commentary | *So Sexy So Soon*

THONG PANTIES AND PADDED BRAS FOR SEVEN-YEAR-OLD GIRLS ARE SOLD THESE DAYS AT MAJOR DEPARTMENT stores. Tiny pink high-heeled shoes are advertised for babies. Risqué Halloween costumes for children (such as "Pimp Daddy" and "Child Ho") fly off the shelves. T-shirts for toddler boys proclaim "Chick Magnet" and "Pimp Squad." Little girls go to makeover parties and spas, and teenagers are encouraged to dress and behave like strippers and porn stars. F.C.U.K. is the name of an international clothing chain popular with young people.

Some of the cover stories for recent issues of magazines popular with young teenage girls include "15 Ways Sex Makes You Prettier" and "A Shocking Thing 68% of Chicks Do in Bed." "Grand Theft Auto," a video game especially popular with teenage boys, allows the gamer to have sex with a prostitute in a stolen car and then murder her. The latest version sold six million copies in its first week and grossed five hundred million dollars.[1]

I started talking about the sexualization of children way back in the late 1960s, when I began my work on the image of women in advertising. The first version of my film "Killing Us Softly," made in 1979, included an ad featuring a sexy little girl and the slogan "You're a Halston woman from the very beginning." I knew something was happening, but I had no idea how bad it was going to get.

Rapid advances in technology have made readily available to most American children devices and methods of communication that, if imagined at all, belonged to the world of science fiction not that long ago—the Internet, cell phones, handheld computers, email, text messaging, video games, hundreds of cable channels, and more. Among other things (some quite marvelous), these devices make pornography not just accessible, but inescapable. Twelve percent of all Web sites are pornography sites and twenty-five percent of all search engine requests are for pornography.[2]

Images that previously belonged to the world of pornography are now commonplace in family magazines and newspapers, in TV commercials, on billboards, online. Today's children are bombarded with graphic sexual content that they cannot fully process or understand and that can even frighten them. Developmentally incapable of interpreting it as adults do, they struggle to make sense of it. Meanwhile, they are robbed of valuable time for working on the age-appropriate developmental ideas and tasks necessary to lay the foundation for positive sexual relationships in the future. Whatever their race, ethnic group, economic status, or gender, and whether they can afford to buy a lot or very few of these products, children are deeply affected.

At the same time, the United States remains the only developed nation that doesn't teach comprehensive sex education in its schools. What many people don't realize is that our children are getting massive doses of sex education—from the commercial culture. And they learn very harmful attitudes about sex and their own sexuality. They learn that sex is the defining activity in relationships, to the exclusion of love and friendship. They learn that sex is often linked to violence (an obviously dangerous and disturbing connection). And they learn to associate physical appearance and buying the right products not only with being sexy but also with being successful as a person. Such messages can shape their sexual attitudes and behavior, values, and their capacity for love, connection, and healthy relationships well into adulthood.

Although the sexual sell is at a fever pitch throughout all forms of the media, depictions of sex as an important and potentially profound human activity are notably absent. Couples in ads rarely look at each other. "Names optional" says a Budweiser ad featuring an entwined couple—get drunk, have sex, you don't even need to know the name of your partner. Men and women in music videos use each other. It is a cold and oddly passionless sex that surrounds us. A sense of joy is also absent; the people involved often look either hostile or bored. The real obscenity is the reduction of people to objects. Our culture is sex-crazed and sex-saturated, but strangely not erotic. As French philosopher, Roland Barthes said, speaking of Japan, "sexuality is in sex, not elsewhere; in the United States, it is the contrary; sex is everywhere, except in sexuality."[3]

One of the challenges in discussing this topic is distinguish-

ing sexualization from sexuality. We are all sexual beings from birth and that is to be celebrated. Not at all the same as sexuality or sex, sexualization has to do with treating other people (and sometimes oneself) as things, as objects. Sexualization is especially problematic to children and adolescents who are developing their sense of themselves as individuals and as sexual beings. Perhaps most damaging of all, sexualized children learn to sexualize themselves, to see themselves as objects. Girls are especially conditioned to do this, as they learn that sexualized behavior and appearance are often rewarded by society.

But sexualization is also harmful to boys. Men who have been conditioned to judge women by the current standard of beauty and to compare real women with the idealized images in the popular media and pornography often find it difficult, if not impossible, to feel empathy for women. These men may find it impossible to have deep and fulfilling intimate relationships with their partners, with their children, with anyone. More and more research, including research on the brain, is attesting to the importance of attachment for all human beings, men as well as women.[4] Yet boys are still socialized in a way that makes attachment and intimacy more difficult to achieve. This is a very high price to pay.

Sexualization fosters sexist attitudes and encourages sexual violence. It is also very likely that the sexualization of children in the media contributes to the increase in child pornography, sex trafficking, and the sexual abuse of children.[5]

When sex in the media is talked about, it is often criticized from a puritanical perspective—there's too much of it, it's too blatant, it will encourage kids to be promiscuous. But sex in commercial culture has far more to do with trivializing and objectifying sex than with promoting it, more to do with consuming than with connecting. The exploitation of our children's sexuality is in many ways designed to promote consumerism, not just in childhood but throughout their lives. These sexual images aren't intended to sell our children on sex—they are intended to sell them on shopping. This is the intent of the marketers—but an unintended consequence is the effect these images have on real sexual desire and real lives.

It is critical to address this from a progressive point of view, a point of view that does not deny the sexuality of children and teenagers but that refuses to allow it to be colonized by marketers or demonized by the right. It is the corporate exploitation of our children's sexuality that is disgusting and dangerous, not the sexuality itself. We need more honest and open information about sex, not less.

The most important thing parents can do for their children is to connect deeply and honestly with them. The research is clear—good relationships create the resilience that prevents dangerous, acting-out behaviors in our children.[6] Of course, this comes as no surprise to people familiar with the work of the Wellesley Centers for Women.

Today there is a grave disconnection between the values caring adults want to convey to children about sex and sexuality and the messages conveyed by the popular culture. In the past the prevailing cultural messages were more compatible with the values and goals that most parents held for their children. As the late George Gerbner, one of the world's most respected researchers on the influence of the media, said, "For the first time in human history, most of the stories about people, life, and values are told not by parents, schools, churches, or others in the community who have something to tell, but by a group of distant conglomerates that have something to sell."[7]

The sexualization of childhood is a public health problem that goes far beyond the home. It affects all of us. And it is increasingly a worldwide problem. The world is fast becoming a global marketplace controlled not by individual governments but by transnational conglomerates interested only in profit and willing to exploit children, even to hijack their sexuality, in pursuit of it.

Although there is a great deal that we can do as individuals, we cannot solve this problem until we act together to change the world our children live in.

We need to encourage citizen activism and protests. We need to teach media literacy and sex education in our schools. We also need to learn and to teach about healthy relationships, what Jean Baker Miller called "growth-fostering connections."

We don't lack information about what is necessary to create a healthier environment for our children. What we have lacked is the political will to achieve it. Perhaps now, with new leadership, this can change. Indeed it must change. As Nelson Mandela said, "We must turn this world around—for the children."[8] ■

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[1]Matt Vella, "Grand Theft Auto Rakes in Record Sales," *BusinessWeek*, May 2008 (retrieved from: www.businessweek.com/innovate/gamesinc/archives/2008/05/grand_theft_aut.html).

[2]American Psychological Association Task Force. Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007, p.11.

[3]Roland Barthes. *The Empire of Signs* (1970), quoted in E. White, "From Albert Camus to Roland Barthes," *New York Times*, September 12, 1982, section 7, p. 1.

[4]David Brooks, "Of Human Bonding," *New York Times*, July 2, 2006 (retrieved online at www.nytimes.com).

[5]APA, *Sexualization of Girls*, p. 35.

[6]C. Dooley and N. Fedele, "A Response to the Columbine Tragedy, *Connections* (Jean Baker Miller Training Institute, Wellesley Centers for Women, Spring 1999), p. 2.

[7]George Gerbner, "Television Violence: The Art of Asking the Wrong Question," (July 1994), in *The World & I: A Chronicle of Our Changing Era*,p. 385 (retrieved online from the Center for Media Literacy, www.medialit.org/reading_room/article 459.html).

[8]In a speech at the launch of the Say Yes to Children Campaign in 2000, quoted by Raffi Cavoukian in *My Hero: Extraordinary People on the Heroes Who Inspire Them* (New York: Free Press, 2005), p. 164.