



Girl Connection

For those who serve adolescent females

October 2008

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Iowa Gender-Specific Services Task Force

Be a Role Model

I recently read an article about high-heeled shoes for girls ages 0-6 months. Take a moment and let that sink in. High-heeled shoes...for infants.

Of course my immediate reaction was shock. Who in their right mind thinks this is a good idea? Admittedly, my reaction is likely stronger than most due to my years of working with women and children who have been victimized.

My personal perspective notwithstanding, I can understand someone simply thinking this kind of thing is "cute." As a matter of fact, I think that is what companies who sell this type of product are counting on: an innocent failure to recognize unintended consequences.

Upon further reflection, the high heels for babies weren't shocking so much as inevitable - the culmination of a burgeoning trend. Women and girls have long been viewed in terms of their sexuality; however, this has generally been an attitude that took hold when a girl reached puberty. This barrier, albeit a flimsy one, has weakened considerably in recent years. The marketing of high-heeled shoes for infants simply takes it to a logical, yet unsettling, chronological conclusion.

In the not too distant past, stores began selling t-shirts for 13 year olds that read, "Who needs brains when you have these?" Next? Mothers began paying to have their 8 year old daughters dressed up as "pop stars" at the mall. Next? Thong underwear for five year olds. It was only a matter of time before sexualizing infants became normal and even "fun." Where does one draw the line?

Just as fathers can be tempted to live out their high school glory days through their sons' athletics with sometimes disastrous results, adult women who dress up little girls to look "sexy" may unknowingly be using little girls as surrogates while simultaneously reinforcing the broader societal notion that to be a woman means that your primary worth is in how you look.

Newborn girls in high-heels, five year olds in thong underwear and teens in t-shirts that read "Future Porn Star" demonstrate how miserably we can fail at giving the next generation a shot at having it better than we did. Women know the sometimes difficult struggle to be appreciated for more than our sexuality, yet inexplicably we are often the loudest voices extolling the virtues of rigid and highly sexualized femininity to the detriment of future generations. After all, who is buying this stuff?

What 6 month old has a choice about wearing high-heeled shoes? What 5 year old *wants* to wear thong underwear? What 8 year old can afford the make-over at the mall? None. So, the onus falls on adults to be the wise decision makers and role models that girls and young women need.

Businesses will always sell things we find repugnant; it is a reasonable price for living in a free society. But no reason exists for adult women to be complicit in the furthering of destructive stereotypes, which is what happens when a woman buys products like this for her daughter and calls it "fun" while remaining willfully ignorant of the implicit message it sends.

Women have everyday opportunities to influence future generations of young women. In short, to be role models. Making a choice not to get swept away by the latest consumer wave that profits from sexualizing little girls is a good place to start.

“Programs must provide positive female role models and mentors.”

Component #4

from *Providing Gender-Specific Services for Adolescent Female Offenders: Guidelines & Resources*,
a publication of the Iowa Commission on the Status of Women.

“In addition to adult female staff who model healthy relationships, programs must also potentiate girls’ relationships of trust and interdependence with other women already present in their lives. Friends, relatives, neighbors, church and social group members can be critical providers of insight, strategy and strength. Furthermore, girls need mentors whose lives reflect the realities of the girls’ lives. They need mentors who show by example that survival and growth, as well as resistance and change, are possible. Such role models must be from the girls’ particular communities as well as from the wider world of women.”

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The Girl Connection

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