

Sex, Kids and the Slut Look

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THE OTHER DAY MY 10-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER AND I breached the prurient wilds of the Junior Fashion Department. Nothing in what she sneeringly calls the "little kid" department seems to fit anymore. She's tall for her age and at that awkward fashion stage between Little Red Riding Hood and Amy Fisher. She patrolled the racks, hunting the preteen imperative—a pair of leg-strangling white tights culminating in several inches of white lace. Everywhere were see-through dresses made out of little-flower-print fabric, lacy leggings, transparent tops and miniature bustiers for females unlikely to own busts. Many were garments that Cher would have rejected as far too obvious.

Lace leggings? When I went to grade school, you were sent home if you wore even normal pants. The closest we got to leggings were our Pillsbury Doughboy snow pants, mummy-padding we pulled on under our dresses and clumped around in as we braved the frigid blasts of winter. Today's high-school girls have long dressed like street-corner pros; but since when did elementary school become a Frederick's of Hollywood showroom?

Grousing that her dumb clothes compromised her popularity, the offspring had herded me to fashion's outer limits. She appeared to be the only 10-year-old in the area; the rest were 14 or so, unaccompanied by their mothers. She pranced up, holding out a hanger on which dangled a crocheted skirt the size of a personals ad and a top whose deep V-neck yawned like the jaws of hell.

"Isn't this great! I want this!" she yodeled, sunshine beaming from her sweet face once more. "You're 10 years old," I said. "Shhh," she hissed, whipping her head around in frantic oh-God-did-anybody-hear mode. Then she accused me of not wanting her to grow up. She's 10 years old and the kid talks like a radio shrink.

It's not really that I want her to be a little girl forever. It's just that it would be nice if she were a child during her childhood. Instead, she's been bathed in the fantasy of bodies and beauty that marinates our entire culture. The result is an insidious form of premature sexual awakening that is stealing our kids' youth.

Meredith was 8 and we were in the car, singing along to some heartbroken musical lament on the radio, when she said, "Mom, why is everything in the world about sex?" I laughed and asked where she got that idea. But then, listening as she knowledgeably recited examples from music, movies, MTV and advertising, it hit me that she was right. The message of our popular culture for any observant 8-year-old is: *sex rules*. Otherwise, why would it deserve all this air



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time, all this agony and ecstasy, all this breathless attention?

Kids pick up on the sexual laser focus of our society; then mimic what they see as the ruling adult craze, adding their own bizarre kid twist. Recently, I read that the authors of "The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior" were shocked to find how many had sex at 10, 11 and 12. Too young to know how to handle it, kids mix sex with the brutal competitiveness they learn in the two worlds they know best: sports and the streets. Sex is grafted onto their *real* consuming passion—to be the most radical dude or dudette in their crowd. Peer pressure—what I'm seeing now in my 10-year-old's wardrobe angst—takes over. The result is competitive sex: California gangs vying for the record in number of girls bedded; teenage boys raping girls my daughter's age in a heartless sexual all-star game where all that counts is the points you rack up. In Colorado Springs, not far from where I live, gangs are demanding that kids as young as 10 have sex as a form of initiation. It's the old "chicken" game in "Rebel Without a Cause," played with young bodies instead of cars.

The adult reaction to all of this is outrage. But why should we be shocked? Children learn by example. Sex is omnipresent. What do we expect when we allow fashion designers to dress us, grown women, in garments so sheer that any passing stranger can see us nearly naked for the price of a casual glance?

Or look at Madonna on the cover of *Vanity Fair* wearing only a pink inner tube and hair done up in cutesy '50s pigtails. Here's a 34-year-old heroine to little girls—the core of her fandom is about 14—posing as innocent jailbait. Inside, she romps on a playground in baby-doll nighties, toying with big, stuffed duckies and polar bears. This is a blatant child molester's fantasy-in-the-flesh. Does kiddie porn encourage sex crimes against children? Who cares!

Rudimentary good sense must tell us that sexualizing children not only sullies their early years, but also exposes them to real danger from human predators. What our culture needs is a little reality check: in an era when sexual violence against children is heartbreakingly common—a recent study estimates that about one quarter of women have been victims of childhood sexual abuse—anything that eroticizes our children is irresponsible, at best.

It's up to adults to explode the kids-are-sexy equation. Our kids need us to give them their childhood back. But this summer, the eroticization of our girl children proceeds apace. The crop tops! The tight little spandex shorts! (Our moms wore them under their clothes and called them girdles.) My daughter's right, everybody struts her stuff. I've seen 5-year-old *Pretty Babies*.

As for me, I don't care anymore if my kid has a hissy fit in the junior department. She's not wearing the Slut Look. Let her rant that I'm a hopelessly pathological mom who wants to keep her in pacifiers and pinafores forever. Let her do amateur psychoanalysis on me in public until my ears fry—I've shaken the guilt heebie-jeebies and drawn the line. So you can put those white lace spandex leggings back on the rack, young lady.

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