

# Children competing in child beauty pageants: a scar on psychological development

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## **Child Beauty Pageants**

A Child Beauty Pageant is a contest where young girls compete for the crown of beauty. It began in the 1960's. In the contest, young girls have to model, dance and present what their talents are. Then, they are judged individually in looks, capability, perfection, and confidence. Finally, one girl wins the crown, banner, trophy, gift bag and cash and is named " Miss Beauty Pageant." In order to win, these young girls need to have make up, fake hair, wax their eyebrows, tan their body, and many other things that young girls are not supposed to do at such age. Young girls should not be subjected to these types of contests because it is not healthy psychologically, they may lose their innocence and they waste their childhood.

The contest's name and division depends on the age. Baby Miss America Pageant is divided in " Mini Miss," which is for baby girls of 3-13 months. " Tiny Miss" are for girls of 14-23 months. " Baby Miss" are for girls of 2-3 years old. Finally, " Little Miss" are for girls of 4-6 years old. On all categories, all the contestants need to model on the stage, do their own dance, and do an act to show any kind of talent they may have. According to Christina Schnell, the young girls are judged in personality, fun fashion outfit, evening wear and overall impression. But to be chosen as one of the participants requires a lot of unhealthy things to be done. The girl must have a great application in order to be picked - and yes, that means having a great picture taken. The end product of this is a picture of a young girl who wears too much makeup and hairspray - some of them even look just like a Barbie doll.

After being successfully chosen these toddlers have to keep up with the competition. Their moms do their make up, tanning, hairstyle and anything that the mother thinks is best for the girl. All the mothers are in charge of the looks of their child but sometimes this gets out of control and makes their daughters to do things they do not want to. For example, dieting. In the January 26, 2012 episode of the TV show, *Toddlers and Tiaras*, a proud pageant mom exposes that she makes her daughter follow a strict diet. Her daughter, Ever Rose, follows a diet of only 1, 600 calories a day by making her eat only salads without any kind of dressing. " You don't get as good of a score if your dress doesn't fit good," says her mother. Rose cries because she wants more food but her mother does not allow her to eat anything else but salad. Toddlers get a lot of weight swings in order to fit in their dresses and since they are very young, these swings happen very often. This stress is messing with the child's metabolism and making them unhappy - no one should blame a little girl to want McDonalds, ice cream or candies because that is what little girls eat. Along with makeup and hair sessions, these girls are going through a lot of things a young girl should not go through. For example, being called " ugly" or " fat" by their mothers. Other contestants or the judges may also have a big impact on the girls' life. At such age, girls have to deal with the stress of being skinny and beautiful - otherwise they will lose the contest and are not considered beautiful at all. These are the main reasons young girls develop bulimia or anorexia and have low self-esteem when they grow up, because they were taught that fat is bad and not to eat too much.

Growing up with these kinds of habits, the added attention and distorted concept of beauty might leave a scar on the girl's psychological development. According to Wonderlich's research, females that have participated in pageants are more likely to develop eating disorders than the ones that have not. Dissatisfaction with their figure is another aspect they grow with, the consequence of the false concept of beauty they have been living with. Wonderlich also said that depression is another immediate derivative of the previous aspects. What looks like a baby girl having fun being all dressed up might end up as a young woman with unhealthy psychological behavior as a result of participating in beauty pageants. These young girls grow up thinking they have to constantly act and dress like an older woman – making them feel stressed and depressed in the future. Because of all the attention they have during the contest – having cameras, being called beautiful, etc. – they sometimes demand even more attention as they grow up.

Psychological development for a person is not built in a short time. These pageants are long processes in which the girls have to be in a constant state of embellishment. Instead of living the life of a regular 3-year-old, Ever Rose is living the life of a mature woman. Like Rose, there are many girls that are forced to wear grown woman clothing, sexualizing their image and distorting what a young girl should be. As a particular case, Maddy Jackson, a 4-year-old pageant on *Toddlers and Tiaras* in the 2011 season, was dressed up as Dolly Parton with the curves and wearing heels. What is the point on making a girl look like a sexual icon? It is a distorted concept of beauty for Maddy having to wear a stuffed bra and underwear to achieve a curvy figure. It is

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also unhealthy to a young girl to wear heels because the bones are still forming and they can get some shortening of the tendons. Even though Maddy does not know what she is doing or the harm she is doing to herself, she will grow up thinking that this is a normal thing that every other female does – always seeking to look different than the people of her own age.

Looking like Dolly Parton is not enough to make your way through. They have to also perform accordingly with their character. Maddy Jackson was dressed up like Julia Robert in *Pretty Woman*, but she also performed the scene where Julia Roberts was dressed like a prostitute and Maddy had to act like her. The girl imitated Julia's walking and attitude because the mother thought this would give her daughter "extra points." The worst part might not even be that the little girls dress and behave as a sexual icon, but that mothers teach their daughters to act like someone they are not and are making them believe that is the right thing to do. What will happen to these beauty pageant contestants when they grow up older? A girl that has been in beauty pageants since potentially at three months old wearing make up, going through having fake hair and eye lashes at three years old to having fake boobs when she turns six is definitely going to make her see the world differently. Expectations are that these young girls, who have been their whole life in these types of beauty contests, might get the body they have longed for almost all their lives through plastic surgery by the age of 15, thus adapting to their world and finally feeling a sense of belonging. There is no relation on how they act to how old they are anymore. They act older than they look and this has become part of their daily life, to be someone they are not.

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All these adult behaviors make the child waste their childhood. Young girls should be dancing ballet or doing recreational activities like painting, singing, playing with Barbie, doing sports, playing in the park, making new friends, etc. instead of worrying about winning the contest and all the things they have to do to win the contest and their appearance – hair, make up, and body image. A six-year-old girl should be dressing up for fun – like in Halloween or in her house with her friends for fun– and not to feel forced to look and act like a princess or a young woman all the time. Because of all the things the little girls have to do in order to win the beauty pageant contest– practice, rehearsals, attend to beauty events, etc. – the mother does not realize that she is wasting her child’s time to be what she is, a child. These young girls do not interact with other young girls outside of the contests so they tend not to have friends when they are done with the contest and develop the feeling of loneliness as they grow up.

Some people might say that submitting girls to beauty pageants is good for their child because they will learn, from a very young age, how to act like a woman. But the fact is that there are parents that could put in danger the care of the child because of this. In fact, Maddy’s performance of Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* made her father fight for full custody because he thought her mother was “sexualizing” her. Like Maddy’s, there are more fathers against the mother’s behavior towards their child. Parents are responsible for their children’s discipline and education. Their role is to teach their children the right thing to do – like what is right and wrong. In the beauty pageants, the girl’s parents are teaching their child that behave and dress like an adult is the right thing to do. According to Hilary Levey’s

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research, parents want their daughter to participate in a beauty contest in order to be “ successful in society” and gain social skills – to be able to interact with others, meet new people or not to be shy – and to increase self-esteem – without knowing all the harm they do to their child.

Levey observed that little girls grow up with the idea that beauty is the only thing that matters in their life. At a young age they feel they need to have make up on all the time, wear fancy clothes and act like they are a princess – it is not funny anymore, it is more like a kind of a job to do it. The girls also demand to have more make up, new clothes, hair stylists and their life is about the 80 percent of their subjects. Levey added that parents of a higher socioeconomic status admitted that they wanted to teach their child how to compete in the real world. “ Competition is very healthy,” said one mother who entered her child in a beauty pageant contest. “ We need competition to keep idiots out of the workforce.”

Other people might say that beauty competitions for young girls do not change their who the girls are but there have been cases where the girl’s behavior demonstrates the opposite. Many girls have lost control of themselves because they did not obtain what they wanted – all the attention of the cameras and audience. In *Toddlers and Tiaras*, eight-year-old Danielle, is jealous of another contestant because she was constantly smiling to the cameras. She claimed the other girl was “ stealing her spotlight” and wished her not to appear on TV. This behavior shows all the frustration and pressure Danielle has during the contests and the feelings towards the others contestants as well. No one should blame Danielle or any other participant

that feels jealous of the other contestants but people can see that the girls do change who they are because they are constantly feeling threatened by the other girls and this is the only way they can defend themselves - fighting back and hurting others. An eight-year-old girl or younger does not know how to handle this kind of situation and it will make them act egocentric to survive in these types of competitions.

One could say that the industry of beauty has distorted the image of women to the extent that, since a very young age, they live with coping with the status quo. Celebrating beauty should be more than a pageant, more than makeup and hairspray. Celebrating beauty should not be subjected to a crown, it should be acknowledging what is really important: women as people. The involvement of toddlers and young girls in beauty contests hurt the child's development. A girl should grow up playing with her friends, toys, painting, etc. and not worrying about her looks and stressing about a beauty contest. It hurts the girls psychologically, it corrupts their innocence and it wastes their childhood. A child should be able to feel beautiful without being a participant in such kinds of contests. Every girl is beautiful.