Report of the task force on the sexualization of girls

Business

Executive Summary Journalists, child advocacy organizations, parents, and psychologists have argued that the sexualization of girls is a broad and increasing problem and is harmful to girls. The APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls was formed in response to these expressions of public concern.

APA has long been involved in issues related to the impact of media content on children. In 1994, APA adopted a policy resolution on Violence in Mass Media, which updated and expanded an earlier resolution on televised violence. In 2004, the APA Task Force on Advertising and Children produced a report examining road issues related to advertising to children.

That report provided recommendations to restrict advertising that is primarily directed at young children and to include developmentally appropriate disclaimers in advertising, as well as recommendations regarding research, applied psychology, industry practices, media literacy, advertising, and schools. In 2005, APA adopted the policy resolution on Violence in Video Games and Interactive Media, which documented the negative impact of exposure to violent interactive media on children and youth and called for the reduction of violence in these media.

These resolutions and reports addressed how violent media and advertising affect children and youth, but they did not address sexualization. The APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls was tasked with examining the psychological theory, research, and clinical experience addressing the sexualization of girls via media and other cultural messages, including the prevalence of these messages and their impact on girls and the role and

impact of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. The task force was charged with producing a report, including recommendations for research, practice, education nd training, policy, and public awareness. This report examines and summarizes psychological theory, research, and clinical experience addressing the sexualization of girls. The report (a) defines sexualization; (b) examines the prevalence and provides examples of sexualization in society and in cultural institutions, as well as interpersonally and intrapsychically; (c) evaluates the evidence suggesting that sexualization has negative consequences for girls and for the rest of society; and (d) describes positive alternatives that may help counteract the influence of sexualization.

There are several components to sexualization, and these set it apart from healthy sexuality.

Sexualization occurs when a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; a person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.

All four conditions need not be present; any one is an indication of sexualization. The fourth condition (the inappropriate imposition of sexuality) is especially relevant to children. Anyone (girls, boys, men, women) can be sexualized. But when children are imbued with adult sexuality, it is often

imposed upon them rather than chosen by them. Self-motivated sexual exploration, on the other hand, is not sexualization by our definition, nor is age-appropriate exposure to information about sexuality.

Evidence for the Sexualization of Girls Virtually every media form studied provides ample vidence of the sexualization of women, including television, music videos, music lyrics, movies, magazines, sports media, video games, the Internet, and advertising (e. g. , Gow, 1996; Grauerholz & King, 1997; Krassas, Blauwkamp,& Wesselink, 2001, 2003; Lin, 1997; Plous & Neptune, 1997; Vincent, 1989; Ward, 1995). Some studies have examined forms of media that are especially popular with children and adolescents, such as video games and teen-focused magazines. Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls: Executive Summary 1 In study after study, findings have indicated that women ore often than men are portrayed in a sexual manner (e. g.

, dressed in revealing clothing, with bodily postures or facial expressions that imply sexual readiness) and are objectified (e. g. , used as a decorative object, or as body parts rather than a whole person). In addition, a narrow (and unrealistic) standard of physical beauty is heavily emphasized. These are the models of femininity presented for young girls to study and emulate.

In some studies, the focus was on the sexualization of female characters across all ages, but most focused specifically on young adult women.

Although few studies examined the prevalence of sexualized portrayals of girls in particular, those that have been conducted found that such

sexualization does occur and may be increasingly common. For example, O'Donohue, Gold, and McKay (1997) coded advertisements over a 40-year period in five magazines targeted to men, women, or a general adult readership. Although relatively few (1. 5%) of the ads portrayed children in a sexualized manner, of those that did, 85% sexualized girls rather than boys. Furthermore, the percentage of sexualizing ads increased over time.

Although extensive analyses documenting the exualization of girls, in particular, have yet to be conducted, individual examples can easily be found.

These include advertisements (e. g. , the Skechers " naughty and nice" ad that featured Christina Aguilera dressed as a schoolgirl in pigtails, with her shirt unbuttoned, licking a lollipop), dolls (e. g.

, Bratz dolls dressed in sexualized clothing such as miniskirts, fishnet stockings, and feather boas), clothing (thongs sized for 7– to 10-year-olds, some printed with slogans such as " wink wink"), and television programs (e. g. , a televised fashion show in which adult models in lingerie were presented as oung girls). Research documenting the pervasiveness and influence of such products and portrayals is sorely needed. Societal messages that contribute to the sexualization of girls come not only from media and merchandise but also through girls' interpersonal relationships (e.

g. , with parents, teachers, and peers; Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Parents may contribute to sexualization in a number of ways. For example, parents may convey the message that maintaining an attractive physical appearance is

the most important goal for girls. Some may allow or encourage plastic surgery to help girls meet that goal.

Research shows that teachers sometimes encourage girls to play at being sexualized adult women (Martin, 1988) or hold beliefs that girls of color are " hypersexual" and thus unlikely to achieve academic success (Rolon-Dow, 2004).

Both male and female peers have been found to contribute to the sexualization of girls—girls by policing each other to ensure conformance with standards of thinness and sexiness (Eder, 1995; Nichter, 2000) and boys by sexually objectifying and harassing girls. Finally, at the extreme end, parents, teachers, and peers, as well as others (e. g. , other family members, coaches, or strangers) ometimes sexually abuse, assault, prostitute, or traffic girls, a most destructive form of sexualization. If girls purchase (or ask their parents to purchase) products and clothes designed to make them look physically appealing and sexy, and if they style their identities after the sexy celebrities who populate their cultural landscape, they are, in effect, sexualizing themselves.

Girls also sexualize themselves when they think of themselves in objectified terms.

Psychological researchers have identified self-objectification as a key process whereby girls learn to think of and treat their own bodies as objects of others' desires Frederickson ; Roberts, 1997; McKinley ; Hyde, 1996). In self-objectification, girls internalize an observer's perspective on their physical

selves and learn to treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated for their appearance. Numerous studies have documented the presence of self-objectification in women more than in men. Several studies have also documented this phenomenon in adolescent and preadolescent girls (McConnell, 2001; Slater & Tiggemann, 2002). Consequences of the Sexualization of Girls Psychology offers several theories to explain how the sexualization of girls and women could influence irls' well-being.

Ample evidence testing these theories indicates that sexualization has negative effects in a variety of domains, including cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, sexuality, and attitudes and beliefs. Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls: Executive Summary 2 Although most of these studies have been conducted on women in late adolescence (i. e. , college age), findings are likely to generalize to younger adolescents and to girls, who may be even more strongly affected because their sense of self is still being formed. Cognitive and Emotional Consequences

Cognitively, self-objectification has been repeatedly shown to detract from the ability to concentrate and focus one's attention, thus leading to impaired performance on mental activities such as mathematical computations or logical reasoning (Frederickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003; Hebl, King, & Lin, 2004).

One study demonstrated this fragmenting quite vividly (Fredrickson et al. , 1998). While alone in a dressing room, college students were asked to try on

and evaluate either a swimsuit or a sweater. While they waited for 10 minutes wearing the garment, they completed a math test.

The results revealed that young women in swimsuits performed significantly worse on the math problems than did those wearing sweaters.

No differences were found for young men. In other words, thinking about the body and comparing it to sexualized cultural ideals disrupted mental capacity. In the emotional domain, sexualization and objectification undermine confidence in and comfort with one's own body, leading to a host of negative emotional consequences, such as shame, anxiety, and even self-disgust. The association between self-objectification and anxiety about appearance and feelings of shame has been found in dolescent girls (12–13-year-olds) (Slater ; Tiggemann, 2002) as well as in adult women.

Mental and Physical Health Research links sexualization with three of the most common mental health problems of girls and women: eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression or depressed mood (Abramson ; Valene, 1991; Durkin ; Paxton, 2002; Harrison, 2000; Hofschire ; Greenberg, 2001; Mills, Polivy, Herman, ; Tiggemann, 2002; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw, ; Stein, 1994; Thomsen, Weber, ; Brown, 2002; Ward, 2004).

Several studies (on both teenage and adult women) have found associations between exposure to narrow representations of female beauty (e. . , the " thin ideal") and disordered eating attitudes and symptoms. Research also links exposure to sexualized female ideals with lower self-esteem, negative mood, and depressive symptoms among adolescent girls and women. In

addition to mental health consequences of sexualization, research suggests that girls' and women's physical health may also be negatively affected, albeit indirectly. Sexuality Sexual well-being is an important part of healthy development and overall well-being, yet evidence suggests that the sexualization of girls has negative consequences in terms of girls' ability to develop healthy sexuality.

Self-objectification has been linked directly with diminished sexual health among adolescent girls (e. g. , as measured by decreased condom use and diminished sexual assertiveness; Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 2006). Frequent exposure to narrow ideals of attractiveness is associated with unrealistic and/or negative expectations concerning sexuality. Negative effects (e. g.

, shame) that emerge during adolescence may lead to sexual problems in adulthood (Brotto, Heiman, & Tolman, in press). Attitudes and Beliefs Frequent exposure to media images that sexualize girls and women affects how girls conceptualize femininity and exuality. Girls and young women who more frequently consume or engage with mainstream media content offer stronger endorsement of sexual stereotypes that depict women as sexual objects (Ward, 2002; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006).

They also place appearance and physical attractiveness at the center of women's value. Impact on Others and on Society The sexualization of girls can also have a negative impact on other groups (i. e.

, boys, men, and adult women) and on society more broadly. Exposure to narrow ideals of female sexual attractiveness may make it difficult for some en to find an " acceptable" partner or to fully enjoy intimacy with a female partner (e. g. , Schooler ; Ward, 2006). Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls: Executive Summary 3 Adult women may suffer by trying to conform to a younger and younger standard of ideal female beauty. More general societal effects may include an increase in sexism; fewer girls pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); increased rates of sexual harassment and sexual violence; and an increased demand for child pornography.

Positive Alternatives to the Sexualization of Girls

Some girls and their supporters, now and in the past, have resisted mainstream characterizations of girls as sexual objects. A variety of promising approaches exist to reduce the amount of sexualization that occurs and to ameliorate its effects. Because the media are important sources of sexualizing images, the development and implementation of schoolbased media literacy training programs could be key in combating the influence of sexualization. There is an urgent need to teach critical skills in viewing and consuming media, focusing specifically on the sexualization of women and girls. Other school-based approaches include ncreased access to athletic and other extracurricular programs for girls and the development and presentation of comprehensive sexuality education programs.

Strategies for parents and other caregivers include learning about the impact of sexualization on girls and coviewing media with their children in order to

influence the way in which media messages are interpreted. Action by parents and families has been effective in confronting sources of sexualized images of girls. Organized religious and other ethical instruction can offer girls important practical and psychological alternatives to the values conveyed y popular culture. Girls and girls' groups can also work toward change. Alternative media such as " zines" (Web-based magazines), " blogs" (Web logs), and feminist magazines, books, and Web sites encourage girls to become activists who speak out and develop their own alternatives. Girl empowerment groups also support girls in a variety of ways and provide important counterexamples to sexualization.

Recommendations I. Research A solid research base has explored the effects of having an objectified body image or viewing objectified body images in the media. Much previous work, however, has focused on women.

Future studies focusing on girls are needed. In addition, more culturally competent, focused work is required to document the phenomenon of the sexualization of girls; to explore the short- and long-term harm of viewing, listening to, and buying into a sexualized pathway to power; and to test alternative presentations of girlhood, sexuality, and power.

We recommend that psychologists conduct research to: 1. Document the frequency of sexualization, specifically of girls, and examine whether sexualization is increasing. 2. Examine and inform our understanding of the circumstances under which the sexualization of girls ccurs and identify factors involving the media and products that either contribute to or buffer against the sexualization of girls. 3.

Examine the presence or absence of the sexualization of girls and women in all media but especially in movies, music videos, music lyrics, video games, books, blogs, and Internet sites. In particular, research is needed to examine the extent to which girls are portrayed in sexualized and objectified ways and whether this has increased over time. In addition, it is important that these studies focus specifically on sexualization rather than on sexuality more broadly or on other constructs such as ender-role stereotyping. 4. Describe the influence and/or impact of sexualization on girls. This includes both short- and long-term effects of viewing or buying into a sexualizing objectifying image, how these effects influence girls' development, self-esteem, friendships, and intimate relationships, ideas about femininity, body image, physical, mental, and sexual health, sexual satisfaction, desire for plastic surgery, risk factors for early pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted infections, attitudes toward women, other girls, boys, and men, as well as educational aspirations and future career success.

Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls: Executive Summary 4 5. Explore issues of age compression (" adultification" of young girls and " youthification" of adult women), including prevalence, impact on the emotional well-being of girls and women, and influences on behavior. 6. Explore differences in presentation of sexualized images and effects of these images on girls of color; lesbian, bisexual, questioning, and transgendered girls; girls of different cultures and ethnicities; girls of different religions; girls with disabilities; and girls from all socioeconomic groups. . Identify media (including advertising) and marketing alternatives to sexualized images of girls, such as positive depictions of sexuality.

8. Identify effective, culturally competent protective factors (e. g. , helping adolescent girls develop a nonobjectified model of normal, healthy sexual development and expression through school or other programs).