens’ and women’s magazines published between 1986 and 1996 found that “readers are increasingly likely to have learned that they need to be more concerned about sex per se – for example, ways to ‘make his thighs go up in flames’ rather than sexual health.” (*“Sexual Teens, Sexual Media: Investigating Media’s Influence on Adolescent Sexuality”*)

“Teens’ magazines,” the study concluded, “have increased the amount of space focused on non-health sex issues, even more, percentage-wise, than have women’s magazines.” During the same period, “space for sexual health-focused content has grown only slightly.” This is a disturbing finding, considering the teen magazines’ reams of instruction on how to get dates and develop romantic relationships, activities bound to lead to sexual experimentation.

Hollywood celebrities are presented as role models against which readers can calibrate their own behavior: “Love Quiz: Are you a serial dater like Britney or uber-committed like Reese?” (Seventeen); “The celeb style you want most: Reese Witherspoon, Cameron Diaz, Salma Hayek and Heather Graham” (Elle Girl); “Celeb high school secrets” (Teen).

With rare exceptions, women who’ve distinguished themselves outside of the entertainment world are not presented as women to emulate (or look like) any where near the frequency of actors and singers.

### **Real reasons to worry**

Should we worry about these pink-and-orange, boy-obsessed, lip-glossed, giggly treatments of teen life or accept them as a rite of passage for teen girls? Meenakshi Gigi Durham of the University of Iowa in Iowa City, who has conducted extensive research on teen media use among middle-school girls, thinks we should. “All the girls I have talked to have expressed some dissatisfaction with their bodies and many of them have resorted to extreme measures such as starvation.” Durham also thinks the magazines are missing the chance to help girls develop a healthy attitude toward sex. “What’s presented as sexy is the bare midriff, the busty blonde. It’s such a fiction. Anyone of any body size and race can experience her sexuality and enjoy it, but these magazines don’t offer this message.”

Adults can converse with girls and help mediate the destructive messages of these publications. But wouldn’t it be great if these magazines – given their abundant resources – were actually showing a sense of editorial responsibility toward their readers? ([www.womensenews.org](http://www.womensenews.org), 10-29-03, reprinted with permission)

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