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THE WAY WE LIVE NOW



Playing at Sexy

Do gyrating little girls become sexting young women? By Peggy Orenstein

Last month, over the course of one workday, six friends sent me a link to the same video along with messages that said, “Have you seen this?” I had, but I clicked it each time anyway. I just couldn’t stop myself. The clip showed a troupe of 8- and 9-year-old Los Angeles girls in a national dance contest. Wearing outfits that would make a stripper blush, they pumped it and bumped it to the Beyoncé hit “Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It).” The girls were spectacular dancers, able to twirl on one foot while extending the other into a perfect standing split. But I doubt that two million people had tuned in simply to admire their arabesques. As with TV phenomena like “Toddlers and Tiaras,” the compulsion to watch was like the impulse to rubberneck at an accident, but in this case the scene was a 12-car pileup of early sexualization.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RANIA MATAR

The girls’ routine was debated on CNN, “Good Morning America” and The Huffington Post. For about 48 hours it blazed across blogs and filled up in-boxes. And then, faster than you can say JonBenet Ramsey, it was gone. Outraged mommy bloggers calmed down. News outlets turned back to the BP oil spill and the Pennsylvania newlyweds who were born on the same day in the same hospital.

Moral panics about pornified girls bubble up regularly these days: should the self-proclaimed role model Miley Cyrus have stripped for Vanity Fair (or given a lap dance to a 44-year-old film producer or pole-danced on an ice cream cart at the Teen Choice Awards)? Is the neckline too low on the new Barbie Basics’ Model 10 doll — nicknamed, seemingly redundantly, Busty Barbie? The next freakout, mark my words, will explode this summer when Mattel rolls out its Monster High

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ILLUSTRATION BY HUMAN EMPIRE 11

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franchise — dolls, apparel, interactive Web site, Halloween costumes, Webisodes and, eventually, television shows and a movie — which will be the biggest product introduction in the company's history and its first original line since Hot Wheels in 1968 (back when "hot," at least to children, had a different connotation). Monster High's racy student body is made up of the children of "legendary monsters," including Clawdeen, a 15-year-old werewolf who resembles an undead street walker, only less demure. But no worries, parents, Clawdeen is not without her wholesome side: although she is a "fierce fashionista" who is "gorgeous" and "intimidating" and hates gym "because they won't let me participate in my platform heels," her Web bio assures us that she is "absolutely loyal to my friends." Well, that's a relief.

I might give the phenomenon a pass if it turned out that, once they were older, little

girls who play-acted at sexy were more comfortable in their skins or more confident in their sexual relationships, if they asked more of their partners or enjoyed greater pleasure. But evidence is to the contrary. In his book, "The Triple Bind: Saving Our Teenage Girls From Today's Pressures," Stephen Hinshaw, chairman of the psychology department at the University of California, Berkeley, explains that sexualizing little girls — whether through images, music or play — actually undermines healthy sexuality rather than promoting it. Those bootylicious grade-schoolers in the dance troupe presumably don't understand the meaning of their motions (and thank goodness for it), but, precisely because of that, they don't connect — and may never learn to connect — sexy attitude to erotic feelings.

That ongoing confusion between desirability and desire may help explain another trend

giving parents agita: the number of teenage girls — 22 percent according to a 2008 survey by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy — who have electronically sent or posted nude or seminude photos of themselves. I have to admit that part of me is impressed by their bravado. Maybe, rather than cause for alarm, this was a sign of progress — indication that girls were taking charge of their sexuality, transcending the double standard. Yet you have to wonder: Just because they're flaunting it, are they feeling it?

I find myself improbably nostalgic for the late 1970s, when I came of age. In many ways, it was a time when girls were less free than they are today: fewer of us competed on the sports field, raised our hands during math class or graduated from college. No one spoke the word "vagina," whether in a monologue or not. And there was that Farrah flip to contend with. Yet in that oh-so-brief window between the advent of the pill and the fear of AIDS, when abortion was both legal and accessible to teenagers, there was — at least for some of us — a kind of Our Bodies, Ourselves optimism about sex. Young women felt an imperative, a political duty, to understand their desire and responses, to explore their own pleasure, to recognize sexuality as something rising from within. And young men — at least some of them — seemed eager to take the journey with us, to rewrite the rules of masculinity so they would prize mutuality over conquest.

That notion now seems as quaint as a one-piece swimsuit on a 5-year-old. Sexual entitlement, according to Deborah Tolman, a professor at Hunter College and author of "Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk About Sexuality," has instead become the latest performance, something girls act out rather than experience. "By the time they are teenagers," she said, "the girls I talk to respond to questions about how their bodies feel — questions about sexuality or desire — by talking about how their bodies look. They will say something like, 'I felt like I looked good.' Looking good is not a feeling."

Tell that to the zombies at Monster High. Or the ones thrusting their hips at warp speed to Beyoncé (who, incidentally, wears a leotard in her video). Better yet, tell it to your daughter: she is going to need to hear it. ♦

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