

Beauty pageants and our children

[Life](#), [Childhood](#)



Beauty Pageants and Our Children Alost 3 million children, most of them girls, from the ages of 6 months and 17 years compete in beauty pageants annually in America. Competition can be local and national and they compete in categories such as swimwear, talent, costume of your choice, and eveningwear. This is an industry where mothers give her daughter energy drinks for a boost before pageants, 3-year-olds don fake fingernails, and parents regularly spend five thousand dollars on a child's pageant outfit (O'Neill 1). Beauty pageants have negative consequences on America's youth contestants through the pressure to be " perfect, " media influences, and child sexualization, which results in exhaustion, eating disorders, and body image issues in their future. In recent years, the child beauty pageant industry has exponentially grown in size and popularity. This growth is mainly due to television shows, such as Toddlers & Tiaras and Here Comes Honey Boo Boo that may be entertaining but exploit little girls in the process. These reality shows expose the behind-the-scenes horrors of beauty pageants that most people were oblivious too before. These shows have also revealed the use of energy supplements to improve the contestants performance, age-inappropriate costumes, intense and painful beauty regimens. Alana Thompson, featured on TLC's Toddlers & Tiaras, is a seven-year-old beauty queen, nicknamed Honey Boo Boo, whose mother frequently gives her the infamous " Go-Go Juice", a mix of Red Bull and Mountain Dew, before pageants. It is common knowledge that energy drinks are bad for one's health, but every nutritionist in the world would agree that Red Bull for a seven-year-old is tremendously dangerous. Alana now has her own reality television show Here Comes Honey Boo Boo. Parents are not only harming

their children's health but also their moral. On one *Toddlers & Tiaras* episode, Paisley, merely 3-years-old, sported a costume based on the prostitute in *Pretty Woman*. In a 2011 episode, Madiysyn "Mady" Verst's mother filled out the then-4-year-old's chest with fake breasts and an impossibly round behind for a Dolly Parton routine. Experts in child development argue the difference between playing dress-up and making a profession out of it. "Little girls are supposed to play with dolls, not be dolls," says Mark Sichel, a New York-based licensed clinical social worker, who calls the extreme grooming common at pageants "a form of child abuse." Playing dress-up "is normal and healthy, but when it's demanded, it leaves the child not knowing what they want," he says. Accentuating their appearance with such accoutrements as fake hair, teeth, spray tans and breast padding "causes the children tremendous confusion, wondering why they are not okay without those things" (Triggs 1). All of this confusion and body image problems is instilled in child beauty pageant contestants at a very young age. Ultimately, this leads to eating disorders, psychological issues, and relationship problems in the contestants' later years. A study conducted at the University of Minnesota by Anna Wonderlich, Diann Ackard, and Judith Henderson showed the correlation between childhood beauty pageants and adult disordered eating, body dissatisfaction, depression, and self-esteem (Wonderlich 1). The results of this scientific experiment proved that for all the tests that assessed characteristics of anorexia and bulimia nervosa scores for those who had participated in beauty pageants were higher than scores for those who had not participated (Wonderlich 5). These results indicate a significant association between childhood beauty pageant

participation and increased body dissatisfaction, difficulty trusting interpersonal relationships, and greater impulsive behaviors, and indicate a trend toward increased feelings of ineffectiveness (Wonderlich 6). Another example of the destructive effects of childhood beauty pageant is Brooke Breedwell, now nineteen, who was a child pageant contestant and a star of the television documentary, "Painted Babies." "As a girl, [Breedwell] suffered from stress and anxiety while striving for an unrealistic standard of perfection. [In various interviews], she explains that her mother's ambition, coupled with her own obsessive drive to win, resulted in severe social and psychological consequences" (Ahrens 86). Another negative consequence of childhood beauty pageants is the disturbing sexualization of young girls that steals away their treasured innocence—as if eating disorders and body image problems were not enough. Former child beauty queen Nicole Hunter confirms this theory by explaining that "dressing and acting like a woman at a young age compelled her to prematurely confront her sexuality, which in turn lowered her self-esteem" (Lieberman 741). The child pageant circuit concentrates on the ideals of perfection and beauty, with an accompanying focus on sexuality. Innocent girls dressed in skimpy costumes parade and dance, remove pieces of their outfits and wink at judges. Basically, young beauty queens are taught to flirt and manipulate their early sexuality in order to win. Though frequently condemned for such eccentric and damaging practices, the child pageant industry has been gaining success and extensive popularity (Lieberman 745). Additionally, reporter Richard Goldstein investigated the JonBenet Ramsey, a child beauty queen, murder case and brought to the surface both our horror at how effectively a child can be

constructed as a sexual being and our guilt at the pleasure we take in such a sight (Giroux 50). Her dynamic role in pageants was vastly examined by media after the murder. After JonBenet's highly publicized murder, the problems of child beauty pageants, especially the degradation of young girls, are first brought to society's attention. Although many pageant parents argue that the press unfairly focused on the connection of beauty pageants to Jon Benet's murder, these defenders rarely address the concerns of robbing a child of her virtue by depicting young girls as "sexualized nymphets." They have little to say about what adolescents actually gain in pageants. Those in favor of the pageants overlook how a child might see herself and her ability to form relationships with society when her feelings of self-worth is defined solely through a belief that beauty is one-dimensional and patronizing (Giroux 54-55). No five-year-old child enjoys getting her hair ripped out and teased, spending hours each day practicing exhausting dance routines, or devoting every weekend traveling to pageants rather than playing with friends. It is the beauty pageant contestant's mother who forces them to endure these strenuous and sometimes painful rituals in order to achieve their own satisfaction. When feminist writer-performer, StaceyAnn Chin first saw *Toddlers & Tiaras* she was "flabbergasted by the parents who were so invested in these contests they got angry if their girls showed any signs of flagging." In regards to the infamous pageant moms, Chin states that, "the pageant reminded me a little of dog shows--tiny, powerless competitors trained to do as they are told, with trainers who exploit their charges to gain fame and fortune and live out some archaic dream they once had for themselves" (Chin 1). The vast majority of pageant moms deny the

harmful effects beauty pageants have on their child. Pageant mothers often “neutralize” their deviant behavior of enrolling their daughter in pageants by claiming pageants help their daughter rather than hurt. Also, mothers deny their own responsibility as the accountable parent by claiming that her daughter chooses to participate in beauty pageants (Pannell 68). Every single pageant mom asked in a study about childhood beauty pageants talked about competitors winning prize money, crowns, trophies and gifts in child beauty pageants (Mosel-Talavera 81). Some mothers deceptively sign their children up for pageants to exploit their daughters financially. One pageant mother says that there is a very infamous pageant child that always wins a large sum of money, ‘There is one little girl down South — she’s the daughter of one of the biggest known photographers. In six weeks’ time she went from pageant to pageant and won like \$40, 000.’ In the summer of 2005, there was another child, whose mother also owns a pageant business, who won three cars at pageants (Levey 204-205). These examples clearly reveal the evils of parents exploiting their children in pageants for their own selfish rewards. In childhood beauty pageants, the pressure from parents, influence from the media, and the desire to win all lead to disastrous consequences for the participants, which will stay with them for the rest of their life. Eating disorders, body image issues, and an early loss of innocence are just a few of the consequences these precious girls will have to deal with in their lifetime. No child should have to struggle with these problems at such a young age. Although little girls dressed up in frilly dresses and tiaras may be cute, there is a fine line between a fun beauty pageant and ruining a young girl’s life.