

The Normalization of Sexual Harm and the Sexualization of Children

“Little girls are being groomed into passively accepting their place as objects in our pornified culture, and boys are being taught exploitive and abusive sexual scripts.”

-- Cordelia Anderson, Founder, Sensibilities Prevention Services

As a society, we are inundated with images and messages that are...

- 1) Sexualizing minors and children at younger and younger ages.
- 2) Portraying sexual exploitation and sexual violence as normal.

These messages are everywhere -- from TV shows and commercials, to movies and music, billboards and bus shelters, even products designed for and marketed to kids.

Harmful to girls *and* boys, this saturation of sexual messaging...

⇒ Creates the perception that a child's self-worth is tied to his or her sexuality. This, in turn:

- **Degrades girls' emotional and mental wellbeing:** Adolescent girls who have a more objectified relationship with their bodies are more likely to experience depression and have low self-esteem. ¹
- **Decreases girls' cognitive performance:** Numerous studies have shown that self-objectification detracts from a girl's ability to concentrate and focus her attention, leading to poorer performance in math, logical reasoning and spatial skills. ²
- **Limits girls' physical performance:** One study found that the greater the extent to which girls viewed their bodies as objects and were concerned about appearance, the poorer their performance throwing a softball. ³
- **Teaches boys to view and treat girls as sexual objects:** Research carried out in a dozen countries found that boys exposed to porn are more likely to indulge in casual sex and less likely to form successful relationships as an adult. ⁴ It also found that young boys exposed to pornography are more inclined to believe that there is nothing wrong with pinning down or sexually harassing a girl. ⁵
- **Impedes healthy and responsible sexuality:** Several studies have found links between early exposure to sexually explicit media and earlier sex as a teen and increases in teen pregnancy. ⁶

⇒ Condone and creates an appetite for sexual harassment and abuse.

- **Watching is like acting to the brain:** Studies of mirror cells in the brain show that brain circuits fire in the same way when we observe someone doing something as when we actually do it. ⁷ Repeatedly viewing images of sexual violence desensitizes people to the awful nature of those acts.
- **Exposure to pornography and the committing of sexual violence are correlated:** Numerous studies have found that boys exposed to sexually explicit media have higher rates of sexual harassment perpetration (even controlling for other factors that could have contributed to this difference – like demographics). ⁸
- **Victimization of underage girls is growing:** Research conducted by the Shapiro Group on adolescent girls in the sex trade suggest that in Minnesota, 124 girls under age 18 were commercially sexually exploited via internet classified ads or escort services in a single month, August, 2010. ⁹

(over)

The Normalization of Sexual Harm

⇒ What is normalization?

Normalization is the process by which an idea or behavior goes from clearly problematic to an accepted part of societal culture.¹⁰

⇒ There is a difference between sexy and sexually exploitive.

Harmful or exploitive images or messages depict people as sexual objects, valuable primarily as things for others' use.

Healthy images present sexuality with a sense of caring, connectedness, and sexual respect. It suggests intimacy as one part of a relationship, rather than all of it.

Admittedly, there is a vast spectrum of sexual content, and lines are difficult to draw.

- Is Miley Cyrus (Disney's Hannah Montana) pole dancing at the MTV Teen Music awards just showing some new moves or role-modeling objectified behavior?
- Is it significant that the main character in the new kids' movie "Hop" stops to visit Hugh Hefner at the Playboy Mansion on his journey to becoming the Easter bunny?
- Do children's push-up bras or "Who needs a credit card?" underwear cross a line?

⇒ The constant pushing of boundaries has changed our collective sense of what is acceptable.

Attractive → Sexy → Objectified → Pornified

⇒ This is the new normal's message:

Sexual exploitation is just part of life.

If you are a woman, you should strive to be seen as a sexual object and treated as such.

If you are a man, you are to act as if a woman's only worth to you is the sexual encounter she can provide, or you can take.

It is a message that, when we say it out loud, we soundly reject.

Sexual violence is not inevitable. It is preventable.



Thank you for your help pushing back against the pervasiveness of these toxic messages.

^{1,2,3} Report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. 2007. pp. 22-25.

⁴ Harms of Pornography Exposure Among Children & Young People. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society.

⁵ Chandra et al Longitudinal Survey of Youth, *Pediatrics* 122, No. 5, 2008, pp. 1047-1054. Children's Hospital Boston Study, presented at the Pediatric Academic Societies, May 4, 2009.

⁶ Shane W. Kraus, Brenda Russell. Early sexual experiences: the role of internet access and sexually explicit material. *Cyber Psychology & Behavior*. April 2008, 11 (2): 162-168.

⁷ Gallese, V., Fadiga, L., Fogassi, L., and Rizzolatti, G. (1996). Action recognition in the premotor cortex. *Brain*, 119, 593-609.

⁸ Bonino, S., Ciairano, S., Rabaglietti, E. & Cattelino, E. (2006). Use of pornography and self-reported engagement in sexual violence among adolescents. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 3(3), 265-268. Brown, J., & L'Engle, K. (2009). X-Rated: Sexual attitudes and behaviors associated with U.S. early adolescents' exposure to sexually explicit media. *Communication Research*, 36(1), 129-151. Flood, M. (2009). The harms of pornography exposure among children and young people. *Child Abuse Review*, 18, 384-400.

⁹ Adolescent Girls in the United States Sex Trade: Tracking Study Results for August, 2010. Prepared by The Schapiro Group.

¹⁰ Normalization of Sexual Harm Webinar, Cordelia Anderson & Dr. Sharon Cooper, 2006, www.cordeliaanderson.com.