



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on August 24, 2012

Study Shows Girls as Young as Six View Themselves as Sex Objects

A university study shows that girls as young as six are being conditioned by the media to think of themselves as sex objects. While past studies have found that teens and young women increasingly see themselves in such terms, the study, published last month in the journal [Sex Roles](#), is the first to identify self-sexualization in early elementary-school-aged girls.



The study was conducted by psychologists at [Knox College](#) in Galesburg, Illinois, who used paper dolls to determine the level of “self-sexualization” in girls ages six to nine. A total of 60 girls were shown two dolls, one dressed in tight and revealing “sexy” clothing, and the other wearing a loose-fitting, “trendy” outfit. Using a different set of dolls for each question, the researchers asked each girl to choose the doll that: 1) looked like herself; 2) looked how she wanted to look; 3) was the “popular” girl in school; 4) she wanted to play with.

The researchers found that across the board the girls most often chose the “sexy” doll over the more modestly dressed one. Most significantly, 68 percent of the girls said the sexy doll looked how they wanted to look, and 72 percent said that the sexy doll was more popular than the non-sexy doll.

“It’s very possible that girls wanted to look like the sexy doll because they believe sexiness leads to popularity, which comes with many social advantages,” said lead researcher Christy Starr. She added that she was surprised at the number of six- and seven-year-old girls who chose the sexy doll as the one they most wanted to look like.

According to [LiveScience.com](#), the researchers found that while media alone was not the deciding factor in influencing girls to prefer sexualized clothing, “girls who watched a lot of TV and movies and who had mothers who reported self-objectifying tendencies, such as worrying about their clothes and appearance many times a day ... were more likely to say the sexy doll was popular.”

The authors suggested that the media, as well as mothers who tend to sexualize women, may predispose girls toward sexually objectifying themselves, with both factors playing off each other and amplifying the effect. “On the other hand,” reported LiveScience, “mothers who reported often using TV and movies as teaching moments about bad behaviors and unrealistic scenarios were much less likely to have daughters who said they looked like the sexy doll. The power of maternal instruction during media viewing may explain why every additional hour of TV or movie watching actually decreased the odds by



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seven percent that a girl would choose the sexy doll as popular, Starr said.”

The religious beliefs of mothers also appear to be an important factor in how girls see themselves, the researchers noted, with girls who watch a lot of television or movies — but who also have religious mothers — tending to be buffered against self-sexualization, perhaps, the researchers wrote, because these mothers “may be more likely to model higher body-esteem and communicate values such as modesty,” a factor that could lessen the impact on girls of the the sexualized images they see in media.

Interestingly, the researchers found that girls who didn’t watch a lot of TV or other sexualized media, but who had religious mothers, were actually much more likely to say that they wanted to look like the sexy doll. “This pattern of results may reflect a case of ‘forbidden fruit’ or reactance,” wrote the authors, “whereby young girls who are overprotected from the perceived ills of media by highly religious parents ... begin to idealize the forbidden due to their underexposure.” It is also possible, the authors suggested, that mothers of girls who demonstrate sexualized attitudes and behaviors responded by limiting their daughters’ access to TV and movies. Regardless of the interpretation of the results, “low media consumption is not a silver bullet” in protecting girls from early self-sexualization, the study’s authors wrote.

In 2007 the American Psychological Association (APA) reported that in “study after study, findings have indicated that women more often than men are portrayed in a sexual manner ... and are objectified. These are the models of femininity presented for young girls to study and emulate.” The report cited such examples as “advertisements (e.g. the Sketchers 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 (e.g. thong underwear 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 young girls).”

According to LiveScience.com, Eileen Zurbriggen, “a professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and chairwoman of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, said the buffering effects of religious beliefs and instruction, co-viewing of media and lower levels of maternal self-objectification pinpointed by the new study are exciting, because they ‘suggest that parents can do a lot to protect girls from the sexualizing culture.’”

Starr said that mothers often feel “so overwhelmed by the sexualizing messages their daughters are receiving from the media that they feel they can do nothing to help. Our study’s findings indicate otherwise — we found that in actuality, mothers are key players in whether or not their daughters sexualize themselves. Moms can help their daughters navigate a sexualizing world by instructing their daughters about their values and by not demonstrating objectified and sexualized behaviors themselves.”

LiveScience noted that while the Knox College psychologists “studied the influence of mothers because there’s more evidence that daughters model themselves after their mothers,” Starr “believes that fathers may also play an important role in how young girls see themselves. She would also like to look at how fathers and the media influence boys’ understanding of sexualized messages and views toward women. More research is also needed, she said, on the consequences of sexualization on young girls’ health, well-being and identity, and whether young girls who objectify themselves also act out these sexual behaviors.”





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