

SUNHERALD.com

Posted on Mon, May. 16, 2005

THE SUN HERALD

## In a kid's world, sex sells, too

Are pimps, babes more appealing than Barbie, G.I. Joe?

By KAREN MACPHERSON  
PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

With their made-up eyes, pouty lips and short skirts, these girls look like real party dolls.

In fact, they are dolls. They're the Bratz, the 10-inch "girls with a passion for fashion" whose skyrocketing popularity among young girls has ignited a marketing war with Barbie, the long-reigning queen of the fashion doll world.

Compared with the flirtatious-looking Bratz, Barbie looks like the scrub-cheeked - albeit curvaceous - girl next door.

As thousands of girls dump Barbie for the Bratz, child development experts worry. They see the Bratz as the cutting edge of a trend - "the increasing use of sexual imagery in products marketed to young children and the sexualization of childhood" - and point to other examples: thong underwear emblazoned with sexually suggestive phrases for 6-year-old girls; "pimp" Halloween costumes for little boys; the increasingly sexually explicit content of TV shows, movies and music CDs.

Some products, like the Bratz dolls, are specifically aimed at children; others are marketed to teens but attract younger children.

A recent Kaiser Family Foundation report showed that most American children age 8 and above have televisions in their bedrooms and no parental rules about what they watch. Among the top 15 TV shows with children age 2 to 11 are "American Idol," "Survivor" and "Desperate Housewives," according to recent A.C. Nielsen statistics reported in The Orlando (Fla.,) Sentinel.

Child development experts worry that such a sex-saturated culture encourages children and young adults to define themselves mainly by how sexy they are, and to see sex as the most important quality in a successful relationship.

"It's not the fact that children are learning about sex when they are young that is a problem. The problem is what today's sexualized environment is teaching them," said Diane Levin, a Wheelock College child development professor.

That environment, she said, is undermining normal sexual development and promoting precocious sexual behavior.

"It doesn't bode well for the future of intimate and caring relationships in which sex is a part when today's children grow up," said Levin, whose essay, "So Sexy, So Soon," is included in the newly published "Childhood Lost: How American Culture Is Failing Our Children."

Marketers, however, contend that today's kids are growing up in a different world than their parents did and are savvier at younger ages. Some also complain that adults read too much into products that kids see merely as "fashion forward" or "cool."

Ultimately, marketers say, it's up to parents to decide what their children buy and watch.

"That's what parents are for - they can't duck that responsibility," said Daniel Jaffe, executive director of the Association of National Advertisers, a Washington, D.C.-based group that represents major advertisers. "My own view is that this is the most important thing that parents can do for their kids - setting limits. Kids are looking for parents to tell them what is right and what is wrong."

Child development experts counter that this often is an impossible task for parents when they are up against companies that spend more than \$15 billion a year on marketing to children. That figure includes more than just sex-linked products, of course, but it helps highlight the challenge, the experts say.

"People have been making money off this for a long time, but I think it is getting worse," said Joan Jacobs Brumberg, a Cornell University professor and author of "The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls."

© 2005 The Sun Herald and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.  
<http://www.sunherald.com>