The Sexualization of Girls

"You have to be pretty and have a body to be popular. If you're too smart, you're called a nerd"—says one fifth-grade girl who participated in a Girls Inc. survey.

"It's hard to be a girl today."



WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Girls get this message repeatedly: What matters is how "hot" they look. It plays on TV and across the Internet. You hear it in song lyrics and music videos. You see it in movies, electronic games, and clothing stores. It's a powerful message.

As parents, you are powerful too. You can teach girls to value themselves for who they are rather than how they look. You can teach boys to value girls as friends, sisters, and girlfriends rather than as sexual objects. And you can advocate for change with manufacturers and media producers.

American Psychological Association

TUNE IN AND TALK
Watch TV and movies with your daughters and sons. Read their magazines. Surf their websites. Ask questions. "Why is there so much pressure on girls to look a certain way?" "What do you like most about the girls you want to spend time with?" "Do these qualities matter more than how they look?" Really listen to what your kids tell you.

QUESTION CHOICES
Girls who are overly concerned about their appearance often have difficulty focusing on other things. Clothes can be part of the distraction. If your daughter wants to wear something you consider too sexy, ask what she likes about the outfit. Ask if there's anything she doesn't like about it. Explain how clothes that require lots of checking and adjusting might keep her from focusing on school work, friends, and other activities.

SPEAK UP
If you don't like a TV show, CD, video, pair of jeans, or doll, say why. A conversation with her will be more effective than simply saying "No, you can't buy it or watch it." Support campaigns, companies, and products that promote positive images of girls. Complain to manufacturers, advertisers, TV and movie producers, and retail stores when products sexualize girls.

UNDERSTAND
Young people often feel pressure to watch popular TV shows, listen to music their friends like, and conform to certain styles of dress. Help your daughter make wise choices among the trendy alternatives. Remind her often that who she is and what she can accomplish are far more important than how she looks.

EDUCATE
You may feel uncomfortable discussing sexuality with your kids, but it's important. Talk about when you think sex is okay as part of a healthy, intimate, mature relationship. Ask why girls often try so hard to look and act sexy. Effective sex education programs discuss media, peer, and cultural influences on sexual behaviors and decisions, how to make safe choices, and what makes healthy relationships. Find out what your school teaches.

ENCOURAGE
Athletics and other extracurricular activities emphasize talents, skills, and abilities over physical appearance. Encourage your daughter to follow her interests and get involved in a sport or other activity.

BE REAL
Help your kids focus on what's really important: what they think, feel, and value. Help them build strengths that will allow them to achieve their goals and develop into healthy adults. Remind your children that everyone's unique and that it's wrong to judge people by their appearance.

MODEL
Marketing and the media also influence adults. When you think about what you buy and watch, you teach your sons and daughters to do so, too.