

### Hypersexualisation of Children

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Western, 21st century life is saturated in sex, because 'sex sells', they tell us.

Sex sells cars, yoghurt, shampoo, moisturiser, anti-perspirant, noodles and even car insurance. In this resource, I will take you through the studies and reports that set out the evidence for the hypersexualisation of society and how this is impacting boys and girls growing up in today's sexualised world. This resource explores theories for why this is happening and how children are objectifying themselves from as early as just seven years old. In a world where children are being taught that their worth comes from their bodies, their sexual attraction and their selfie-game, how is this contributing to the sexual exploitation and abuse of children?

#### Hypersexualisation

Where infantilisation sexualises adults pretending to be children, hypersexualisation sexualises children with adult messages and products. Interestingly, hypersexualisation is beginning to effect boys, too.

Young girls have been on ITV This Morning pole dancing. Why would we teach children to pole dance? Something that has always been associated with stripping, sex, and the sex industry? Why are young children on live TV in their underwear dancing on a pole?

Fashion and clothing products demonstrate the way children are sexualised to sell products including padded bras for children that say 'little miss naughty' on them. Children are made to look much older, with a lot of makeup and hair extensions, adult clothing and adult posing.

There's a very concerning trend of slogan t-shirts which encourage rape culture in males; small toddler wears a t-shirt saying 'lock up your daughters'. Why? What is it about this boy that means we should lock up our daughters? What does that phrase mean? It is a phrase linked with sexual behaviour of men towards women, so why does this little boy have it on his top? And what about the babygrows stating, 'I'm a tits man'. This is an explicit message which sexualises breastfeeding, to move it away from a biological process to a sex act by reframing the baby as a man who loves tits. Already, you should be able to see how problematic and prevalent this issue is.

#### Infantilisation

Infantilisation can be defined as treating an adult, talking to an adult or presenting an adult as a child. In other contexts, it might mean being talked to by a boss like a child or being reprimanded like a child for a mistake you made. However, in the context of sex, it means presenting and treating adults like children whilst sexualising them.

Fancy dress clothes deliberately portray childhood as sexy. How many adults go out dressed up as are dressed as children, in the uniform of children to represent childhood,

but the costume has been altered to be sexy. What exactly is sexy about children's uniform? If you search for adult female Disney costumes online, there is a costume sold in Disney Stores and on the Disney website where Mickey Mouse is wearing a corset, hotpants and stockings. Why?

Women in photographs are also posed holding children's toys, in children's body language and facial expressions; what is it about childhood that is so sexy? Some argue it is 'purity' or 'innocence'. However, when we have images like Barney, Kermit the Frog and Dora the Explorer next to a woman in a man's shirt with no trousers on and with deliberate bed-head hair, what message is this giving about how we feel about childhood?

Finally, underwear. More and more adult underwear has children's characters on them. Everything from Mickey Mouse to Fireman Sam and the Mr Men characters. Why would we put children's characters on our underwear? Who would see it? Why should our genitals be decorated with Fireman Sam and Scooby Doo? It is worth really thinking about this.

## **Methods of Sexualisation**

### **0-5 Years**

- ❖ Clothing with sexy slogans on for babies 'sexy baby' 'I love tits' 'WAG to be' 'Who needs money when you're this cute?' 'I love to suck'
- ❖ Baby models, baby beauty pageants, baby photoshoots
- ❖ Baby Bratz dolls dressed in leather lingerie
- ❖ Bralettes, bikinis and lingerie for babies from 18 months and up (bikinis from birth)
- ❖ Cosmetics sold for toddlers include make-up, nail varnish, lipstick etc.
- ❖ Sexualised toys, dolls, characters, gender stereotyped fairy tale characters and heroes in films and series
- ❖ First start to listen to music and watch music videos
- ❖ Girlfriend and boyfriend
- ❖ Fashion resembles adults
- ❖ Slogans across underwear

### **6-11 Years**

- ❖ Padded bras available from 7 years old
- ❖ TV shows focus on relationships, dating, love, heartbreak and bodies
- ❖ Music videos and music lyrics now very prominent
- ❖ Clothing is now mini versions of adult clothing
- ❖ Internet access increases significantly
- ❖ Computer games and online networks
- ❖ Pornography now being viewed
- ❖ Imitate celebrities and heroes
- ❖ Gender stereotyping really starts to affect boys now
- ❖ Beauty pageants, body image issues begin
- ❖ Magazines aimed at girls talk about dating, sex, bodies, dieting, cosmetics, fashion
- ❖ Self-objectification and seeing themselves as sexual to others begins now
- ❖ Disney Channel characters 'metamorphosis' towards sex idols and take fans with them
- ❖ Lingerie, bras, slogan pants, slogan tops

## 12-18 Years

- ❖ Magazines team sexual images of celebs, models and young people with big colourful words like 'sexy' 'dating' 'sex' 'diets' 'kiss-n-tell' 'secrets' 'lose weight' 'get ripped' 'get hard'
- ❖ Porn is consumed regularly and extensively by some
- ❖ Clothing is adult by now
- ❖ Lingerie, contraception, drinking adverts (even food!)
- ❖ Music videos, music lyrics and celebrity culture is central
- ❖ Reality TV – love island, ex on the beach, next top model etc.
- ❖ Sexism, sexist comments, sexual harassment, sexual abuse
- ❖ Frequent use of sexualised video games, internet access
- ❖ Boys are heavily influenced by gender roles now and porn/media is affecting the way they see themselves/others
- ❖ Stuck in limbo where their youth is sexualised but also taboo – 16 years old age of consent but still a child (e.g. 'jailbait')

### Contributions To Self-Sexualisation

The APA (2007) offers a summary of the sources of sexualisation:

Cultural Contributions	Interpersonal Contributions	Intrapsychic Contributions
Media Music Videos Music Lyrics Television Shows Magazines Cartoons Sports Media Internet Video Games Advertising Toys and Products Clothing	Parent's Gender Schemas Plastic Surgery Beauty Pageant Comps Comments Education Settings Peers	Self-Sexualisation Body Image Pressure Self-Objectification

It is important to understand that individuals do not develop or live in isolation, they absorb and take on messages and cultural norms from their environment and relationships with others, so when hypersexualisation of children is absorbed, the intrapsychic results include children who see themselves and measure themselves on how 'sexy' they are or how attractive they are to others, they experience pressure to look a certain way and to have a certain body shape. As found by the APA in 2007, children begin to sexually objectify themselves from a much earlier age than we thought, and this needs thorough exploration.

## Theories and Explanations of Sexualisation of Children

### Socialisation Theory or Social Learning Theory

We imitate behaviours and learn by copying social examples, are children simply copying what they see, and do we celebrate and congratulate the sexiest hottest people?

### Cognitive Theories

Children develop a cognitive script, given to them by us, such as 'to be a boy, I must be strong and tough' 'to be girl, I need to be pretty'; these powerful scripts or 'schemas' direct a child in how they should behave, look and think. For girls, the schema involves a lot of sexualised messages and for boys it the schema involves dominant masculinity.

This theory also includes unconscious processing and subliminal messages like thin = beautiful. Messages linked to desirability and thinness are presented in fun, bright colours in fun fonts on the front of magazines and in media. When strong messages are teamed with bright, fun and funky colours and text, people are more likely to see them as positive.

### Feminist Social Constructivist Theories

The theory that girls and women receive messages from society about who they should be and how they should maintain their gender, their roles and femininity, sexual stereotypes and so on – boys also receive these messages but for them, the messages ultimately harm women and girls by teaching young boys to objectify and sexualise girls.

### Objectification Theories

The powerful visual media has caused us to objectify (make into an object) people. Especially women and girls. Body parts with no head for example in adverts for perfume or clothing. The body becoming an object for sex or marketing. The person becomes dehumanised and demoralized. There are three parts of objectification theory: body surveillance, body shame and then body internalisation of sexual object, the child then behaves in the way they think they should as a sexual object.

### Psychoanalytic Theories

This theory argues that early development and childhood experiences shape how we see ourselves and others, therefore early exposure to sex and adult materials change the way we see the world and ourselves. The theory also argues that early trauma and abuse increases sexualisation and self-sexualisation in children.

### Alternative Theories

- ❖ Dollars, Pounds, Euros: It's all about the money! The theory that the sexualisation of children from as young as humanly possible sells billions of dollars' worth of products that would not usually be sold to children at all.
- ❖ The Walt Disney Controversy: The controversy surrounding The Walt Disney Company comes from the high level of hyper-sexualisation in their films, series, channels, merchandise and celebrity endorsements including the way they move their celebs from dol.

- ❖ **The Corporate Paedophilia Theory:** The theory that the constant subtle sexualisation of children is deliberately managed and manufactured by people in power who are child sex offenders or paedophiles who are creating an environment that perpetuates and trivialises sexual abuse or sexual attraction to children.

## **The Impacts of Sexualisation of Children**

The most common impact of hypersexualisation is the increase of acceptance and belief in stereotypes of gender roles and sex. This means that the children are more likely to believe in stereotypes of women's roles and men's roles, especially in regards to sex and relationships.

The second most common impact of hypersexualisation of children is self-objectification and body image dissatisfaction due to constantly measuring their bodies against the bodies they see in the media.

The third is the earlier onset of sex and sexual activity, which was found by the APA in 2007 to include peers pressuring each other into sex, this could be due to desensitisation towards sex or the glamorisation of sex. As children become very sexualised, they may become completely desensitised to sex or dehumanise others, and only see them as sexual objects or things to have sex with.

The final is sexual abuse; the evidence on this is currently unclear but relates both ways, maybe children who are hypersexualised are targeted by sex offenders? Maybe they become hypersexualised during sexual abuse? Maybe children who are hypersexualised are more likely to commit harmful sexual behaviours against other children?

### **Impacts From Empirical Research**

**Cognitive functioning:** Findings from multiple studies reported by the APA show that cognitive functioning including decision making, mathematics, reasoning tasks and so on are all vastly inhibited by children who self-sexualise or self-objectify. Self-sexualisation takes up a lot of cognitive resource, also, children below 8-10 years old cannot understand that the purpose of an advert is to make you buy something, so when they see oversexualised behaviour on the TV selling chocolate or perfume or clothing, they also absorb the sexual nature of the message as linked to the product. A study was conducted which explored children's academic abilities in maths tests depending on what they were wearing and whether there was a mirror nearby. The children who were asked to wear comfy jumpers to perform the maths test near the mirrors performed very well. The children who were asked to wear revealing clothing or swimsuits near the mirrors to perform the maths test performed much worse and spent much more time checking how they looked in the mirror.

**Physical activity performance:** The 'throwing like a girl phenomenon' is said to be caused after the developmental period when girls have self-sexualised due to society, they keep their arms closer to their bodies instead of putting their whole arm into the throw which meant that it created the 'throw like a girl' movement. This is said to be due to the way women and girls are socialised to be as small as possible, taking up minimum space and not drawing attention to the way their bodies move during sport or movement.

**Body image:** Children are much more likely to feel anxious after being asked to look at themselves in swimsuits in a mirror rather than a jumper, children who have been sexualised or self-sexualised are more likely to use words like disgusting, revolting, horrible about their bodies and their feelings.

**Sexual activity and perceptions about sex:** The hypersexualisation of children results in decreased condom use, decreased sexual assertiveness, negative attitudes towards sweating, periods, bodily functions and pubic hair. The children become adults who are dissatisfied with sex and report that they do not enjoy sex because they are worried about body or performance (APA, 2007).

**Attitudes:** Hypersexualised children are more likely to believe in rape myths and harmful gender stereotypes (Taylor, 2020).

**Struggling to find perfection:** Children who have been sexualised are likely to struggle to attain the bodily perfection forced upon them by the media, this extends quite strongly to boys and young men who struggle to find sexual partners and have the sex they have been watching in porn and seeing on TV. There is now emerging research exploring the way hypersexualised material and consistent porn viewing causes boys and young men to suffer erectile dysfunction in real sex and can need visual stimulation to become aroused or to ejaculate. Some boys and young men report sex being boring or not arousing enough due to the desensitisation they experience through years of watching porn. Girls and boys struggle to achieve perfection to look like the models or porn actors/actresses.

**Desensitisation to plastic surgery:** There is mounting evidence that more and more young people under 18 years old are having breast implants, penis enlargements, vaginoplasty, vulva cosmetic surgery, fillers, implants in their buttocks and so on. This is directly related to the hypersexualisation of children. 66% of girls aged 12-14 years old said they wanted cosmetic surgery (WOWGO, 2016).

### **The Impact of Sexualisation on Practice and Policy**

**Gender biased abuse risk assessments:** Risk assessments contain indicators that play to the sexualisation stereotypes and assume that sexualisation comes from an abuser, rather than society.

**Sexual harassment of girls is low priority:** Girls are often subjected to sexual comments, harassment at school and sexual bullying. When we fail to respond, we collude with it.

**Boys are seen as perpetrators:** Because the entire sexualisation process and objectification process increases masculinity and power issues, boys are no longer seen as potential victims.

**Girls are seen as hyper-desirable:** Girls are seen as so desirable that boys and men 'cannot help themselves', and are therefore excused. The school uniform debate about distracting boys from their education is a clear example.

### **Sexualisation of Children and Links To Safeguarding Children From Sexual Abuse**

It is evident that the sexualisation of children is not only prevalent but has harmful effects. When children show sexually harmful behaviours, show indicators or signs of sexual abuse or exploitation or even show signs of peer-on-peer sexual abuse, it is common for us to look at the child or the parenting as the root cause of the issues.

A lot of our interventions are built around the child protection model of intervening with the individual and the family characteristics, routines and behaviours. The issue of sexualisation presents a whole new spectrum of underlying issues to sexual abuse, sexual health, self-esteem, identity issues, vulnerabilities, sexual exploitation, sexting, abusive images and so on.

In a society that glamorises sex work, stripping, modelling, swapping sex, using sex and selling sex, why would a child who was offered something in return for a sexual act think that was harmful? And why would they listen to us when we told them that it was wrong of the adult to do that?

When sex is constantly used, humans become desensitised to it. This is similar to the way that humans have evolved to be scared of death and injury but now manage to play and spend billions every year on video games about death, war and mass murder. Children are becoming so desensitised to sex and sexual activity that it may cause a disconnect between sex and relationships, where sex is not seen as intimate or private.

Children who are sexually abused may believe that they colluded with or caused the abuse by 'being sexy' or the offender might tell them that they are 'beautiful' or 'sexy' or 'irresistible'.

Professionals, parents and the general public use language such as 'promiscuous' and 'sexualised' and 'mature' to discuss child victims of sexual exploitation which hypersexualises rape and abuse victims.

## **What Can We Do?**

### **Working Through Schools and Formal Education**

- ❖ Media literacy workshops and sessions for children
- ❖ Breaking down sexual stereotyped activities and opportunities for boys and girls at school
- ❖ Development of talent; to move the focus of the child from appearance and sexiness to intellectual or physical talent
- ❖ Comprehensive, early and critical SRE

### **Working With The Entire Family As A Prevention Method**

- ❖ Studies have shown that parents and carers can subtly encourage or completely ignore sexualisation leading to children who absorb it much faster
- ❖ Teaching parents and carers to take part in co-viewing where the parent/carer deliberately makes a critical comment about media, sexualisation, objectification etc. to spark a conversation or debate
- ❖ Encouraging and taking part in activism

### **Working Directly With Children You Are Concerned About**

- ❖ Show them alternative media, videos, vines, blogs and speeches about these issues and allow them to discuss and debate
- ❖ Support them to create their own as a project
- ❖ Support them in activism and find a topic that you can help them to critique
- ❖ Introduce them to projects, programmes and opportunities that emphasise their competence, skills and passions rather than their appearance or sexualised perceptions and biases

### **Applying This Knowledge To Your Working Life**

- ❖ Note down or start to document how common self-sexualisation, objectification and external sexualisation is in the children you work with
- ❖ Challenge assumptions, decisions or notes made about a child that are based on sexualisation of their gender, their age or their characteristics
- ❖ Introduce this topic into participation groups and youth projects
- ❖ Consider whether this may be linked to the abuse/exploitation of any of the children you are

For more information about hypersexualisation or victim blaming, please visit [www.victimfocus.org.uk](http://www.victimfocus.org.uk) or contact Jessica on [jessica@victimfocus.org.uk](mailto:jessica@victimfocus.org.uk)