Proactive Parenting Tips for Counteracting the Sexualization of Children and Teenagers

From:
So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids by Diane E. Levin Ph.D. and Jean Kilbourne Ed.D.

For your young child, you can...

Limit exposure to sexual content in media and pop culture.

- Use media rating systems to help you decide what media is and is not okay.
- Work with your children to develop rules and routines about their TV watching and media use.

Keep up with children’s media and popular culture.

- Collect information from the children themselves.
- Make sure you look at the most popular items, at least a couple of times, so you are able to talk with your children about them.
- Learn from and share what you know with the parents of your children’s friends.
- Remember that, beyond media, it’s also important to keep up with the real-life experiences related to sex and sexiness, violence and commercialism that children have in the home, at school, and with friends.

Get beyond just saying “no.”

- When possible, try working out solutions with your children.
- When you do need to set limits or say “no,” try to do it in a constructive way—rather than a punitive way (by using your power over children to get your way).
Establish safe channels of communication with children.

- Let children know it's okay to raise any and all issues with you, including sexual issues.
- As you talk to your children, keep in mind that having the right answers and responses is less important than getting used to talking about and sharing information about these issues.

Have meaningful conversations with children about sexual issues.

- Try not to blame children or make them feel guilty or ashamed when they do or say something that seems inappropriate.
- Try to take your child's point of view and see the world through his or her eyes.
- Don't always expect to know the perfect response instantly.
- When you respond to your child, take the age, prior experiences, specific needs, and unique concerns of your child into account.
- A good way to respond to an issue your child raises is to try to find out what he knows.

Help children use play and art to meet their needs.

- Try to have open-ended toys and play materials that can be used in many ways rather than highly structured toys (toys that come “with back-stories” like TV or movie-themed action figures or characters) that control children’s play.
- Help your child get beyond narrowly scripted play that is controlled by a TV or movie script, or highly structured play materials.

Reduce gender stereotypes.

- Encourage a broad range of interests and skills in both your girls and your boys.
- Choose toys and play materials that allow for a broad range of play activities instead of narrowly scripting it.
• Encourage girls and boys to find common ground for engaging in meaningful activities with each other, including play.

• Point out examples of males and females who are doing a broad range of activities, not just the limited range that children so often see in the media.

• Help boys and girls find appealing role models that provide alternative images to increasingly influential celebrity culture with its superstar icons.

**Teach children how to have positive relationships.**

• Give your children many direct opportunities to experience positive and caring relationships at home and at school.

• Help children express and receive appropriate positive affection, both physical and otherwise, with appropriate people in their lives.

• Share stories about yourself and experiences you had at ages similar to your child’s age.

**Create a give-and-take process for working out problems together.**

• Talk about the problem together in a way that helps your child see both sides.

• Try to come up with one or more possible solutions that take into account both of your views.

• After your child has tried out the solution, talk together about how well it worked and decide what changes might be needed to make it work better next time.

**Work cooperatively with other adults.**

• Talk with other adults in your child’s life about concerns and how you are trying to address them.

• Talk about specific issues that have come up with your child and how you have worked on resolving them.

• Agree on how you’ll deal with TV and other media when your children are at each other’s houses.
Help parents and schools work together.

- Build parent-teacher relationships based on mutual respect and collaboration.
- Share concerns with each other when problems come up in the classroom with individual children or a larger group.
- Work to create a school-wide community that makes dealing with the sexualization of childhood a community-wide affair.
- You can ask your children’s teachers and school to keep parents informed about issues that come up in school related to the sexualized culture and what is being done about them.

For your teenager, you can...

Limit exposure to sexual content in media and pop culture.

- Do not allow computers and televisions in your teen’s bedroom. Have them use these items in a family or common room where you can occasionally glance at what they are watching on TV or websites they are visiting online.
- Do not buy inappropriate clothing, games, DVDs, CDs and other media for your teens, and set an example by limiting your own consumption.
- Encourage your teen to find alternatives to consumer culture with activities like sports, music/drama, or religious or political groups.

Keep up with teen’s media and popular culture.

- Go to movies with your teen and watch the occasional TV show.
- Talk to your teen about what they are watching at home or outside the home, and respectfully exchange opinions.
- Let your teen tech you about the media they consume. Listen to their music, and play their video games. Do not condemn the media they love, but help them become more critical viewers by asking questions and discussing.
• Join the internet social networking sites your teen is involved in, like MySpace and Facebook to get a sense of what’s going on and monitor content of photos and messages they post. Check out YouTube.

Get beyond just saying “no.”

• Share values and expectations with your teen. If you disapprove of your teen being sexually active, say so and give reasons why.

• You eventually want your child to have a healthy sex life when they are old enough and mature enough. Instead of saying “just say no”, “just say ‘later’ “ may be a more useful message.

Establish safe channels of communication with teens.

• If you have done this when your kids were young, it will not be difficult to continue with your teenager. If not, begin now!

• Be willing to listen, do not rush in with judgments or advice. Allow your teen to voice their own opinions and make their own decisions.

Have meaningful conversations with teens about sexual issues.

• Don’t worry about having the perfect answer or the right response.

• If you don’t know the answer to a question, research it together.

• Be sure to tell your teen they can ask you anything—don’t assume they know that.

Help teens process sexual and other media messages they see in the media.

• Ask questions about what your teens are seeing and how they feel about it, without jumping in with your own opinion.

• Consult Common Sense Media for media ratings and tips for parents, as well as the CMCH (Center on Media and Child Health) for up-to-date research and answers to your questions.

Reduce gender stereotypes.

• Challenge assumptions about gender by asking your daughter to help repair something or asking your son to help cook and clean up.
• Encourage a broad range of interests and skills in your teen, and focus on compassion, kindness, perseverance, rather than how they look.

• Avoid sexist comments about yourself, and ask questions about any sexist comments you hear from your teen.

• Support media that promote positive images of males and females.

**Teach teens how to have positive relationships.**

• Model healthy intimate relationships for your teens.

• Do not abuse others or tolerate abuse yourself.

• Be physically affectionate, insofar as your teen allows.

• Let your teen know that conflict is inevitable in close relationships and teach ways to resolve conflict peacefully.

**Create a give-and-take process for working out problems together.**

• Talk about disagreements, and consider different points of view.

• Choose your battles carefully; focus on health and safety and ease up on less important issues. Try not to take everything personally.

• Discuss potentially risky activities with your teen and allow them to come up with solutions on their own you can all agree on.

**Work cooperatively with other adults.**

• Get to know the parents of your teen’s friends. This helps gain perspective on your own parental experience, and fosters a feeling of safety to know where your teen is and whom he/she is with.

• Get to know your teen’s friends. Allow them to feel comfortable spending time at your house by creating a teen-friendly environment in which an adult can be present without hovering.

**Help parents and schools work together.**

• Middle schools and high schools should be teaching accurate, age-appropriate sex education, as well as media literacy education, as well as...
working to prevent bullying or sexual harassment. Make sure your teen’s school is invested in these issues.

- Use your voice to elect politicians that will place a priority on the well-being of young people and who will give them the resources they need
Resource List

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CHILDREN AND THE COMMERCIAL CULTURE


**Websites**

The Body Positive

Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood

Center for a New American Dream. Download a free copy of Tips for Parenting in a Commercial Culture.

Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children’s Entertainment. The Toy Action Guide and Media and Young Children Action Guide help parents deal with the needs of young children in the commercial culture.

**MEDIA AND MEDIA LITERACY**


*Media Literacy*. Mankato, MN: Capstone Press, 2007 (a series of short books for elementary school students covering movies, music, magazines, television, and online communication).


**Websites**

[Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME)]

[American Academy of Pediatrics]

[Center for Media Literacy]

[Center on Media and Child Health]

[Common Sense Media]

[Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation]

[Media Education Foundation]

[Media Education Lab]

[Mind on the Media]

[National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE)]

[National Institute on Media and the Family]
New Mexico Media Literacy Project

Teen Media: Mass Media and Adolescent Health

POPULAR CULTURE AND GENDER


Katz, J. Tough Guise: Media Images and the Crisis in Masculinity, 1999 (a film produced and distributed by the Media Education Foundation).


Kilbourne, J. Killing Us Softly 3: Advertising’s Image of Women, 2000 (a film produced and distributed by the Media Education Foundation).


**Websites**

The Future of Fatherhood

Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

Girls Inc.

Hardy Girls Healthy Women

Mind on the Media/ Turn Beauty Inside Out Project

New Moon: The Magazine for Girls and Their Dreams
PBS Parents Guide to Understanding Girls

SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT AND SEX EDUCATION - For Adults


For Young Children

Harris, R. H. *It’s So Amazing! A Book About Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies, and Families*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick, 1999. (Ages 7 and up.)


SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT AND SEX EDUCATION -
For Older Children and Teenagers


Websites

Advocates for Youth

Children Now: Talking with Kids About Tough Issues

Go Ask Alice! Columbia University’s health Q&A resource

Sex, etc.: Sex Education by Teens, for Teens

Teen Aware: Sex, Media and You

Teenwire.com (run by Planned Parenthood)