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## Little Girls Gone Wild: Why Daughters Are Acting Too Sexy, Too Soon

Push-up bras, pedicures, hip-hop dance classes: These are now the social currency of the under-10 set. What happened? And how can we help our girls stay girls for longer? Rachael Combe reports.

Like 5K

By Rachael Combe



noah cyrus

Getty Images

It was the high heels that finally got my attention — my daughter received four pairs for her second birthday, pink plastic ones with rhinestones and feathers. Louisa quickly became disconcertingly expert at walking, running, and kicking soccer balls in them. I couldn't put my finger on why they creeped me out. After all, I loved to play dress-up at her age too. My grandmother was petite, almost child-size, and I spent half my childhood swanning around in her low-cut evening gowns, my cheeks rouged up with her Mary Kay. But then I realized there was a major difference: I played dress-up with my grandma's high heels. Louisa plays dress-up with heels that have been manufactured for and marketed to children — with their own celebrity style icon in 4-year-old Suri Cruise, who has been known to wear higher heels than I do as an adult.

There's been a lot of noise about little girls acting and dressing way too sexy lately. To be perfectly honest, I wasn't that concerned when Miley Cyrus took her clothes off, or when her then-9-year-old sister, Noah, showed up for a Los Angeles Halloween event dressed in what looked like a Goth hooker outfit. (*Those crazy child stars*, I said

to myself.) I rolled my eyes at the YouTube clip of scantily clad 8- and 9-year-olds in a dance competition, pelvis-thrusting to Beyoncé's "Single Ladies"; it reminded me of the show *Toddlers & Tiaras* — disturbing, but very different from the reality of most kids. But then I started hearing reports from my real-life friends. One complained that they only make padded training bras now and that her sixth-grader looked like a Pamela Anderson wannabe. Another called to talk about her 6-year-old's dance-recital costume: fuchsia hotpants with heart appliqués on each buttock. The insanity seems to be trickling down to real girls — *our* girls. Take this so-wrong-I-hope-it's-not-right statistic: According to a survey by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and [cosmogirl.com](http://cosmogirl.com), 22 percent of girls ages 13 to 19 have sent or posted nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves online.

Luckily, Louisa doesn't know how to operate the camera or computer, and I feel pretty certain that I can prevent her from turning into a teen who lists "topless dancer" as one of her career aspirations. Yet the first thing you learn in parenting is that pride comes before a fall (you know, the old "My children will never watch TV/whine/sleep in my bed" thing). So I wondered: When do I start taking action to protect her from our supersexed culture — and what do I do, short of sending her to a nunnery? I posed the question to educators and moms around the country — and while I discovered that it all begins much earlier than you'd think, I also learned that there's a lot that parents can and should control.

### The terrifying truth: It starts with princesses

My innocent toddler is already a prime marketing target, I learn when I speak to Peggy Orenstein, the author of a new book, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches From the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture*. "It's subtle stuff that puts girls on the road to getting their identity from how they look, which as they get older will be increasingly defined as hot and sexy," she tells me. "And you can see it starting with the Disney princesses." In Orenstein's book she makes the case that girlhood really is different today: more commercialized (companies spent \$100 million in advertising to kids in 1983; today they spend almost \$17 billion), more girly (nearly everything manufactured for girls — from birth — is screamingly, irritatingly, blindingly pink), and increasingly sexualized.

You may balk — what's sexy about a little girl in a pink princess costume? But sexy, as it turns out, is not the same thing as *sexualized*. Sexualization is not only imposing sexuality on children before they're ready and viewing girls as sexual objects, but also valuing a girl for her appearance over her other attributes. "Princesses are just a phase," Orenstein writes, but they mark a girl's "first foray into the mainstream culture.... And what was the first thing that culture told her about being a girl? Not that she was competent, strong, creative, or smart but that every little girl wants — or should want — to be the Fairest of Them All."

Orenstein builds her case with stats showing that the more a girl is exposed to girly-girl culture, the more vulnerable she is to depression, eating disorders, distorted body image, and risky sexual behavior. She describes one study in which college girls shown just two commercials with stereotyped portrayals of women — a girl raving about acne medicine and a woman thrilled with a brownie mix — expressed less interest in math- and science-related careers afterward than girls who hadn't been shown the ads. These days, the average *child* in America watches an estimated 40,000 ads a year.

"Just as they say marijuana is a gateway drug, all this stuff that's being marketed to little girls is a gateway to sexualization," agrees Rachel Simmons, author of *The Curse of the Good Girl: Raising Authentic Girls With Courage and Confidence*. Simmons points, for example, to the trend of moms treating preschoolers to manicures. "When you take a girl to a salon at age 4, it equates prettying yourself with closeness to your parent. There's a message there: *This is how we spend time*," she tells me. "You're training her that buying things is what makes you valuable as a girl."

What begins with Cinderella is followed, once girls hit grade school, by less innocent stuff: TV programs like *Hannah Montana* and *iCarly*, which center around eye-rolling, miniskirt-clad girls whose idea of success is being a rock diva or a reality star. Their rapt audience — most in the 6-to-11-year-old demographic — follows the shows and the offscreen lives of their stars with wide-eyed curiosity. And then so many of those tween idols — girls such as Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan, even Miley — wind up as premature sex symbols, headed for a fall. You can argue it has always been thus (Maureen McCormick has said she traded sex for cocaine shortly after playing Marcia Brady — Marcia, Marcia, *Marcia!*), but back then we never heard a peep about it. Now our 24-hour news cycle brings their skimpy outfits and crazy antics straight into our homes, where our kids can get a load of them.

"It's a pattern," Orenstein says. "They go from being role models, doing things like wearing promise rings, doing charity work, and what's the next step? They take their clothes off or head to rehab. The road to female identity is rocky right now, and these stars are traveling it in a writ-large, public way that reflects, in a smaller way, the dilemmas real girls face."

So how do you keep your little girl from becoming *that* girl, when the line between good femme fun and scary consumerism is so faint?



### When to say no... and when to say nothing

It was already too late when Lisa Khakee, a mom of two girls, 4 and 7, realized she might have gone too far. "I've been to the Bibbidi Bobbidi Boutique," she laments, referring to the salon at Disney World where girls are painted with glitter makeup and given hair extensions and manicures. "And I have no one to blame but myself. I'd heard about it from other parents; my girls had no idea what it was." The end result was beauty treatments her kids found mildly amusing at best and painful and itchy at worst. "They had more bobby pins and hair-spray in their hair than I did on my wedding

little girls getting mani pedis

Getty Images

night," says Lisa, whose youngest deconstructed the 'do as soon as they left. In retrospect, she feels foolish for buying her girls a full-on salon experience when they hadn't even thought to want it.

But what happens when they *do* want it, expressing interest in something you can't stand (like, say, Bratz dolls, those bedroom-eyed plastic playthings that appear to be dressed for a shift at the Hustler Club)? Veteran teachers I spoke with said one of the biggest changes in students over the years is they've grown less and less accustomed to the word *no*. People are putting their kids in the driver's seat, but, let's face it, kids are crappy drivers. Your daughter may love the sweats with JUICY emblazoned across the butt — but she also may love eating Pixy Stix for lunch. "We've learned to feel that we can't go up against the culture or the peer group," Orenstein told me. "But I really think you can. Your child wants to know your values."

Yet simply putting your foot down won't work. "When you do say no, you have to treat it as a more complicated issue," says Diane Levin, Ph.D., a professor of education at Wheelock College in Boston and coauthor of [So Sexy So Soon](#). "You can't just say, 'Here's the right answer,' thinking it will sink in." Ask your kids why they like the toy or TV show they're begging for. "It gives you the opportunity to add other voices in their heads besides advertising or their peers."

Jodi Belshe of Overland Park, KS, was appalled when she heard her 10-year-old mindlessly singing Katy Perry's song "California Gurls," warbling lyrics about women wearing "Daisy Dukes, bikinis on top." Jodi resisted the urge to freak out and instead asked her daughter what she thought the song's message was. Her daughter said, "I guess it's about girls showing off their bodies." Jodi wondered aloud if her daughter thought that was a great way to get attention. "I think I'd rather my friends liked me because I was smart or kind," she answered after some thought, to her mother's relief. "Well, that's why I don't want you to listen to that song," Jodi said. "Neither of us agrees with the message."

While it can seem like Katy Perry and her ilk are being beamed directly into kids' brains while they sleep, the culprit I heard cited over and over is television. Some parents take the tactic of watching shows with their kids — and offering play-by-play commentary. Kimberly Stelting of Olathe, KS, has been known to embarrass her daughters (12, 14, and 16) by giving matter-of-fact information about sexual content slipped into "family" TV shows. "I once had to explain the word *douche*! And when I was done, my daughter said she wished I hadn't," she reports. "But I just say, 'You wanted to watch the show; now we have to talk about what you saw.'"

For younger kids, some parents have taken it a step further and removed choice from the equation. Ann Friedman of Durango, CO, tried to get her 8-year-old to "stick to PBS, but she'd channel surf and end up watching *Hannah Montana* and *iCarly*." Ann started to notice a new attitude from Iris. "She'd put her hand on her hip and say, 'Mom,'" Ann says, making her voice drip with adolescent disgust. "And then I realized that's what those girls do." Now their TV viewing is all done via mom-approved DVD.

Keeping an eye on what they're doing shouldn't stop at the TV screen, either. Karen Mallow of Ancram, NY, told me her 13-year-old likes to try on outfits with her friends and take pictures like fashion models. One afternoon, as Karen perused the shots on her daughter's MacBook, she saw a few way-too-provocative poses one girl had struck on her daughter's bed. "I made her delete them," she says. "I said, 'Once this is on your computer, you could hit the wrong button. If this gets out, you don't know where it'll end up.'"

### Point them in the right direction

This can start to sound like a lot of medicine-taking: monitoring every show a child watches, telling a girl over and over how unnatural Barbie's measurements are. And in fact, one tactic advertisers use is to paint parents as big spoilsports. "Companies employ developmental psychologists to craft their message and tell kids, particularly in the preteen years, 'You're in charge, you make it happen, this is your identity,'" says Lyn Mikel Brown, Ed.D., a professor of education at Colby College in Maine and coauthor of [Packaging Girlhood](#). "So when you say, 'No, bad, awful,' kids see it as you taking their fun and their choices away." Which, of course, makes the forbidden fruit that much more alluring.

Mikel Brown recommends trying to change the conversation to a positive one: "Invest the good stuff with a lot of energy and excitement, the way the media invest things with energy and excitement." Lisa Khakee, for example, bought her 7-year-old a set of *Little House on the Prairie* books, then, when that was a hit, found the DVDs — and ultimately got her daughter so worked up about prairie life that she dressed as Laura Ingalls Wilder for Halloween, neatly sidestepping the racks of slutty-pirate-

girl/jailbait-witch costumes.

Encouraging girls to play sports is another way to get them focused on the strength of their bodies, not just on how they look. "I talk about it with my friends; sports give our daughters a sense of confidence and self-worth," says Laura Hohnhold of Evanston, IL, the mom of a 12-year-old who swims and plays softball.

Sports also create healthy common ground between girls and boys. Educators say they're seeing the end result of the all-blue-for-boys, all-pink-for-girls marketing trends: boys and girls who have a harder time playing together, which ultimately leaves both sexes lagging in academic and social development. Further, there's evidence that kids who play well with the opposite sex grow up to have more positive, long-lasting romantic relationships.

The key is not to *sexualize* those friendships, Orenstein says. A 5-year-old girl's friend who is a boy is not a *boyfriend*. Laughing about how cute they are and their impending marriage is a surefire way to embarrass the poor thing and send her running into the safety of making hot-pink sparkle jewelry with her girlfriends.

Her point leads to an important lesson in all of this: As counterintuitive as it may feel, sex is not the enemy. Robyn Silverman, Ph.D., a child development specialist in New Jersey, says we must be careful, in our zeal to shelter our daughters, not to make sex seem bad or scary: "We want girls to grow up and have full, responsible, passionate sexual relationships. That's why sexualization is so detrimental. If they're hurried along before they're ready, they can associate negative feelings with being sexual. The right time is great. But the wrong time really messes with their heads." So what's the right time? It's every parent's judgment call, Silverman says, but it's when a young *woman* has not only developed physically but also possesses the maturity to understand the message she sends with smoky eyeliner and a tight skirt — and to handle the reactions they elicit.

Protecting your daughter doesn't mean never talking about sex *or* never telling her she's beautiful. "It just can't be the only thing you find praise-worthy," says Silverman. "She's smart and interesting and funny — *and* she's pretty."

My daughter, Louisa, is beautiful to me, breathtakingly so. It was the first thing I said when she was born, and then I cried because I was so happy to see her. I still feel that way. Every morning, I'm just so delighted to see that little face, those strong, chubby limbs. We call her The Viking because she's so exuberant, so gung ho. The idea of her some day comparing herself to Cinderella, or Barbie, or some simpering teen queen on TV and finding herself lacking — too fat, too skinny, too loud, nose too big, lips too small — and trying to compensate with store-bought sexiness breaks my heart. I don't want anyone to take that light out of her heart or out of her eyes. My goal then, I suppose, is to teach her to see herself as I see her, and to love herself as I love her, as someone who already possesses everything she needs.

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