



APA Press Release
February 19, 2007
Contact: Public Affairs
(202) 336-5700
(202) 494-0860 (After-hours calls: Rhea Farberman)

SEXUALIZATION OF GIRLS IS LINKED TO COMMON MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS IN GIRLS AND WOMEN—EATING DISORDERS, LOW SELF-ESTEEM, AND DEPRESSION; AN APA TASK FORCE REPORTS

Psychologists call for replacing sexualized images of girls in media and advertising with positive ones

WASHINGTON, DC—A report of the American Psychological Association (APA) released today found evidence that the proliferation of sexualized images of girls and young women in advertising, merchandising, and media is harmful to girls' self-image and healthy development.

To complete the report, the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls studied published research on the content and effects of virtually every form of media, including television, music videos, music lyrics, magazines, movies, video games and the Internet. They also examined recent advertising campaigns and merchandising of products aimed toward girls.

Sexualization was defined by the task force as occurring when a person's value comes only from her/his sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics, and when a person is sexually objectified, e.g., made into a *thing* for another's sexual use.

Examples of the sexualization of girls in all forms of media including visual media and other forms of media such as music lyrics abound. And, according to the report, have likely increased in number as "new media" have been created and access to media has become omnipresent. The influence and attitudes of parents, siblings, and friends can also add to the pressures of sexualization.

"The consequences of the sexualization of girls in media today are very real and are likely to be a negative influence on girls' healthy development," says Eileen L. Zurbriggen, PhD, chair of the APA Task Force and associate professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. "We have ample evidence to conclude that sexualization has negative effects in a

variety of domains, including cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, and healthy sexual development.”

Research evidence shows that the sexualization of girls negatively affects girls and young women across a variety of health domains:

Cognitive and Emotional Consequences: Sexualization and objectification undermine a person’s confidence in and comfort with her own body, leading to emotional and self-image problems, such as shame and anxiety.

Mental and Physical Health: Research links sexualization with three of the most common mental health problems diagnosed in girls and women—eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression or depressed mood.

Sexual Development: Research suggests that the sexualization of girls has negative consequences on girls’ ability to develop a healthy sexual self-image.

According to the task force report, parents can play a major role in contributing to the sexualization of their daughters or can play a protective and educative role. The APA report calls on parents, school officials, and all health professionals to be alert for the potential impact of sexualization on girls and young women. Schools, the APA says, should teach media literacy skills to all students and should include information on the negative effects of the sexualization of girls in media literacy and sex education programs.

“As a society, we need to replace all of these sexualized images with ones showing girls in positive settings—ones that show the uniqueness and competence of girls,” states Dr. Zurbriggen. “The goal should be to deliver messages to all adolescents—boys and girls—that lead to healthy sexual development.”

Full text of the Executive Summary, Report, and tips on “What Parents Can Do” are available at: <http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html>

Members of the APA Task Force:

Eileen Zurbriggen, PhD (Chair)

Associate Professor of Psychology, Psychology Department, University of California, Santa Cruz

Expertise: Associations between power and sexuality, including rape, childhood sexual abuse, and mental connections between power and sex (such as eroticizing dominance and submission). She is currently conducting a study to investigate the ways in which college students link power and sex, and the messages concerning these linkages that they receive from parents, peers, and the media.

Available for interviews

Sharon Lamb, EdD

*Clinical Psychologist, Professor of Psychology,
Saint Michael's College*

Co-Author: Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters

from Marketers' Schemes

Expertise: Licensed psychologist, Professor of Psychology at Saint Michael's College, and co-author with Lyn Mikel Brown of the book "Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes" (St. Martin's Press, 2006). She has also written on "normal" sexual development in girls and on how therapists can treat sexual issues as they arise in the therapeutic encounter with children and teens. Her research on girls' development, teenagers and sex, and abuse and victimization is widely cited. As a clinical psychologist, she also works with girls in her private practice.

Available for interviews

Tomi-Ann Roberts, PhD

Psychology Department, Colorado College

Expertise: Psychology of gender and emotions. She studies girls' and women's attitudes and emotions toward their own bodies and body functions in a sexually objectifying culture.

Available for interviews

Deborah Tolman, EdD

Center for Research on Gender and Sexuality, San Francisco State University

Expertise: Adolescent sexuality, specifically the sexuality of girls, focused on their experiences of their own sexuality; gender and its development in adolescence, specifically in tandem with sexuality; how boys' sexuality development and girls' sexuality development co-occur through adolescence; mental health as it relates to gender and sexuality; sexual content on television; sexualization of adolescent girls; and both mental health and healthy sexuality.

Available for interviews

Monique Ward, PhD

Psychology Department, University of Michigan

Expertise: In general, her research examines contributions of parents, peers, and the media to sexual socialization. She has focused on the role of the media in this process, examining how media portrayals shape adolescents' attitudes, expectations, and behaviors related to gender roles, sexual roles, and sexual relationships. She also explores intersections between gender ideologies, body image, and sexuality.

Available for interviews

Rebecca Collins, PhD

RAND Corporation

Expertise: The causes and consequences of health risk behavior, including sex and substance use, in adolescents and adults (in particular, the role of the media in these behaviors).

Unavailable for interviews.

Jeanne Blake, Public Member

Words Can Work

Jeanne Blake is a medical journalist and president of Blake Works, Inc. which produces research and evidence-based multimedia (DVDs, the Words Can Work® series of booklets, wordscanwork.com, and abouthealth.com) about the challenges young people face growing up. She is an affiliated faculty member with the Division on Addictions at Harvard Medical School.

Not a researcher, not recommended for interviews

###

The American Psychological Association (APA), in Washington, DC, is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States and is the world's largest association of psychologists. APA's membership includes more than 145,000 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants and students. Through its divisions in 54 subfields of psychology and affiliations with 60 state, territorial and Canadian provincial associations, APA works to advance psychology as a science, as a profession and as a means of promoting health, education and human welfare.

Find this article at:

<http://www.apa.org/releases/sexualization.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.